Expectations Across Entertainment Media

by

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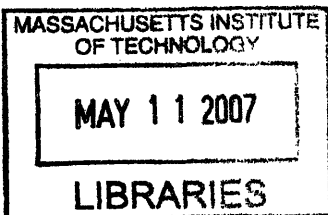Program in Comparative Media Studies
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ABSTRACT

An audience's satisfaction with an entertainment product is dependent on how well their expectations are fulfilled. This study delves into the implicit contract that is formed between the purveyor of an entertainment property and their audience, as well as the consequences of frustrating audience expectations. Building on this model of the implicit contract, the creation of expectations through marketing, character and world development, and the invocation of genre discourses are examined through the lens of the television shows *House M.D.* and *Veronica Mars*. The issues surrounding the dynamic equilibrium between novelty and stability in serial entertainment and entertainment franchises brought up by these initial case studies are examined in further detail through the collectible card game *Magic: the Gathering*, and the complexity of the interactions between different types of expectations are demonstrated via a study of the superhero comics serials *52* and *Civil War*.

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Chapter 1 – The Implicit Contract

Everyone wants something from their entertainment. Whether they're looking for special effects or nuanced characterization, a climactic conclusion or an ongoing narrative, an audience's satisfaction with an entertainment product is dependent on how well their expectations were fulfilled. Understanding the relationship between the purveyor of an entertainment property and that property's audience as a contractual one does a great deal to explain why audiences enjoy and accept certain creative choices and reject and are angered by others.

The idea of an implicit contract being formed between the creator or purveyor of a work of entertainment and its audience is not a new one. Creators and critics of fiction and film have been aware of the need to entertain audiences without boring or distracting them for quite some time. The science fiction author Larry Niven described the contract between author and reader in the following terms:

> The reader has certain rights... He's entitled to be entertained, instructed, amused; maybe all three. If he quits in the middle, or puts the book down feeling that his time has been wasted, you're in violation.[1]

Damon Knight used similar language to describe the contract between author and reader:

> There is an implied contract between the author and the reader that goes something like this: Give me your time and pay your money, and I'll let you experience what it's like to be
> - A trapper in the North Woods
> - An explorer in the Martian Desert
> - A young woman in love with an older man
> - A dying cancer patient...

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[1] http://www.logicalcreativity.com/jon/quotes.html#n

You must look hard at the offer you are making: Would you accept it, if
you were the reader?[2]

While Knight and Niven describe the implicit contract largely in terms of engaging
and entertaining the audience through explicit authorial choices, some film
theorists have taken the metaphor further. Both Thomas Schatz and Henry
Jenkins have used the metaphor of a contract to discuss the relationship
between media producers and audiences. Schatz described film genres as a
tacit contract between audiences and media producers, which creates a
"reciprocal studio-audience relationship"[3], but Jenkins argues that Schatz goes
on to undermine the reciprocal dimension of the contract by privileging "the
generic knowledge of the filmmaker over the activity of the spectator... [he] gives
us little sense of the audience's expectations and how they originate... What
Hollywood delivers is presumed to be what the audience wanted"[4]. Jenkins'
implication is that the relationship between audiences and media producers is
more fraught with complications than Schatz acknowledges, though he does not
explicitly propose an alternative model of the audience/producer contract.

I believe, as Jenkins does, that the exchange which audiences and the purveyors
of entertainment are engaged in is more complicated than it is represented as by
Knight, Niven, or Schatz. In my previous work on the implicit contract, I
described the functioning of the implicit contract in the following terms:

> Whenever someone picks up a magazine, turns on the TV, or goes to a
> movie, they have certain expectations of the experience they'll receive in
> exchange for their time, attention, and money. What those expectations
> are depends on both their knowledge of the media form and the specific
> content they're pursuing. (For example, anyone turning on a commercial

[2] Knight, *Creating Short Fiction*, p. 54
[3] Schatz, Thomas. "The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study", in *Film Genre Reader*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.
[4] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, p. 123

TV channel expects that the show they're watching will be interrupted by ad breaks, and that the ads will not intrude into the show.)

The typical exchange involved in entertainment media might be modeled thusly:

The Audience offers the Provider

- Their time
- Their attention
- And sometimes (e.g. movies, cable TV) their money.

The Provider offers the Audience

- Entertainment
- And the delivery structure they expect.

[W]henever an entertainment provider violates the implicit contract created by the audience's expectations (through intrusive advertising or clumsy product placement, for example), they risk alienating their audience.[5]

This description of the implicit contract between audiences and media providers complicates and refines Niven, Knight, and Schatz's visions of the implicit contract by addressing questions of presentation and non-narrative structure (which can have a significant impact on an audience member's satisfaction with an entertainment product), but it still does not tell us very much about the actual **contract** between audience members and media providers and why it works the way it does. If we are to understand the nature of that contract more clearly, and by extension, how the expectations of audiences serve to structure their reactions to entertainment products, we must turn to legal theory and a clearer understanding of how contracts in general function.

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[5] Austin, *Selling Creatively: Product Placement in the New Media Landscape*, p. 14–16

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What is a Contract?

On a definitional level, a contract is an agreement (explicit or implied) between two parties in which each takes on the obligation to provide the other with some form of consideration. An arrangement where one party provides the other with something for nothing can't be a contract, as there is no exchange—it is either a gift (if it was given freely) or theft/extortion (if it was taken without consent or given as a result of coercion).

If we pause to deconstruct this, the following points become evident:

- A contract is based on the mutual exchange of goods and/or services.
- A contract (whether explicit or implied) creates an obligation on the part of both parties to fulfill its terms.
- The purpose of a contract is to ensure that an exchange does not become one-sided (where one party benefits while the other receives no consideration).

With the preceding points in mind, it becomes clear why the contract model is applicable to the relationship between media audiences and media providers, as the exchange involved in entertainment media has already been described.

Contracts Implied in Fact

Legal studies recognizes two types of contracts which are willingly agreed on: Express contracts and contracts implied in fact. An express contract is "a written or oral agreement whose terms explicitly state the basis for consideration"[6], and even for entertainment products with End-User License Agreements (and even those are problematic, as EULAs are non-negotiable and oft-ignored), the understanding between audience members and purveyors of entertainment is rarely so formal and explicit. The contract implied in fact, in which "the parties

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[6] Fish, "The Law Wishes to Have a Formal Existence", in *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*, p. 160

have entered into no formal agreement but comport themselves in relation to one another in ways that could only be explained by the existence of the requisite contractual intentions"[7] is a much better model for understanding the relationship: audience members would not waste their time or attention on an entertainment product unless it had been presented in a way that suggested it would entertain them. While such contracts have no legal force, the perception that their terms have been violated will typically cause both social and economic consequences. (To wit, audience members who feel they have been cheated are likely to be vocal about their unhappiness, and will stop giving their money to content providers which they feel have treated them unfairly.)

The Contract as Discourse

The alert reader will have noticed that the previous paragraph dealt with the **perception** that the purveyor/audience contract had been violated. This is because with an implicit contract, each audience member's subjective experience of the entertainment will determine whether they feel the contract's terms have been fulfilled or not.

This may seem uncomfortably subjective to those accustomed to thinking of contracts and the law as fixed and formal structures, in which discourse plays no part, but as Stanley Fish argues in "The Law Wishes to Have a Formal Existence", the formalism of law itself is a discursive construct based on the fiction that contextual knowledge is not required to interpret the "unambiguous" terms of a contract:

> [A]n instrument that seems clear and unambiguous on its face seems so because "extrinsic evidence"—information about the conditions of its production including the situation and state of mind of the contracting parties, etc.—is already in place and assumed as a background; that which the parol evidence rule [a rule by which extrinsic evidence is cannot

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[7] Ibid.

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be used to interpret, vary or add to the terms of a contract] is designed to exclude is already , and necessarily, invoked the moment writing becomes intelligible... the law is continually creating and recreating itself.[8]

By using examples of cases in which the idea of "trade usage" was invoked to interpret the period of "June-Aug" to exclude the month of August, and in which the delivery of steel measuring 37 inches in length was ruled to fulfill the terms of a contract that stipulated steel measuring 36 inches in length, Fish makes it clear that contract law, for all its desire to be formal and internally consistent, regularly has its course determined by the rhetorical prowess of litigants:

> [B]y making the threshold of admissibility the production of a "reasonable construal" rather than an obvious inconsistency (as... 31,000 is inconsistent with 3,100), the court more or less admits that what is required to satisfy the [law] is not a demonstration of formal congruity but an exercise of rhetorical skill. As long as one party can tell a story sufficiently overarching so as to allow the terms of the contract and the evidence of trade usage to fit comfortably within its frame, that evidence will be found consistent rather than contradictory.[9]

It is difficult to imagine a clearer indication that even legal contracts whose terms are expressly stated are discursive in nature, with their terms susceptible to radical transformation if one party's "overarching story" has enough rhetorical power to persuade a judge that, for the purposes of a given contract, $37 \approx 36$. And if that is true, it follows that the informal, implicit contracts that exist between audiences and purveyors of entertainment are also discursive.

The Terms of Discourse in Entertainment

Of course, the discourse between audiences and purveyors of entertainment does not function in the same way as that between the parties to a legal contract.

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[8] Ibid., p. 146
[9] Ibid., p. 149

While the parties to a legal contract may debate what the terms of their agreement mean before bringing their dispute before an arbitrator or a judge for a binding decision, the purveyors of entertainment have no such option. There are no legal authorities they can turn to that determine which interpretation of the contract is correct, and in media that aren't iterative or serial in form, the most significant contribution to the discourse which creators and purveyors of entertainment can make is their work itself. In such cases, if audience members are dissatisfied with an entertainment product, the purveyors of that product have no reliable means of responding to that dissatisfaction.

When working in iterative media, such as TV or comics, which regularly release new content, the terms of discourse are slightly different. While creators working in such a medium can respond to audience dissatisfaction by changing the content of later work, there is inevitably some sort of time delay involved in such a "response", given the lead time necessary to produce content for serial release. As such, even creators that work in iterative or serial media are likely to feel powerless or frustrated when audiences interpret or react to their work in a way the work's purveyors see as misguided or unsympathetic.

Consequences of Contract Violation

The idea that the creators of a work of entertainment are powerless cuts both ways, of course. While the purveyors of an entertainment property may lack control over how their work is interpreted, the audience for that property has no control over its creation. Furthermore, without an enforcement mechanism for perceived violations of the implicit contract, audience members must take on the enforcement role themselves.

In practice, audiences have three means by which they can attempt to redress perceived contract violations. The first is **dissatisfaction**, which manifests itself both in lessened engagement with an entertainment property and complaints made to other fans and the property's creators. The second is **withdrawal**,

which manifests itself in the loss of the audience member as a viewer or customer. And the final means is **boycotting**, which manifests itself in an audience member actively trying to dissuade others from supporting or engaging with a property.

Audience members typically become dissatisfied with an entertainment property due to perceived contract violations that are relatively minor (repeated continuity gaffes, an unearned happy ending, etc.). Such minor violations erode the audience's engagement with the property, but the damage can be repaired over time by supplying content that delivers the kind of entertainment which the audience desires. At the same time, the cumulative effect of repeated contract violations can lead audiences to withdraw from a property, as can a single contract violation of sufficient magnitude.

Some might challenge the idea that minor erosions of an audience's engagement with a property actually matter (at least until they result in the loss of a customer). To counter this notion, I will draw on my own work developing E.P. Thompson and Henry Jenkins' idea of the moral economy:

> If a purchase supports an individual or company that has treated an audience member well, that purchase has added value for the audience member. Conversely, a creator or company that has treated an audience member poorly will encounter resistance when trying to make a sale. Audience consensus on the legitimacy and sincerity of a rights holder's behavior has a significant impact on the quality of the word of mouth they receive.

> In addition to its obvious economic impact, the moral economy has an emotional dimension as audience members develop relationships with creators or rights-holders. Over the long term, "legitimate" behavior and sincere engagement can cause audience members to become personally

invested in your success. Consistently behaving in ways the audience deems illegitimate can create resentment and an environment where audience members will become equally invested in your failure.[10]

When viewed as part of the moral economy, minor violations of the implicit contract have a clear effect, as they create audience resistance to a creator or company's products and may well lead to boycotts, where audience members who have been "burned" (typically those who were once highly engaged with a property before one or more contract violations transformed their engagement into outrage and a sense of betrayal) decide that withdrawal from a property is an insufficient response to the violation of the implicit contract, and choose to actively undermine the property's success.

Creators and producers who are concerned about the risk of triggering such an audience backlash over a perceived violation of the implicit contract should be aware that marketing and creative choices can do a great deal to shape both a property's audience and the terms on which it will be received. As such, the purveyors of entertainment possess significantly more power to influence how their work is interpreted than a naïve observer might imagine (though not as much as theorists like Schatz believe). This point becomes particularly clear in light of the structuring functions of familiarity and genre conventions, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Contextualizing the Implicit Contract

While the implicit contract is a powerful tool for understanding the relationship between the audience and purveyors of entertainment, its value is dependent on an understanding of how the audience's expectations are created and fulfilled. While a truly universal study of these processes is beyond the scope of a master's thesis (and very probably that of any treatise), I will be developing two

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[10] Austin, Alec. "How to Turn Pirates into Loyalists: The Moral Economy and an Alternative Response to File-Sharing". Cambridge, MA: Convergence Culture Consortium, 2006. p. 12

theoretical concepts which, in combination with the implicit contract, seem to have analytical value:

- **Genre as Discourse (and Series as Genre).** While the idea of genres being defined discursively has been advanced by Altman and Mittell, it can also be extended to narrative series and franchises, which can be understood as subgenres with their own internal conventions and defining discourses. By grasping the terms and core appeals of these discourses, the range of acceptable variation within a series can be better understood.

- **Dynamic Equilibrium.** The tension between the need for stability and familiarity in entertainment and the need for variation and renewal may be as old as entertainment itself. Dynamic equilibrium is the process by which creators can maintain the long-term viability of a series or franchise by varying its content while still retaining the property's core appeals.

These concepts will be developed and examined in the context of general types of expectation and expectation structures, as well as through the lens of specific case studies. Chapter 2 will deal with expectations of genre, familiarity, and structure and examine the medical mystery series *House M.D.*, while Chapter 3 will address expectations of narrative continuity and diegetic coherence, illustrating its points by examining the first two seasons of *Veronica Mars*.

Chapter 4 will serve as a turning point in my argument, as I transition from a focus on purely narrative expectations to study expectations of interaction and play, and how collectible card games such as *Magic: the Gathering* can achieve dynamic equilibrium despite subverting fundamental expectations of balance and fairness. While the convergent nature of collectible card games will not be fully explored in this chapter, the complex overlap between expectations of consumption and interactivity which they embody should clarify the importance of

developing a basic grammar of audience expectations before attempting to wrestle with the full complexity of a convergent or transmedia entertainment form.

Finally, in Chapter 5, the theoretical tools which have been developed in the previous chapters will be used to dissect the functioning of American superhero comic books, whose narrative dimension can only be fully understood in light of the historical structures surrounding their creation and consumption. The multiple strategies of dynamic equilibrium used in superhero comics are examined and linked to specific companies, and the series *Civil War* and *52* will be used to illustrate Marvel and DC's approaches to continuity and crossovers.

As I alluded to in my description of Chapter 4, the goal of surveying such a wide range of audience expectations is to establish a critical grammar which can be used to help understand and create the kinds of interactive and convergent media that will emerge in the century to come. Despite their rhetorical claims of novelty, all new media draw on classical principles in the course of their development, just as collectible card games were built upon classical principles of play and collectability. Furthermore, the importance of the implicit contract, genre discourses, and dynamic equilibrium across entertainment forms as distinct as games and serial narrative strongly suggest that while the specific expectations a property carries with it may shift from form to form and genre to genre, the underlying process by which the audience develops expectations remains stable across a wide variety of contexts. My hope is that this study will form a foundation which further work on audience reception and expectation structures in convergent media can build upon.

Chapter 2 – Familiarity and Genre

Familiarity and repetition are powerful tools in the entertainment industry. From the audience's perspective, familiar elements in a work of entertainment can be reassuring, promising them an experience similar to previous experiences they enjoyed. On the production side, familiarity and repeated elements allow for efficiencies in market testing, content creation, and management, as well as greater control over IP and profitable merchandise and franchise tie-ins. As such, including markers or signals that communicate the ways in which an entertainment property is familiar is vitally important to both audience members and marketers, as they provide landmarks which audiences can use to navigate an increasingly cluttered media landscape. This is true both in the marketing of the property and in its composition.

Markers of Familiarity

There are an almost endless variety of markers or signals that can be used to communicate familiarity, but they can be grouped into a rough hierarchy, with categories that are higher on the scale tending to be familiar in general ways, while categories that are lower on the scale tend to be familiar in more specific or predictable ways.

At the top of the scale are **cultural conventions**, the unspoken, tacit assumptions which every culture has about how entertainment or narrative should be presented. Subordinate to cultural conventions is the category of **auteurship**, in which works are bounded and made distinct through a given creator's style and technique. **Form & Genre** are more predictable than auteurship, since each form (and each genre) has its own constraints and distinguishing characteristics, while authors and creators can work across multiple genres and forms. More predictable still is the **franchise**, which in turn can encompass multiple **series & serials**, none of which can be less predictable than the franchise as a whole, since they are contained in within it. By the same

logic, individual episodes in a series or serial tend to be more predictable still. Approaching the narrowest, most predictable end of our scale, we find **specific content**, such as the theatrical version and director's cut of a movie, different productions of a play, or a TV episode with and without deleted scenes. And just before art becomes perfectly predictable through complete invariance, we find **specific performances**, such as the minute differences in performance between different nights of a play, or the distinction between one live version of a song and another live version of that song.

It should be clear that every member of every category on this scale can be used as a mark of familiarity. One person might like Hong Kong movies in general, while another might have a particular fondness for John Woo's action films, and yet another might have enjoyed *Hard Boiled* but not *The Killer*. It should also be clear that every category can also be used to distinguish a work from similar works, as Pierre Bourdieu describes it in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. As Henry Jenkins has noted in his essay "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten", fans of a TV show will sometimes "reject large chunks of the aired material, including entire episodes"[11], just as critics will dismiss entire genres as sub-literate trash while making exceptions for a handful of works within the genre. These behaviors (fans excising works from the canon, and critics condemning science fiction but celebrating Orwell, or condemning romances but celebrating Jane Austen, etc.) suggest that for any given individual, some marks of familiarity will override others, and that for any individual, the process of distinguishing a work that is likely to be of interest from one that is not takes multiple classes of familiarity into account.

Hard vs. Soft Expectations & The Implicit Contract

Furthermore, it is important to differentiate between the kinds of expectations which markers that are more general create compared to the expectations created by markers that carry more specific connotations. General, high level

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[11] Jenkins, Henry. "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten", revised manuscript, p. 10

markers of familiarity tend to create expectations which are flexible or "soft" (since cultures, authors, and even specific forms or genres produce a wide range of content, making variations accepted, even expected), while more specific, lower-level markers tend to create expectations which are more concrete or "hard". This is most obvious when one considers the kind of expectations created by representing a product as a director's cut of a movie or a live version of a song—if they are not recognizable as variations on a known text, that would be a gross violation of the implicit contract—but (as I will show in Chapter 3) diegetic narratives develop elaborate structures of hard expectations as they play out.

The difference between hard and soft expectations is vital to understanding how the implicit contract plays out in practice. The softer an expectation is (i.e. "Steven King writes long books"), the less most audience members will care if it is not fulfilled. (While it is possible to imagine someone who would be annoyed if Steven King wrote a book that was less than 300 pages long, the more intense their annoyance, the more marginal they are likely to be.) Conversely, the harder an expectation is (i.e. "The reader will learn who killed Lilly Kane by the end of the season"), the greater the backlash will be if that expectation is frustrated.

The Nature of Genre

Genre is one of the most widely used markers of familiarity, due to the human desire to group things of like kinds together, and its study may allow us additional insights into how expectations can be created and fulfilled. Aristotle's *Poetics* gave rise to the idea that genre is an inherent textual quality, as the Philosopher declares:

> I propose to treat of poetry in itself and of various kinds, noting the essential quality of each.[12]

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[12] From the S.H. Butcher translation. See http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.mb.txt

This sentence's rhetorical elegance allows it to paper over a variety of issues, including the key questions for genre studies, which are how Aristotle has decided that the kinds of poetry he will discuss are distinct, and whether or not they actually possess "essential qualities". Due to the respect accorded to the *Poetics* and its foundational place in the critical canon, however, Aristotle's assertion of the concrete, textual existence of genre (implied by the "essential qualities" dividing the different kinds of poetry) went undisputed for many years. Horace, confident in Aristotle's authority, felt it unnecessary to even argue that genres existed, taking it for granted that the forms of poetry were known in statements such as "Let each form of poetry occupy the proper place allotted to it"[13], and supplementing Aristotle's descriptions of poetic forms with prescriptions and admonitions to authors that reinforced the divisions between genres.

The work of Aristotle and Horace formed the foundation of neoclassical criticism during the Renaissance, and even after the Romantics assailed neoclassical ideas about the division of genres (so entrenched that Altman describes the first step of neoclassical composition as the "identification and separation of genres"[14]), the idea of genre as an inherent textual quality returned at the end of the 19th century, with scholars like Ferdinand Brunetiere applying Darwin's model of evolution to the division of genres, reinforcing the Horatian model of genres as distinct and immiscible by providing a quasi-scientific justification for it. As Altman notes:

> Reinvented by practically every student of genre since Brunetiere, scientific justification of genre study serves to convince theorists that genres actually exist, that they have distinct borders, that they can be firmly identified, that they operate systematically, that their internal

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[13] This is the translation of a line from the *Ars Poetica* cited by Altman. (Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: British Film Institute, 1999. p. 3). A more recent translation of the same line (Leon Golden, 1995) is "Let each genre keep to the appropriate place allotted to it." See http://www.english.emory.edu/DRAMA/ArsPoetica.html

[14] Altman, p.5

functioning can be observed and scientifically described, and that they evolve according to a fixed and identifiable trajectory.[15]

In spite of the persuasive power of the scientific justification, the 20th century saw several shifts away from the neo-Horatian understanding of genre. René Wellek and Austin Warren argued that "the literary kind [i.e. genre] is an 'institution'—as Church, University, or State is an institution"[16], while Tzvetan Todorov gave the reader the power to classify a work as fantastic or not[17], and E.D. Hirsch Jr. tied textual structure to reader expectations about that structure, arguing that "the details of meaning that an interpreter understands are powerfully determined and constituted by his meaning expectations,"[18] and that "an interpreter's preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands, and that this remains the case unless and until that generic conception is altered."[19] While pursuing such theories could challenge the hegemony of genre models that see genre as an inherent textual quality, placing the power to define genres in the hands of audiences rather than critics, literary genre studies remains dominated by such models. As Altman wrote in 1999:

> [T]he most important English-language genre theory of the last two decades, *Alastair Fowler's Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982), resolutely returns to classical emphasis on textual structure within traditional genres and canons of texts... 'The kinds, however elusive, objectively exist', says Fowler (p. 73), permanently closing off debate.[20]

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[15] Ibid, p. 6
[16] Wellek, René and Warren, Austin. *Theory of Literature*, 3rd Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956 [original 1949]. p. 226
[17] "Does the reader hesitate between two explanations—one uncanny, the other marvelous—of the phenomena encountered within the text? Then the text must be considered part of the fantastic genre." Altman, p. 10
[18] Hirsch, E.D., Jr. *Validity in Interpretation.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967. p. 72
[19] Ibid., p. 74
[20] Altman, p. 11

Unfortunately, such a Platonic understanding of genre would be counterproductive for a study of audience expectations. As Jason Mittell has noted, such models tend to produce definitions which are "contrary to how [a] genre is defined and conceived of in more common everyday use",[21] either by including works which few would consider to be valid examples of the genre, or excluding works from the genre which most would agree should be included in it.

Instead of seeing genre as an inherent "component" of a text, then, it would be more useful to understand it as a textual *category*. As Mittell argues:

> We do not generally differentiate between shows that take place in Boston and those that take place in Chicago, but we do differentiate between [shows] set in a hospital and those set in a police station. Texts have many different components, but only some are activated into defining genre properties. [T]here are no uniform criteria for genre delimitation— some are defined by setting (like westerns), some by profession (like legal dramas), some by audience affect (like comedy), and some by narrative form (like mysteries). This diversity of definitional criteria suggests there is nothing internal to texts mandating how they are to be generically categorized... Genres only emerge from the intertextual relations between multiple texts.[22]

But, of course, these intertextual relationships do not emerge on their own—they must be activated, either by audience members perceiving parallels between texts, promoters advertising them, or creators deliberately building them into their work. And as Rick Altman has noted, these groups often deploy the connections between texts in dramatically different ways, for radically different purposes:

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[21] Mittel, Jason. *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2004. p. 4
[22] Ibid., p. 8

Whatever intrinsic characteristics generic material may have had prior to its recognition as a genre, it is actively modified by those who pronounce the genre's name, describe its traits, exhibit it, reproduce part of it, or otherwise make use of its potential... Differing generic identifications correspond to different uses, placement in different series, and emphasis on diverse characteristics... When we look more closely at generic communication, [what appears are] competing meanings, engineered misunderstanding and a desire for domination rather than communication.[23]

Implicit in Altman's description of genre's intertextual nature is the idea that genres can be understood as discourses, as Mittell makes explicit:

To understand how genre categories become culturally salient, we can examine genres as *discursive practices*. [Emphasis Mittell's.] By regarding genre as a property and function of discourse, we can examine the ways in which various forms of communication work to constitute generic definitions, meanings, and values within particular historical contexts.[24]

Understanding genre as the product of a continuing discourse does a great deal to explain the strategies of distinction engaged in by fans and critics, as if genres are not fixed, the act of including or excluding specific works from a canon is a powerful technique for reshaping the popular understanding of genre boundaries. Such an understanding of genre also does a better job of accounting for the influence of economic forces on production and distribution than a purely textual model does. If genres are created by intertextual discourses, it becomes possible to understand franchises, series, and serials as sub- or micro-genres, with their own rules and conventions, while on a retail level, the logistical

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[23] Altman, p.98–99
[24] Mittell, p. 8

overhead that would be attendant on shelving products in multiple sections drives stores to file them in one section at a time (with exceptions made for subsidized products). This practice reinforces the public perception that genre classifications are clear-cut, even when two books filed in different sections may have more in common with each other than the other books in their section.

Furthermore, as Pierre Bourdieu points out in *Distinction*, the acquired cultural competence of "taste" is often used to legitimize and solidify social differences, and the establishment of hard boundaries between genres is just another means of distinguishing between those who have learned to look down on the paraliterary genres (such as SF, fantasy, romance, pornography, and the like) and those who do not. This logic (and the economic motive of increased sales potential) is part of what lies behind the classification of many works that use the conventions and techniques of genre fiction, such as those of Kurt Vonnegut, as 'literature' on the grounds that they are more elevated than other works in the field they spring from. While there are legitimate grounds for separating Vonnegut's work from the works of Heinlein and Asimov (particularly on the basis of the intertextual discourses they are engaged in), applying such standards on a less selective basis would allow more works currently understood as SF into the literature section than the arbiters of taste (and the economics of bookselling) would be willing to tolerate.

Familiarity, Marketing, and the Implicit Contract

As noted above, markers of familiarity (such as genre and class appeals) are key to the process by which audiences distinguish interesting works from uninteresting ones, and it is this process which purveyors of entertainment seek to influence through marketing.

In light of our model of the implicit contract, marketing serves two interconnected purposes: It presents the entertainment property in an intriguing and appealing manner, so that audiences will want to engage with it (creating soft expectations)

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and it prepares audience members to engage with the property by making promises (via the deployment of markers of familiarity) about the experience which the property will provide them (creating hard expectations). There is no inherent opposition between these two purposes, but if the property is misrepresented and the promises made in the marketing campaign are not upheld, audience members are likely to feel that they have been cheated.

Case Study: V for Vendetta Trailer

To illustrate the both the complexity of the promises which are made to audiences and the sheer number of markers of familiarity that are deployed to position a work of entertainment before its release, let us turn to the first theatrical trailer for the film *V for Vendetta*.[25] Ignoring, for the moment, the MPAA approval screen (which firmly places the trailer within a specific cultural context), the trailer begins with Natalie Portman (as Evey Hammond) flinching away from the lights being trained on her in an interrogation chamber, followed by a faceless interrogator inquiring "Do you know why you're here, Evey Hammond?" with an English accent. The bulk of the screen is dark, and continues to be dark as the interrogator continues to speak and the viewer is shown a glimpse of a group of black-uniformed men searching a ruined urban interior with flashlights, and then a montage of Evey on a darkened street, hiding behind a door and under a bed, being dragged down a corridor, having her head shaved, and finally, having a black bag removed from her head as she is placed opposite the faceless interrogator in a prisoner's smock. The interrogator's dialogue through this (and the glimpses of V that follow it) is: "You're being formally charged with conspiracy to commit treason, terrorism, and sedition, the penalty for which is death by firing squad. You have one chance, and *only* one chance, to save your life. You must tell us the identity or whereabouts of Codename V. Do you understand what I'm telling you?" Evey's reply is "Yes."

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[25] As of the time of this writing, this trailer is available on the V for Vendetta website (http://vforvendetta.warnerbros.com/trailer.html) and on YouTube (http://youtube.com/watch?v=8XKa8VE7ILI is one URL).

The interrogator asks, "Are you ready to cooperate?" and Evey's answer is "No."

Already, the viewer has been presented with a staggering number of genre cues and markers of familiarity. Natalie Portman is recognizable as Evey. The darkness (both literal and figurative) of the trailer's visuals strongly suggests that the movie's tone will be similarly dark, while the prison setting, Evey's visual transformation into a prisoner, and the interrogator's dialogue strongly suggest that the movie has terrorist themes and is set in a totalitarian England. The uniformed men with guns and flashlights imply that the movie will contain violence and action, as do V's weapons, while Evey's refusal to cooperate, combined with Natalie Portman's star image, suggests that the audience's sympathies should be aligned with V and Evey rather than the apparatus of the state.

This introductory sequence is followed by the logos of the movie's producers (Warner Bros., DC/Vertigo, and Silver Pictures) being flashed on the screen, while ominous music plays in the background. The logos are further markers of familiarity, while the ominous music reinforces the viewer's previous impression of the movie's tone.

While a truly comprehensive list of all the promises to the audience contained in the first theatrical trailer for *V for Vendetta* would be interminable, an attentive viewer could be assumed to draw the following conclusions about the movie after watching the trailer:

- It's dystopian science fiction (totalitarian setting, images of labs and hypodermic needles, an inter-title reading "An uncompromising vision of the future", etc.)
- It's a revenge story (V's voiceover: "The only verdict is vengeance—a vendetta", Evey's line: "You're getting back at them for what they did to you", and its title)

- It will resemble the Matrix movies in aesthetics and over-the-top action (intertitle: "From the creators of the Matrix Trilogy", motion trails on V's daggers, etc.)
- V's actions will be somewhat morally ambiguous (V saving Evey and fighting the government vs. Evey's response to V's pronouncement that "What was done to me was monstrous": "And they created a monster.")

The second theatrical trailer[26] for V for Vendetta uses essentially the same material, albeit rearranged, and supplemented with more CG- or special effects-intensive images (such as V's destruction of the Houses of Parliament, London and Evey in the rain, thousands of citizens clad in cloaks and Guy Fawkes masks converging on Nelson's column, V triggering the immense pattern of dominoes, etc.), emphasizing the grandiose visuals typical of the Matrix movies[27] as well as a heightened sense of anticipation (Finch's question "Are we ready for it?" is clearly intended to develop this sense, while unlike its predecessor, this trailer lists the movie's release date—March 17). One interesting note is the *absence* of a marker that a handful of viewers might have expected: the credits at the end of the trailer state that the movie is "Based on the Graphic Novel Illustrated by David Lloyd", which could be read as a refusal on the part of Alan Moore (the graphic novel's author) to endorse the adaptation of his work.[28]

Direct Promises, Indirect Appeals, and Overall Impressions

Moving beyond the specifics of the *V for Vendetta* trailers, let us consider what kinds of things promotional materials such as trailers promise an audience.

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[26] "Trailer 2" at http://vforvendetta.warnerbros.com/trailer.html

[27] Of course, the absence of such FX-heavy scenes from the first trailer was likely due to the exigencies of the production schedule—it is probable that the effects for those scenes had not been finalized when the first trailer was assembled.

[28] In actuality, the situation is much more complicated—as a result of a lawsuit over the movie version of League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Moore decided that: "If I owned the sole copyright, like with 'Voice Of The Fire,' there would not be a film. Anything else, where others owned copyrights, I'd insist on taking my name off future films. All of the money due to me would go to the artists involved." See http://www.comicbookresources.com/columns/index.cgi?column=litg&article=2153 Moore's opinion of the movie was not particularly high, but that was not the reason for the absence of his name from the credits.

There are direct promises (such as that all the images shown in the trailer are from the movie, the statement that the movie is set in the future, and the involvement of certain producers, actors, etc.), which are both explicit and verifiable; and then there are indirect appeals, which build on direct promises to produce a clearer sense of what the movie will be like, and finally, the overall impressions that will motivate audience members to watch the movie once it is released.

On their own, most direct promises are not very interesting (not all movies set in the future will appeal to science fiction fans, and not all movies with star actors or famous producers contain good performances) and the odds of some specific scene or plot detail glimpsed in the trailer being crucial to the viewing experience of a typical audience member is rather small.[29] Rather, it is the indirect appeals of promotional materials which are apt to hook audiences and be seen as the main promises that the purveyor made in the creation of the implicit contract. A science fiction fan might be captivated by the implied promise of Matrix-style combat, for instance, while comics fans might be attracted by a desire to see a masked superhero pursue revenge against a totalitarian government, and other viewers might want to see Natalie Portman in dishabille. While not explicit, these expectations are still largely verifiable (and thus "hard")—the combat scenes in V have many similarities to those of the Matrix movies, V is a masked superhuman seeking revenge, and Natalie Portman is seen in various states of undress during the movie.

This verifiability of indirect appeals gives audiences strong grounds for objection when inaccurate or deceptive appeals are used to promote a property. For

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[29] To consider another medium, many books, especially genre titles, have dustcover blurbs that factually misrepresent the book's contents. The back cover of Elizabeth Bear's Carnival, for instance, contains the description: "The pair are dispatched to New Amazonia as diplomatic agents... But in reality, one has his mind set on treason." As **both** of the book's secret agent protagonists intend to engage in treason, this is untrue, but it gives the reader a sense of the book's story without giving too much away. Cover art is another area in which the content of books is often misrepresented (typically through a non-Caucasian protagonist being depicted as Caucasian).

instance, if the "Scary Titanic" trailer[30] (a trailer for *Titanic* produced by editing clips from the movie together into a 30 second video that presents *Titanic* as if it were a horror film) had been used to promote the movie, audiences which went to see it on that basis would justly have been outraged, even though every direct promise made in the trailer was fulfilled. This is because the material that was cherry-picked for the trailer and the conventions used in editing it both communicated that the movie being promoted should be read as part of the horror genre (i.e. taking part in the intertextual discourse of films that draw on the conventions of horror), when neither the material chosen or the editing conventions were representative of the movie itself. While real-life trailers tend not to be quite so egregious in their misrepresentation of the material they promote, audiences often complain that trailers are not representative of the movie they promote (e.g. "all the best parts were in the trailer").

The overall, qualitative impressions audience members take away from a trailer—such as the idea that a movie will be as good as, or better than, comparable works (in the same genre, or by the same creators, actors, etc.)—are simultaneously the most valuable for promotional purposes and the most treacherous, as they are completely subjective, not verifiable, and trade on the brand value of a company or individual's name. Accordingly, if the expectations generated by those impressions are frustrated, the perceived violation of the implicit contract is likely to taint the creators and companies involved as well. This can lead to conflict between the imperatives of marketing and the implicit contract, because the aim of promotional materials is to create a positive impression of a product's quality or desirability, sometimes at the expense of accuracy,[31] while the implicit contract gives purveyors of entertainment an incentive not to oversell their products.

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[30] Available at http://www.ps260.com/elfollador/Scary%20Titanic.mov . An alternate '*Titanic* as Horror Movie' trailer (a titanic horror) can be found at http://www.moondogedit.com/ , though its effect is very dependent on its soundtrack, which is not derived from *Titanic* itself.
[31] This practice crops up fairly often in the movie industry when a movie is deemed not have legs, and promotional materials are designed to maximize the opening weekend's box office take.

Serial vs. Non-Serial Properties

It would be easy to cast conflicts between the imperatives of marketing and those of the implicit contract as a conflict between short-term profit and long-term trust, and such a view is not without validity. A much more illuminating lens to use, however, is the difference between one-off media properties (such as movies) and serial or series properties (such as TV shows, comics, etc.).

While fulfilling the implicit contract can be extremely valuable to the purveyors of one-off properties (witness *Titanic*'s worldwide gross of $1.835 Billion[32]), it is not necessarily as vital to them as it is to the purveyors of serials or series, since it's possible for one-off properties such as movies to make back their production costs on their opening weekend, even if audiences emerge feeling as if they've been cheated. Making a series or serial profitable, on the other hand, *requires* the development of long-term audience engagement, which means that violations of the implicit contract within the context of a serial property can be far more damaging. After all, promoting a series as something it was not would almost inevitably lead to its cancellation.[33]

In addition to differing in how they can be promoted, the vast majority of non-serial properties are not internally inter-textual[34], as serial properties inherently are, and thus cannot create or function as their own (sub-)genre, complete with genre conventions and skirmishes over which texts are canonical, as series and serials can. This point can be seen most clearly by examining a series which has

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[32] See http://www.worldwideboxoffice.com/ and http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=titanic.htm

[33] Marc Dolan argues that this was the main reason for the cancellation of *Twin Peaks* once it began leaning on the genre conventions of soap opera in its second season: "However successful the creators' decision to employ an episodic-serial detective story as the main plot for Twin Peaks may have proved in the short term, it was probably their biggest mistake in terms of sustaining viewer interest over the long haul... The initial advertising campaign for Twin Peaks... took the form of unanswered questions ("Who took the video of Laura in the woods?"), which conditioned readers to classify Twin Peaks as a detective story rather than a soap opera weeks before the series came on the air". Dolan, Marc. "Peaks and Valleys of Serial Creativity" in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, David Lavery, ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995. p. 36-37

[34] The exceptions to this rule are one-off properties that are made up of multiple short stories, such as *Pulp Fiction* in film and *The Things They Carried* in literature.

well-established internal conventions and clearly signals its genre allegiances, such as Fox's *House M.D.*

Case Study: *House M.D.*

House is an American product, which already tells us something—it is in English, and will work within American cultural conventions. *House* was created by David Shore, who also runs the show (placing him in television's "auteur" position), had Bryan Singer directing the pilot (he's also an executive producer), and stars Hugh Laurie. Publicly, David Shore is a virtual unknown (*House* is the first show he's created that's been aired), making the signaling value of his name minimal. Bryan Singer is known for *The Usual Suspects*, the first two *X-Men* movies, and *Superman Returns*, while Hugh Laurie is best known for his work on *Blackadder*. Singer's involvement suggests the show will be complex and somewhat nerdy, while Laurie's experience in black comedy suggests that the show will have a bit of an edge.

House is also an American broadcast TV Drama, which is loaded with meaning. We now know that the language used on the show will be restricted (no one will say 'fuck'), that the show's running time will be approximately 42 minutes, that it will be written around several ad breaks (four, in this case) with a teaser preceding the first ad break and one act following each break, and that the overall tone of the show will be serious rather than farcical (i.e. death, pain, and emotional situations will be played straight, not for laughs). If we add that *House* is a medical show, we now know its setting (a hospital), that its central characters will be doctors (and possibly nurses), and that one locus of the show's appeal will come from patients and illness.

So far, we know that *House* won't resemble a hospital comedy like *Scrubs* or a daytime soap like *General Hospital*, save in the most superficial manner. But we still don't have enough information to distinguish it from *E.R.* (an ensemble action drama set in an emergency room and focusing on patient trauma and doctor's

reactions to that trauma) or *Grey's Anatomy* (a hospital drama with a female lead and a heavy slant towards romance). In essence, while we know the tone of the show (dramatic) and the setting (a hospital), neither is enough to give us an idea of what direction *House* takes with the hospital setting, or what other genres it draws on for its dramatic structure.

In an interview included in the first season *House* DVD set, David Shore stated that, "What we were trying to do, quite cynically, was to do a cop kind of show in a medical setting. And I felt it was really important that we have a character in the center of it that was interesting"[35]. For those who don't already know that *House* is a non-ensemble medical mystery/procedural, this clarifies things enormously. With this knowledge of the show's context, medium, and form (American TV drama), as well as its setting and the dramatic form (medical mystery) it falls into, and the general style of the creators involved, we can begin to guess whether a given audience member will be interested in the show or not with some degree of accuracy.

Overlapping Genres & the Conventions of TV Mysteries

This begs the question, why does knowing that *House* is a medical mystery tell us more than the fact that it's a medical drama? What is it about the mystery genre that gives us more information about content than the fact that House is a drama and set in a hospital?

The answer is fairly straightforward if one examines the discourses that define the genres of "drama" and "hospital show". Knowing that *House* is an American TV drama conveys information about the tone of the show, as well as its running time and basic act structure (teaser + four acts), but little more. Discovering that *House* is set in a hospital conveys a sense of the range of characters and situations that are likely to crop up within the show, but very little information about its tone or structure.

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[35] "The Concept", Bonus Materials, Disc 3 Side B, *House M.D.* Season 1 DVD set.

Learning that *House* focuses on medical mysteries, on the other hand, conveys much more specific information to a viewer who knows the requirements of the mystery genre. Each episode of a mystery show tends to focus on a particular crime—which in the hospital context, is replaced with an illness. In order to solve the crime and apprehend or convict the criminal (i.e. to cure the illness), the investigators (doctors) must gather clues (symptoms and contextual evidence). At the end of each episode, either the crime is solved (the patient is properly diagnosed), or the investigation is ongoing (treatment continues), and occasionally the criminal may escape (the patient dies). While the conventions of the TV drama deal with tone and act structure, and the conventions of the hospital drama deal with setting and characters, the mystery genre provides a narrative framework which has significant structural requirements. The mystery must be introduced, investigated, complicated, and eventually resolved, and because viewers are aware of these conventions, they watch mystery shows (or read mystery novels) to be entertained and surprised by the specifics of how each episode plays out.

To return to the question with which I began this section, the fact that *House* is a mystery tells us more about the specifics of its narrative because the conventions of the mystery genre are more restrictive (and thus more predictable) than those of drama or the 'hospital' genre. Still, all three genre descriptions must be combined into the phrase "medical mystery drama" for a viewer to form a coherent picture of what *House* is about. This is because while the conventions of each genre are familiar, they are also diffuse: The set of possible TV shows encompassed by each genre category (drama, mystery, or hospital show) is extremely large. Only by focusing on the set of shows that share all of their conventions (the intersection of the three genres) does a clear sense of the show's properties emerge.

Structural Exemplar—Pilot

Having assessed *House* in light of its genre allegiances and other markers of familiarity, it would behoove us to examine an episode of the show that is representative of its conventions and structures. Unlike some other shows, the pilot for *House* was aired, and accurately represents the show's plot & relationship template. An annotated episode synopsis reflects the structural framework underlying most episodes of *House*.

The **teaser** begins by introducing the patient (a kindergarten teacher), and showing her collapse with an unknown malady. This is one of the show's conventions, and allows audiences to play the "spot the corpse" game popularized by *Six Feet Under*[36].

Act one begins with Greg House uninterested in treating the patient (conventional, as long as the illness isn't particularly intriguing), who is introduced as his friend Dr. Wilson's cousin. Wilson points out that House's team is idle, and coerces House into taking the case. A differential diagnosis scene between House and his team (Dr. Chase, Dr. Cameron, & Dr. Foreman) follows (another convention), and House's claim that meeting patients is useless because "everybody lies" is introduced. A conversation between House and Dr. Cuddy follows, in which House expresses complete disinterest in working clinic hours (conventional). Cuddy then pulls House's authorization to do tests on his patient until he agrees to work clinic duty. (Cuddy/House confrontations are another convention.) In the course of administering the contrast MRI, the patient seizes, which would have gone unnoticed if Cameron hadn't been paying attention. (The seizure and Cameron's concern are both standard.)

Act Two opens with an aerial shot of Princeton Plainsboro hospital (a standard act opening shot). House checks in to the clinic, diagnoses an orange-colored

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[36] *Six Feet Under* began episodes with a sequence in which the "client" for the funeral home that was the center of the show was introduced and killed off. *House*'s opening sequence parallels this approach, with patients and their illnesses being introduced instead of corpses.

patient as having a wife who's cheating on him, and is inspired to treat his primary patient with steroids after confronting a mother who won't let her son use his asthma inhaler. Cameron tries to give the patient hope as this speculative treatment begins (character convention), and Foreman does recon at the school, then refuses to break into the patient's home when House asks him to (ethical dilemma and character convention—House and Foreman are often at loggerheads). Cuddy then demands that House stop his speculative treatment as it's unethical. (Ethical dilemma) When Cuddy arrives in the patient's room, however, she feels much better. This lasts just long enough for the patient to seize again, at the end of the act.

Act Three opens with new symptoms emerging in the wake of the patient crashing. Based on differences in the speed at which various illnesses would kill her, House stops all treatment for diagnostic purposes, (ethical dilemma) and in response, Foreman asks Cameron to help him break into the patient's house (convention). Another interlude in the clinic follows, this time explicitly humorous, as House feeds a patient claiming chronic fatigue syndrome placebos to make him go away (playing clinic scenes for humor is a convention). Cameron and Foreman discover pork in the patient's apartment, revealing that Wilson lied about being the patient's cousin to get House to take the case (convention: Everybody lies), and suggesting the final diagnosis (another convention)—the patient has a dying tapeworm in her brain. Due to the series of failed diagnoses, however, the patient refuses further treatment. (Standard ethical dilemma)

Act Four begins with House meeting the patient for the first time and confronting her about her decision to stop treatment. He fails to convince her, and overrules his team's plan to declare her incompetent. Chase suggests a non-invasive test that could prove the patient has tapeworms, and the test confirms House's final diagnosis. (Obviously conventional.) In the wake of this success, Cameron follows up on a conversation with Foreman and confronts House about why he hired her. (This is part of the episode's melodrama arc, discussed below.) The

episode ends with House being disinterested in the patient once she's been cured (convention). He's watching TV in the clinic with Wilson when the clinic patient he fed sugar pills returns for a refill.

Strategies of Familiarity:

This annotated synopsis reveals several patterns which are consistent throughout the first season of House. First, the overall structure of the show is highly regimented. There are conventional openings (introducing the patient of the week[37]), conventional act-outs (typically the patient crashing, spasming, and/or revealing a new symptom in acts 1 & 2, with act 3's ending trending towards a crash, a revelation, or an ethical dilemma[38]), conventional revelatory moments (House connecting a clinic case to his primary case to make a breakthrough or logical leap[39]), and conventional resolutions (House's diagnosis can't be correct or confirmed until the fourth act, or if it is, other complications will prevent proper treatment) and episode endings (focusing more on House or his supporting cast than on the patient[40]).

This consistent structural framework has its advantages. Not only does it allow new viewers to become familiar with the show's rhythms and setting while they are still solidifying their grasp of the show's setting and character relationships, but it also creates sites of structural pleasure and anticipation for longtime

[37] 17 of 22 first season episodes introduce the episode's patient in this manner, with another 2 begin with House encountering a patient via Princeton Plainsboro's clinic. Of the remaining 3, one ("Kids") introduces the patient but has another character collapse, and the other two ("Three Stories" and "Honeymoon") are part of a continuing plot and deviate radically from the standard intro.

[38] During House's first season, Act 1 ended with either the patient crashing/exhibiting a new symptom or the dramatic revelation of a clue over 95% of the time (21 out of 22 episodes), Act 2 did so over 86% of the time (19 of 22 episodes), while Act 3 did so 68% of the time (15 of 22 episodes). If ethical dilemmas are included as part of the "standard" for Act 3 outs, 81% of such outs are standard (18 of 22 episodes). See accompanying spreadsheet for details.

[39] While not as consistent as the structural patterns noted, House connects clinic cases to his main patient's case quite regularly. The second episode of the series, "Paternity", is only one example.

[40] 18 out of 22 episode conclusions focus on House or his supporting cast, while only 6 focus on patients, and 3 have an explanatory focus. Of the 4 conclusions that don't focus on House or his staff, 3 of them focus on interpersonal conflict between House and Voegler, the chair of the hospital's board of directors.

viewers. On another level, the B-stories that play out in the background of each episode of *House* serve a unifying role, not only by familiarizing the audience with certain of the show's recurring themes (House trying to avoid spending time in the hospital's clinic, his insubordinate attitude toward the hospital's authority figures) but also by developing his character and his relationships with his supporting cast. While individual episodes may involve C- or even D-stories, generally only one significant multi-episode narrative plays out at a time.[41] As some of these examples make clear, these stories deal in the workplace drama typical of a hospital show, but they tend to have a darker edge than such stories in other shows—perhaps unsurprisingly, as *House*'s overall tone is darker.

The manner in which episodes of *House* tend to end is also indicative of where the long-term appeal of *House* is focused. Not only do patients come and go on an episode-by-episode basis, while House and the recurring cast members remain, but the medical portions of the mysteries are incomprehensible to most of the audience. As a result, the melodramatic elements of each episode (e.g. patients and their relatives lying to House, and House's relationships with Cuddy, Wilson, and the members of his team) are vitally important to the show's accessibility. Locating conflict on the social level is a powerful strategy for heightening drama, and allows viewers to guess at the cause of the disease without risking the final reveal—while a viewer may guess that a husband gave his wife a disease and is unwilling to admit to an extramarital affair, they are unlikely to have sufficient medical expertise to guess which disease he gave her. Over the long term, the episode structure described above becomes a generic framework within which the core cast can have their own dramas play out (retaining the attention of viewers who prefer serialized stories or who might otherwise become bored with the show's structural repetition) while still providing

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[41] In the first two seasons, the stories focused on a conflict between Cuddy and House over time spent in the clinic; Dr. Cameron's crush on House; a power struggle between House and the hospital's new board chairman, Voegler; House's relationship with his ex, who is the hospital's new lawyer; Chase's father dying of cancer (this arc and the previous arc bridge season 1 & 2); Foreman being assigned to be House's supervisor; Wilson being divorced by his wife and staying with House; and Foreman stealing an article from Cameron and refusing to apologize.

a point of entry to viewers who might want to watch the show on an episodic basis.

Strategies of Distinction:

Having identified some of the structural conventions of *House*, it is worth investigating what specific qualities set *House* apart from similar shows (such as CBS's cancelled *3 Lbs*, which set out to imitate *House*'s formula and genre appeal).

One element that makes House distinct from its imitators is that Dr. Gregory House (the titular character of *House*) is clearly modeled off of Sherlock Holmes. While none of the supplementary materials in the first DVD set mentions this connection, David Shore has stated in interviews that House was based off of Holmes[42], and the parallels between the two are obvious. Both Holmes and House are addicted to drugs (Holmes to cocaine, House to Vicodin), both have only one close friend (Dr. Watson/Dr. Wilson), both have minions who handle much of their investigative legwork (The Baker Street Irregulars/House's medical team), both are arrogant, and perhaps most obviously, both have 221B as their street address.[43]

On their own, these parallels have scant value, save insofar as the allusions to Holmes help characterize Gregory House and render the theme of a diagnostic genius solving unsolvable problems more accessible. But by building off of the idea of Holmes-as-doctor by giving House a reason for his addiction (chronic pain), and giving him a relentlessly cynical worldview and a penchant for snappy wit and ruthless behavior, the show's creative team not only gave House a distinctive personality, they added three vital elements to the show's formula: An investigative dynamic in which House and his patients are often at odds (House's

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[42] See http://tviv.org/House,_M.D./Gregory_House and http://www.housemd-guide.com/holmesian.php . The original interview page on tv.zap2it.com seems to have been taken down.

[43] Before the credits of Episode 207 ("Hunting"), as House and Wilson exit House's apartment, the house number is clearly visible on the wall.

maxim—"everybody lies"—is repeatedly proven true), a layer of trenchant humor which amuses without undermining the gravity of the show's action, and a sense that House will stop at nothing in order to diagnose his patients. Some of the most striking moments of the show have come from House doing shocking things (such as goading a patient's father into attacking him and shooting a corpse in the head) in order to confirm a diagnosis.

Most other medical dramas depict doctors as well-intentioned and self-sacrificing, but neither House nor the show's supporting characters are so easily understood, and all of them are morally ambiguous. House is a drug addict, a manipulator, and a bully, while Wilson is a womanizer, Cuddy (the hospital supervisor) is a martinet, and House's subordinates Cameron, Chase, and Foreman are (in order) a naïf, a sycophant, and a ruthless, unapologetic ass. Despite this, however, all of them are portrayed in a more-or-less sympathetic manner, and one of the greatest pleasures which the show affords is listening to the exchanges of one-liners and between House and the supporting cast.

Dynamic Equilibrium & Strategies of Variation:
Of course, once a viewer has been fully familiarized with the conventions of a TV series, the pleasure they once took in anticipating the show's rhythms can turn into boredom. For this reason, the writers of House must balance the familiarity of their show's episode structure with the need to keep that structure interesting.

This tension between the need to preserve a show's conventions and patterns and the need to keep the audience interested is not unique to House. This passage comes from Marc Dolan's essay on Twin Peaks, "Peaks and Valleys of Serial Creativity":

> The intent here seems to have been to alleviate one of the oldest
> problems of the continuous serial form, that of stimulating and maintaining
> interest in plot points in an acceptable manner[.] As should be obvious,

continuous serial must of necessity build and sustain a cult status to stay on the air; the whole raison d'etre of the form is that viewers supposedly cannot bear to miss an episode. To stimulate and maintain that level of interest, you need to draw viewers into watching the show and then keep them hooked. Since the inception of the form, however, authors of continuous serials have been forced to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of two sorts of viewer complains: (1) that a show's initial plot situation and/or their eventual complications are too stale; and (2) that these situations and/or their complications are too outrageous.[44]

While Dolan phrases the problem differently, the same tension is clearly at work: The audience desires both novelty and structural stability (as well as, perhaps, believability). In order to satisfy both sets of desires, creators must achieve a kind of dynamic equilibrium, where a consistent structural framework is continually renewed and reinvigorated by variation and complication.

To date, *House*'s writers have deployed three major strategies in order to achieve dynamic equilibrium, with two of them focusing on content, and the other concentrating on structure. The first content-focused strategy emphasizes varying the circumstances and context of a case: The patient may be a celebrity doctor with his own agenda, or may need to be diagnosed amidst the chaos of a hospital under quarantine. The second content-focused strategy shifts the locus of conflict or interest in the episode from the A-story (the patient) to the B-story (interpersonal conflict and hospital politics), such as in the episode where Chase almost kills a patient because he's been distracted by the news of his father's death. In essence, however, both content-focused strategies retain the standard episode structure, and focus on filling each act with variations on the show's usual tropes.

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[44] Dolan, p. 35

The structure-focused strategy breaks moves away from the rigid structure of a typical episode and rearranges structural tropes in much the same manner as the content-focused strategies play with narrative tropes. Instead of an episode focusing on a single case, House might teach a class on diagnostics, and recount three stories about injured legs, one of which is an account of how he was crippled. Alternatively, the diagnosis of a disease might be split across two episodes, with the original patient dying at the end of the first episode, and one of the members of House's team serving as the patient in the second episode.[45] Some variations straddle the gap between content and structure: In episode 210, "Failure to Communicate", House is snowed in at the Baltimore airport and must diagnose a patient by consulting with his team over the phone. The basic skeleton of the episode is the same, but the logistical limits imposed by the episode's premise render the episode's structure more restrictive than usual.

House M.D. as a Genre

Having laid out the typical structure of an episode of House, and the kinds of variations in content and structure which later episodes have exhibited, the question arises: What is it that unifies these disparate episodes? It is not merely their unity of characters and narrative continuity—shows like Frasier and Cheers (and Friends and Joey) shared characters but were quite distinct in tone and content, and episodes that deviated too far from what audiences would accept in depicting certain characters have historically been disavowed by fans of a show. [46] The inter-textual links between the episodes of House are deeper than that, both on a structural and thematic level. Essentially, the factor that unifies the various episodes of House is that they are engaged in discourse with each other... which means that House functions as a genre, and that its name, used as a marker of familiarity, conveys the expectation that future episodes will

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[45] Both of these examples are genuine. Episode 121 ("Three Stories") has House teaching a class, while episodes 220 & 221 ("Euphoria" part 1 & 2) form a single story.
[46] See Henry Jenkins's discussion of character rape in "Star Trek: Rerun, Reread, Rewritten" and below, in Chapter 3.

continue that discourse, even if their form or specific content deviates from the baseline which the show has established in previous episodes.

This expectation—that the discourse will be continued—has many implications, most of which restrict the content of new episodes. As the discourse centers on House's role as a doctor at in Princeton Plainsboro Hospital and his relationships with the members of his supporting cast, viewers are aware at a visceral level that an episode that ends with House being arrested will result in him being released in the next episode. Similarly, while another character may threaten to fire or imprison him, and members of the core cast may quit their jobs or become deathly ill, the first set of events would fatally disrupt the discourse that is in place (removing House from his proper context), and the second event is unlikely to be permanent, as its disruption to the discourse (while not fatal) would be significant, due to the show's repetitive and episodic nature.[47] By contrast, if a character's life was endangered in The Shield, audiences would have no assurance of their survival, because that show's discourse (and higher degree of seriality) has allowed for the possibility of major characters being killed since its very first episode.[48] This indicates very strongly that just as the marketing of a product has the power to shape the terms on which a product will be received, the conventions used at the beginning of a work of entertainment have immense power to set the terms of the internal discourse that will follow.

The expectation that the generic discourse and conventions associated with a series will be perpetuated also points to a significant shift in the role of markers of familiarity once an audience member has engaged with a serial or series. Some markers that were initially were taken as indications that a property would be of interest (such as the publisher or studio associated with the series) recede in importance to audience members, while others (such as issues of genre

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[47] Situation Comedies (which are also episodic) exhibit the same resistance to permanent change.
[48] In the first episode of The Shield, Vic Mackey kills one of the members of his Strike Team in cold blood.

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discourse and auteurship) become central. Questions of narrative and world or character continuity, in particular, can become exceptionally complicated, and for this reason, I will examine them more closely in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 – Narrative Continuity and World Coherence

Having examined how markers of familiarity such as auteurship and genre conventions create audience expectations, we now turn to the question of how expectations are created and developed by the narrative progress of an entertainment property. While the idea of the disparate episodes of a series engaging in discourse with one another is useful for understanding the generic nature of a continuing franchise, the key expectation created by a long-form narrative (serial or otherwise) is the expectation that the secondary world depicted in the narrative (e.g. the depictions of characters, the setting, and the details of the ongoing plot) will be continuous and coherent—that is, that one event will follow from another in causal sequence, that previously established facts will not be contradicted or forgotten, and so on.

The basic principle of continuity in narrative (i.e. the casual continuity and coherent development of plot events) dates back to Aristotle, as causal plots are exalted and episodic plots are condemned in the *Poetics*:

> A whole [plot] is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end... naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it... Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence.[49]

Aristotle goes on to argue that:

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[49] Aristotle, *Poetics* (S.H. Butcher translation), parts VII–IX.
http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.mb.txt

[It] is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity... The true difference [between history and poetry] is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen.[50]

In other words, plots must not only be causally continuous, but possess verisimilitude.

Though Aristotle's specific aim was rather narrow in scope (causing those watching a tragedy to feel *catharsis* at the play's culmination), the principles of continuity and coherence he identified have more general application in creating and maintaining audience engagement. John Gardner's discussion of fiction as the process of creating a "vivid and continuous fictional dream" in *The Art of Fiction* illuminates this point:

Fiction does its work by creating a dream in the reader's mind[, and] if the effect of the dream is to be powerful, the dream must [be] vivid and continuous—*vivid* because if we are not quite clear about what it is we are dreaming... our emotions and judgments must be confused, dissipated, or blocked; and *continuous* because a repeatedly interrupted flow of action [will] have less force than an action directly carried through from its beginning to its conclusion. [One] of the chief mistakes a writer can make is to allow or force the reader's mind to be distracted, even momentarily, from the fictional dream.[51]

According to Gardner, the reason that breakdowns in causality or failures of verisimilitude are bad is that they distract audiences from immersion in the fictional dream which narrative entertainment seeks to create—and insofar as

[50] Ibid., part IX
[51] Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers.* New York: Vintage, 1983. p. 31–32

immersion in a fictional dream is an audience's goal, such a distraction violates the implicit contract.

The idea that such complete audience immersion is even possible is a relatively modern one, particularly in theater. As Martin Esslin notes in his biography of Bertolt Brecht:

> We are so used to the concept of the stage as a faithful representation of the world that we tend to forget how recent a growth the naturalistic theatre really is: before the second half of the nineteenth century... the theatre could not even pretend to create a complete illusion of actual life, observed through a missing fourth wall... Declamation, asides, and monologues formed part of a convention never intended to convey the illusion of real happenings on which the audience was merely eavesdropping.[52]

While not classical in origin, the formally expressed desire for verisimilitude and immersion in theater seems to precede its possibility by at least a half-century. Of Goethe and Schiller's 1797 "On Epic and Dramatic Poetry", Esslin writes:

> Goethe and Schiller had described... the dramatic [genre] of poetry as follows: '[The] dramatic poet presents [the event he is depicting] as totally present... The actor [represents] himself as a definite individual; he wants the spectators to participate in his action, to feel the sufferings of his soul and his body with him, share his embarrassments and forget their own personalities for the sake of his... The spectator must not be allowed to rise to thoughtful contemplation; he must passionately follow the action; his imagination is completely silenced.'[53]

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[52] Esslin, Martin. *Brecht: A Choice of Evils.* London: Methuen, 1984. p. 111–112
[53] Ibid., p. 113

Though certain elements of this theory of dramatic engagement (particularly the final clause, that the spectator's imagination must be "completely silenced") are medium-dependent, the underlying principle that Goethe and Schiller advocate— that the audience should be engaged with the characters and immersed in the narrative of an entertainment and not be distracted from that engagement or immersion—has been an axiom of popular narrative since at least the end of the eighteenth century,[54] and remains one today.

Metafiction vs. Aristotelian Drama

Of course, not every form of entertainment seeks to deepen its audience's engagement with its narrative layer. Metafictional stories and plays certainly do not.

As John Gardner describes it, a metafictional work is:

> [A] story that calls attention to its methods and shows the reader what is happening to him as he reads. In this kind of fiction, needless to say, the law of the "vivid and continuous fictional dream" is no longer operative; on the contrary, the breaks in the dream are as important as the dream. [55]

While Gardner's reference to 'the reader' indicates he was speaking specifically of written stories, metafictions also exist in a variety of other media, such as drama and cinema. The techniques of metafiction can be deployed for a variety of purposes, and while mass audiences tend to be most aware of them through their use in comedy (e.g. the animator's interventions in *Duck Amuck*, and the patently false previews of *Arrested Development* and *Disgaea*), they are also deployed for ideological reasons, to "undermine... fiction's harmful effects"[56], as

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[54] John Gardner dates his theory of the fictional dream to "the seventeenth century or so." Gardner, p. 82.
[55] Ibid., p. 87
[56] Ibid., p. 87

Gardner would have it, or to instruct and educate audience members, as in the plays of Bertolt Brecht:

> Brecht regarded a theatre of illusion and identification as downright obscene[, and] identification with the characters on stage seemed equally indecent... Such an audience, Brecht argue[d], may indeed leave the theater purged of its vicarious emotions, but it will have remained uninstructed and unimproved... The audience, in his view, should not be made to feel emotions, it should be made to *think*. But identification with the characters of the play makes thinking almost impossible... the audience [has] neither the time nor the detachment to sit back and reflect in a truly critical spirit on the social and moral implications of the play. [Brecht's] answer is clear: the theatre must not only not attempt to create such an illusion, it must do its best to destroy in the bud any such illusion of reality as it will continuously, and mischievously, tend to arise.[57]

One could argue that such disruptive and ideologically motivated creative choices bring the label of "entertainment" into question, but I will not pursue that line of reasoning. Instead, I will postulate that the kind of enjoyment that audiences can derive from metafiction of this type is distinct from that produced by narrative continuity, which by our understanding of the implicit contract and genre discourse renders metafiction and traditional, Aristotelian drama into two distinct creative forms, with different conventions and expectations. As John Gardner put it:

> The appeal of metafiction may be almost entirely intellectual. If we laugh, we do not do so heartily, as when we laugh at or with an interesting lifelike character [but] with a feeling of slight superiority... If we grieve, we grieve like philosophers, not like people who have lost loved ones. Mainly we

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[57] Esslin, p. 115

think. We think about the writer's allusions, his use of unexpected devices, his effrontery in breaking the rules.[58]

These appeals are clearly not the same as the appeals of an immersive or engaging narrative, and thus "pure" metafictions cannot be judged by the same standards as continuous narratives (nor can "partial" metafictions such as those comedies cited above). It is, therefore, useless to bring up the deliberate interruptions and discontinuities of metafiction when evaluating the importance of narrative continuity in traditional Aristotlean drama, in which a perceived distraction or discontinuity will necessarily be understood as a violation of the implicit contract by audiences.

Establishing Continuity and Coherence

So far, we have demonstrated the importance of the underlying principle of narrative continuity and coherence in dramatic narrative, but we have not examined its operation. On one level, continuity is easily achieved: As long as later events grow organically out of earlier events, and previously established facts and characterizations do not change without a convincing diegetic reason, one has narrative continuity. This understanding of continuity is an oversimplification, however: Not only do long-form or serial narratives often leave threads dangling and contain enough details that keeping them all consistent can become a Sisyphean task, but such an understanding of continuity does not address the pivotal importance of how the beginning of a narrative or the introduction of a character shapes the terms of that narrative or the terms on which that character will be understood.

David Bordwell, in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, asserts that "Every film trains its spectator"[59], and we have already seen how some of this training (both in films and other media) is accomplished. Markers of familiarity position a given

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[58] Gardner, p. 90
[59] Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. p. 45

property as belonging to a particular genre or group of genres, establishing the expectation that the conventions associated with those genres will be adhered to. But the instantiation of those conventions—the development of a genre's archetypes into actual characters and the establishment of a setting in which the genre's conventions make sense—is accomplished through, first, the introduction of those characters and that setting, and second, the development of said characters and setting through the action of the plot.

The introduction of the characters establish the dramatic foundation of the entertainment: Who characters are, what relationships they have, what they value, and how their priorities or past choices will cause them to come into conflict with either each other or the world around them. The introduction of the setting establishes both the terms of the narrative's physical reality (i.e. whether space ships, vampires, or magic exist), as well as its thematic superstructure (e.g. "everybody lies", "the people you love let you down"). Both types of introduction help define the terms of the discourse which the narrative will engage in, as the introduction of characters defines the stakes of the narrative (i.e. why the audience should care), and the introduction of the setting defines both what is possible (i.e. magic, space flight) and what is probable (i.e. conspiracies, lying patients) within the diegetic world that the narrative occupies.

Bordwell's description of the audience's activity while watching a film further clarifies the specifics of how audience members create a continuous narrative from the disjointed sentences and images of an entertainment property. In addition to the assumptions and inferences necessary to make sense out of a visual medium, Bordwell describes the task of hypothesizing as follows:

> [T[he spectator frames and tests expectations about upcoming story information... assumptions and inferences take care of the "microscopic," moment-by-moment processing of the action, but at critical junctures we are tuned to expect particular events. Across scenes, hypotheses emerge

with some clarity: will the character do *x* or *y*? A more indefinite but highly

significant arc of "macroexpectation" may extend across a whole film...

So ongoing and insistent is the perceiver's drive to anticipate narrative

information that a confirmed hypothesis easily becomes a tacit

assumption, the ground for further hypotheses.[60]

This explanation of the process by which audiences anticipate future plot

developments reveals why the introduction of characters and the setting is vital:

By establishing the boundaries of what is possible and which issues are

important, such introductions constrain the likely course of the narrative, allowing

the audience's hypotheses about short-term events to be more accurate, and (as

a result) allowing them to extrapolate beyond the short-term and form

macroexpectations about the long-term course of the narrative. It also points out

a reason for the resentment and resistance audience members exhibit towards

the retroactive alteration of established continuity: by returning to a hypothesis

that has already been confirmed and invalidating it, the author of a narrative also

invalidates all of the subsequent expectations that were built upon the

confirmation of that hypothesis. Such a creative decision achieves surprise, but

at the cost of a violent breach of the implicit contract with the audience, as not

just one, but *every* expectation built upon the now-invalid hypothesis has been

frustrated.

There are several additional points which must be made about the retroactive

alteration of continuity (popularly known as a "retcon") and the breach of the

implicit contract that it entails. First, the development of a character or a change

in the setting, as long as it is depicted and motivated in a manner consistent with

the course of the narrative as a whole, is not a violation of the implicit contract.

Second, if a false hypothesis is properly framed (e.g. it is derived exclusively

from the testimony of an unreliable narrator, as in *The Usual Suspects*, and

therefore not reliable) its revelation as false may be within the bounds of the

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[60] Ibid., p. 37–38

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implicit contract, as long as only a handful of other expectations have been built on it. Similarly, purely additive alterations to continuity (i.e. they fill in "holes" in continuity without invalidating previously established facts) are usually acceptable.

Difficulties arise, however, when a hypothesis appears to the audience as having been confirmed and then is revealed as false after many other hypotheses have been built upon it. This is true even if the hypothesis was framed in a way that might have suggested it was unreliable, as unless they are reinforced, such frames will fade from the audience's memory, lending the hypothesis the credence of long-established fact. Rebecca Borgstorm's work on the role of structure in role-playing games helps illustrate how such hypotheses limit the range of acceptable outcomes in an ongoing narrative:

> Each time the players agree on something—implicitly or explicitly—regarding the story, that provides *structure*... When there is sufficient structure for the players to answer a specific question regarding the imaginary world, this creates *meaning*. [Structure] restricts the field of possible stories and limits the set of potentially emergent meanings.[61]

While Borgstrom is using "players" to describe the individuals participating in an improvisational role-playing game, the same kinds of structuring and meaning-creation functions occur in the development of any narrative. By reading "the players" to mean a creator and their audience, we can see this passage as a description of how both the terms of the implicit contract and diegetic continuity (what Borgstrom calls "meaning") emerge. Audiences which agree to a particular narrative hypothesis and then see that hypothesis reversed after a long period of acquiescence to it on the part of the narrative's creators may reasonably suspect the creator of the narrative of not "playing fair".

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[61] Borgstrom, Rebecca. "Structure and Meaning in Role-Playing Game Design", *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. p. 58–59

Secrets and "Fair Play"

The idea of fair play in narrative is one that has a long history in the mystery genre. Richard A Lupoff, in the essay "It All Started With Cain", writes:

> Fair Play was annunciated in three forms, apparently independently of one another, all in the magical year of 1928. The Oath of the (London) Detecting Club states: "...your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them, using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence or the Act of God." Monsignor Ronald A. Knox put it more succinctly in his "Detective Story Decalogue: "The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader." And S.S. Van Dine, in his "Twenty Rules of Writing Detective Stories," starts right off with Fair Play: "The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described."[62]

While certain of these strictures go beyond what is required by the implicit contract, the idea of fair play in narrative is not merely restricted to mystery (though the genre's concern with truth, lies, and secrets makes the principle particularly important there). Bordwell's description of the process of anticipation which audience members engage in makes it clear that trying to anticipate some portion of what will happen next is a source of enjoyment for audiences, and might even be described as a kind of game. Within the context of that metaphor (which the mystery genre's concept of "fair play" implicitly endorses), playing fair requires creators to give their audience all the clues they need to be able to anticipate what will happen next, while still surprising most or all of their audience at least some of the time. A creator who does not play fair (e.g. keeps vital

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[62] Lupoff, Richard A. "It All Started With Cain".
http://www.mysterynet.com/books/testimony/cain.shtml

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information secret from the audience, or presents a falsehood as a fact without also presenting evidence that undermines it) can thus be said to be "cheating"— not only within the context of allowing the audience to anticipate the plot, but also on the level of the implicit contract, by not delivering the kind of experience the audience has reason to expect.

Case Study: *Veronica Mars* Season 1

One example of an extended and intricate serial narrative that "plays fair" with the reader is the first season of *Veronica Mars*. Over the course of its first 21 episodes, every piece of evidence necessary for the audience to be able to reconstruct the chain of events surrounding Lilly Kane's murder was presented, with the murderer hiding in 'plain sight', like Poe's purloined letter, until the season finale.

Over the course of the season, a wide variety of possible murderers are presented to the audience: Abel Koontz, Jake Kane, Celeste Kane, Duncan Kane, Weevil, Logan Echolls, and (finally) Aaron Echolls. Abel Koontz, as the "official" killer, is framed in a way that makes it likely (through the first episode) and then very clear (from the second episode onward) that he did not actually kill Lilly Kane, and that he is taking the fall for someone else.

Keith Mars' suspicion that Jake Kane killed his own daughter is always a possibility, but no clear motive ever emerges (though Veronica imagines one possible scenario for Jake killing Lilly towards the end of the season). After "Credit Where Credit's Due", when the Kane family's alibis are discredited by the discovery that Lilly's time of death was inaccurate, Celeste and Duncan Kane become suspect—Celeste because she "loved Duncan and tolerated Lilly", and Duncan because of his hallucinations and the psychiatric drugs he's taking. Weevil's relationship with Lilly also places him under suspicion, although the audience is fed clues about it before Veronica learns of it.

The more Veronica learns about Abel Koontz, the more obvious it becomes that the Kane family is bribing him to take the fall for Lilly's murder. Simultaneous to this development, Aaron Echolls is introduced, first as a man who engages in domestic violence, then as a serial philanderer, and then (through the complete absence of any shift in affect when Logan and Veronica arrive to find him thrashing Trina's abusive boyfriend) as a complete sociopath. The clash between Veronica and Clarence Wiedman over the disposition of her mother and Amelia DeLongpre serves to obscure the fact that Aaron Echolls is being characterized in a way that would make a relationship with him fit the "secret" which Lilly tells Veronica she has just before she's killed. Logan's note that Duncan tried to kill his father the week he and Veronica broke up, followed by Duncan's confrontation with Veronica and his subsequent flight to Cuba depict Duncan as the probable killer until the final episode—but as the Kane family tells Duncan that they believe he killed Lilly, Veronica shifts her suspicions to Logan because of her discovery of the spy cameras in the Echolls guest house and Cassidy Casablancas' testimony about Logan's alibi. When Veronica watches the tapes she finds in Lilly's room, however, she discovers that Lilly's "secret" was that she was sleeping with Aaron Echolls, and that she discovered and took the tapes—meaning that Aaron was the killer.

The revelation of Aaron Echolls as the actual killer works, despite the fact that no evidence linked Aaron to the crime directly prior to "Leave it to Beaver", because the final episode's events are not abruptly introduced, but grow organically out of previous events, with no breaks in continuity or characterization. Jake and Celeste Kane's belief that Duncan killed Lilly and their choice to cover up that fact grow naturally out of Duncan's epileptic condition, Jake's ambitions for his son, and Lilly's statement that her parents adored Duncan and tolerated her. Aaron's revelation as the killer grew out of what the audience already knew of Aaron's character as well as the introduction of the cameras in the Echolls guest house in "a Trip to the Dentist". As such, both of these developments (as well as Veronica's suspicion of Logan and Weevil's pursuit of him upon hearing of her

suspicions) were completely believable. All the evidence needed to surmise that the Kanes believed Duncan was the killer and were covering it up through Abel Koontz and Clarence Wiedman was available halfway through the season; and while the final piece of evidence that Aaron was the actual killer came in the second-to-last episode, his characterization throughout the season made it clear that he was more than capable of murder if he felt threatened. Thus, the first season of Veronica Mars could be said to have "played fair" with its audience, as its conclusion grew organically out of long-established continuity.

"Chararacter Rape", Credibility, and Redundancy

Of course, if the level of coherence and diegetic continuity displayed by the first season of *Veronica Mars* is key to fulfilling the implicit contract, narrative incoherence and discontinuities must been seen as violations of that contract. We have already discussed how retroactive alterations of continuity, or "retcons", are likely to be interpreted as a violation of the implicit contract, and this tendency is exacerbated when the discontinuity being introduced affects the depiction of a long-established character. The bounds of such discontinuities (known among fans as "character rape") and the virulent audience reactions which they can spark are described by Henry Jenkins in his essay, "Star Trek: Rerun, Reread, Rewritten":

> Gross "infidelity" to the series' concepts constitutes what fans call "character rape" and falls outside of the community's norms. In Hunter's words:

>> A writer, either professional or amateur, must realize that she. . . is not omnipotent. She cannot force her characters to do as she pleases. . . . The writer must have respect for her characters or those created by others that she is using, and have a full working knowledge of each before committing her words to paper. (p.75)

Hunter's conception of "character rape," one widely shared within the fan community, rejects abuses by the original series writers as well as by the most novice fan and implies that the fans themselves, not program producers, are best qualified to arbitrate conflicting claims about character psychology because they care about the characters in a way that more commercially motivated parties frequently do not. In practice, the concept of "character rape" frees fans to reject large chunks of the aired material, including entire episodes, and even to radically restructure the concerns of the show in the name of defending the purity of the original series concept. What determines the range of permissible fan narratives is finally not fidelity to the original texts but consensus within the fan community itself.[63]

This last clause is important to understanding the sense of violation which the perception of "character rape" produces, in that even if a creative choice has textual backing, if that textual backing is perceived as thin, or was insufficiently reinforced (recall my previous statement about the 'unreliability' of hypotheses fading from the audience's memory, unless it is reinforced), audiences are likely to reject that choice because it causes the fictional dream which they have constructed for themselves to break down or become incoherent. Within this context, the mystery genre's idea of "fair play" can be extended to encompass credibility—not only must the audience be provided with all the information necessary to prepare them for a plot development or the solution of a mystery, but those clues must be presented in a way that renders them both credible and memorable. Often this requires a significant amount of redundancy in presentation, particularly in a serial medium: For instance, in the first season of *Veronica Mars*, the fact that Weevil had a relationship with Lilly Kane was suggested in four separate, fairly significant incidents[64] before Veronica confirms it as a fact by bugging the school counselor's office, while Lianne Mars'

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[63] Jenkins, Henry. "Star Trek: Rerun, Reread, Rewritten" (2005 Revision), p. 10
[64] Weevil weeping at the dedication of Lilly's memorial in "the Wrath of Con", Wanda Varner's question about Weevil and Lilly in "Return of the Kane", and Weevil's anger with Felix in the bathroom and the revelation of a tattoo with Lilly's name on Weevil's back in "The Girl Next Door".

alcoholism is only suggested on two occasions[65], making its revelation in the middle of the season come off as jarring to those audience members who either missed (or dismissed) those hints.

Case Study: Cassidy Casablancas and *Veronica Mars* Season 2

An excellent example of "character rape" and the problems attendant on not reinforcing the unreliability of certain hypotheses was the end-of-season revelation that Cassidy "Beaver" Casablancas caused the bus crash which served as the season-spanning mystery arc of the second season of *Veronica Mars*. While Cassidy's introduction at the end of season 1 cast him in a questionable light, over the course of season 2 he was portrayed in a very sympathetic manner, and the extreme contrast between this sympathetic depiction and his revelation as a mass murderer, especially when combined with a retcon that altered the continuity surrounding Veronica's rape that had emerged in "a Trip to the Dentist", was enough for many members of the audience to reject the second season's conclusion, whether they would have classified it as "character rape" or not.

Introduction: End of Season 1

Cassidy "Beaver" Casablancas first appears in "M.A.D." (episode 120), in which his arrival at the Echolls estate with his brother, Dick, interrupts Veronica's makeout session with Logan. While the 09ers in general (and Dick Casablancas in particular) are rarely portrayed in a sympathetic light, Cassidy's role is basically a cameo.

Cassidy plays a much larger role in the next episode, "A Trip to the Dentist", in which Veronica investigates her rape at Shelly Pomroy's party. After interrogating several of the 09ers and discovering that she was dosed with GHB, Veronica interviews 09ers Dick Casablancas and Sean Friedrich, whose self-

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[65] Once in the first episode, when Logan says of Lianne, "now there was a woman who could drink" (though this lacks credibility, since Logan is harassing Veronica), and later on, when Veronica states that she attributed Lianne's erratic behavior to "the vodka talking".

serving narratives both confirm that they left Cassidy Casablancas alone in a room with an unconscious Veronica and a strip of condoms. When Veronica confronts Cassidy, however, he categorically denies that he raped her, claiming that he fled the room and threw up. The episode concludes with Duncan Kane admitting that he and Veronica slept together that evening, though Duncan recalls Veronica being conscious and willing. While there is no hard evidence presented that Cassidy's testimony is any less self-serving than that of Dick or Sean, Veronica accepts it as fact, and Duncan's admission that he and Veronica slept together reinforces that acceptance by providing a credible alternative to Cassidy (who is definitely presented as more sympathetic and credible than Dick or Sean)[66] lying to Veronica about what happened. As no hints that Veronica's trust in Cassidy is misplaced emerge in the next 21 episodes, the hypothesis that this episode seems to confirm (that Cassidy didn't rape Veronica) soon becomes axiomatic.

The perception of Cassidy's decency fostered by the hypothesis that he didn't assault her in her sleep is further reinforced in the next episode, when Dick tells Cassidy that they would take a secret "[t]o the grave, man, that's what we said". Cassidy's response, which comes several scenes later, is to go to Veronica and tell her that:

> "There's something you should know. It's for your own good[67]... On the weekend that Lilly was killed, me, Dick, and Logan, we were down in Mexico surfing... Logan, he, ah, he got all worked up talking about how he knew that Lilly was seeing somebody new... So he got up early that morning. The day that Lilly was murdered, he drove back to Neptune to see her."

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[66] Dick is consistently portrayed as an ignorant, tactless, male chauvinist pig, while Veronica proved Sean stole $1,000 in a poker game in "An Echolls Family Christmas". Given that all of three flashbacks gave the impression that Dick and Sean were bullying the (comparatively quiet and timid) Cassidy into "being a man" by raping Veronica, Cassidy's story definitely comes off as the credible of the three.

[67] Presumably this is because Cassidy knows that Veronica was or is dating Logan.

While Cassidy's motives for giving up Logan's secret aren't entirely clear (before Dick reminds him of their promise, he's talking about phone records and shoes, implying that he might actually be concerned about justice being done), he is willing to break a promise to his (unsympathetic) brother to confide to Veronica that Logan could have been Lilly's killer, and that she might be in danger. This makes him one of a handful of 09ers who've demonstrated any concern for others in the course of the show (the others being Duncan Kane, Logan Echolls, and Meg Manning).

Establishment of Sympathy: Beginning and Middle of Season 2

Cassidy continues to be portrayed as an atypical 09er male in season 2, demonstrating in a variety of ways that he's both smarter[68] and better socialized[69] than his brother and other 09ers. Though his hiring Veronica to check up on Kendall Casablancas (Cassidy's stepmother) results in Veronica uncovering that his father's real-estate empire is built on sand as well as the fact that Kendall is sleeping with Logan (Ep. 203–"Cheaty Cheaty Bang Bang"), Cassidy's hand-picked stock portfolio vies with Veronica's for first place out of all the portfolios in the Future Business Leaders of America club (Ep. 207–"Nobody puts Baby in a Corner"). Also, when Cassidy decides to start up his own real-estate company with Kendall as the front-woman, he turns to Veronica's tech-savvy friend Mac for web support and graphic design (in Ep. 209–"My Mother, the Fiend"), which is not only a smart move, given Mac's established talents, but also the beginning of a relationship between Mac and Cassidy, granting Cassidy even more positive credibility due to his association with Mac (given that the worst thing Mac has been portrayed as doing is running a purity test scam to fleece the 09ers of their allowance money). And while Cassidy and Mac conspire to get back at Dick after he harasses them at the Winter Carnival (Ep. 213–"Ain't

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[68] In "Normal is the Watchword", Cassidy notes that he scored 400 points higher than Dick on the SATs.
[69] In the same episode, Cassidy comments "You guys are twisted," when he notices Dick and Logan checking out his stepmother, Kendall.

No Magic Mountain High Enough") by hiring a pre-op transsexual escort to seduce him, this is par for the course for the show, as Veronica consistently gets back at those who've angered her (as do Logan and Weevil, in "The Girl Next Door").

Establishment of Suspicion: End of Season 2

Mac and Cassidy's relationship begins to break down when Mac finds Cassidy unwilling to become more intimate with her and goes to Veronica for advice. When Cassidy finds out about Mac bringing Veronica into their relationship, he dumps her. ("Ep. 217–Plan B") Evidence surfaces that Cassidy might have had a grudge against Cervando, a PCH bike club member who was killed in the bus crash, because Cervando held him accountable for Dick Casablancas ruining his $200 designer jeans. ("Ep. 218–I am God") When Veronica asks Cassidy to tutor Weevil so he can graduate (and so Cassidy can get his car fixed), Mac overhears Cassidy having trouble and offers to help out, and their relationship starts back up again. (Ep. 221–"Happy Go Lucky") Veronica also learns that she has Chlamydia in the same episode.

Unlike Aaron Echolls in Season 1, the only evidence that actually incriminates Cassidy directly emerges in the Season 2 finale, "Not Pictured". While Woody Goodman commented that he coached some of the Neptune High students who went to Sharks stadium in little league in the season premiere ("Normal is the Watchword"), it wasn't until "Happy Go Lucky" that it became clear that Woody had molested some members of his little league team, and only in "Not Pictured" does Veronica discover that Woody Goodman had Chlamydia, that Cassidy Casablancas was also on that team, and that his voice was the one that was erased in the recording used to blackmail Woody into scuttling incorporation (which benefited the Phoenix Land Trust). And while Veronica learns that Hart (the boy from season 1 who made the war movie that recorded Lynn Echolls' death) is one of Cassidy's acquaintances in "Happy Go Lucky", it isn't until "Not Pictured" that Hart tells her that they actually used explosives in their war movies,

which Cassidy acquired from Curly Moran (a now-dead mechanic associated with the bus crash).

This kind of last-minute reveal is manifestly not "playing fair". Aside from Cassidy's intimacy issues and his conflict with Cervando (which had nothing to do with the actual reason Cassidy blew up the bus), prior to "Not Pictured" there is absolutely **no** evidence beyond his acquaintance with Curly Moran that suggests Cassidy would be capable of acquiring or using the explosives that were used to blow up the bus other than his innate intelligence and occasional ruthlessness (qualities which are shared by Mac and Veronica, making both of them equally qualified to be behind the bus crash, if one discounts their absence from the scene). That Cassidy would have a motive to blow up the bus only emerges in the final episode, when it's revealed that he was molested by Woody and meant to keep that fact a secret. Furthermore, "A Trip to the Dentist" is retconned so that Cassidy actually did rape Veronica—without using the condoms his brother provided (an uncharacteristically foolish act)—overturning a hypothesis that had been "confirmed" for 22 episodes and everything that the audience has learned about Cassidy's character since then.

In addition to cheating the audience of its opportunity to properly anticipate the season's ending, this particular series of creative choices is also a classic example of "character rape". By retconning Veronica's rape without undermining Cassidy's testimony, the show's writers break violently from accepted continuity, both by having Cassidy rape Veronica, and having him do so in a manner that would (uncharacteristically) leave evidence behind. Furthermore, the decision to have Cassidy be the killer (and to have him be competent with a gun and abuse Mac on his way to confronting Veronica) undermines everything the audience has accepted about Cassidy's character. While his father and Dick are competent with guns, Cassidy is explicitly excluded from the trip that Logan, Dick, and Richard Casablancas take to the shooting range in "Driver Ed" (Ep. 202), and there is substantial evidence that he cares about Mac and shies away

from confrontation. When two episodes of abrupt developments and retroactive alterations of continuity are pitted against a full season's worth of characterization with which they are inconsistent, the emotional balance will almost always tip the scales towards established continuity and characterization rather than what is likely to be perceived as the violation of the implicit contract in order to achieve surprise or a convenient resolution of the plot.

Chapter 4—Expectations of Audience Interaction

The previous two chapters have examined the role of expectations in diegetic narrative, which for all its complexity has at least been well-studied. I will now shift my focus to the dimensions of interactivity, play, and consumption, which are essential to any understanding of new media forms such as videogames.

While expectations about how audiences should interact with entertainment clearly exist in traditional media, both on a technological (one should read a book, or put a DVD/VHS tape into an appropriate player) and social (silent reading, not talking during a public performance) level, these are either necessary to make consumption of the media possible or an outgrowth of the cultural conventions about the "proper" use of media, and are—at least for our purposes—trivial. What we are concerned with are expectations of *direct* interaction between audiences and their entertainment, which are much richer and more complex on the level of audience reception. And to illustrate the complex structures that such expectations often create, I will examine the evolution of collectible card games (which are often convergent or transmedia entertainment properties themselves) and the vital role which dynamic equilibrium has played in the persistence of the first modern CCG, *Magic: the Gathering*.

Design Expectations: Symmetry & Skill

Before we can understand the ways in which design choices create and structure expectations in games, we must first examine the fundamental expectations which audiences have about games themselves. The most fundamental expectation that players have about traditional multiplayer games (i.e. board and party games) is that of **symmetry**—the expectation that the rules of the game shall apply equally to all players, and that players shall have the same pool of options and resources at their disposal. The principle of symmetry can most easily be seen at work in two-player games like Chess or Go, where each player

begins with the same set of pieces (chess) or has a effectively limitless pool of identical pieces (Go), though it can also be seen in party games such as Charades, where it manifests itself in the division of players into teams of equal numbers, and board games such as Monopoly, where each player begins with the same amount of money.

Expectations of Compensated Asymmetry

Of course, even the mathematical symmetry of games such as Chess or Go is not perfect, as one player must be allowed to move before the other, and gains an advantage by doing so. There are various ways of addressing this kind of issue (championship chess matches typically allow each player to play first the same number of times, while Go grants the player who plays second a "komi" of 5.5 points to compensate for the advantage gained by playing first), but they all have the same aim—giving each player or team an equal opportunity to prevail. In many cases, this aim can only be achieved or approximated through deliberate asymmetries that attempt to compensate for pre-existing asymmetries (such as the "komi" rule in Go).

Game Balance, & Expectations of Skill and Luck

This process, of introducing new asymmetries or modifying existing ones in order to create a game which is *effectively* symmetric, is known within the games industry as "balancing" a game, and its goal (giving each player an equal opportunity to prevail) is popularly known as "game balance".[70]

It must be understood that whether a game is "balanced" or not is not dependent on the skill of the players engaged in it, but only on the rules and internal structure of the game itself. While a balanced game may involve randomness, so long as that randomness is symmetric in its impact, the expectation is that a player of superior skill will defeat a player of lesser skill the majority of the time

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[70] This association between game balance and symmetry has led to the term being used more generally, as a synonym for fairness or an appropriate level of challenge (in single-player games), but for the purposes of this study, I will be using the term in the narrowest possible sense.

(though, of course, an increase in the role of randomness increases the chance that a less skilled player will win any given game due to luck rather than skill). This can be seen in gambling games like Poker or Blackjack, where mental acuity and specialized skills (such as calculating probabilities, card-counting, and "reading" one's opponents) allow skilled players to win consistently over the long term, while randomness still allows less skilled players to prevail on occasion.

It should be understood that games of pure randomness, such as the card game War, have no allowance for skill. As a result, the majority of purely random games that are widely played involve gambling (such as lotteries or Roulette) and are intentionally unbalanced—one player (the "House" or lottery-runner) has a higher probability of victory (i.e. profit) than the others. While games such as War are not played because they are uninteresting over the long term, the hope of a random windfall is what makes lotteries and Roulette appeal to their players, who play solely in order to have a chance of getting lucky. Such games are typically shunned by players with the mathematical competency to understand that their odds are stacked against them.

Handicapping

As I noted above, a game's being balanced only gives each player an equal opportunity for victory in the abstract—if one player is significantly more skilled than their opponent in a 2 player game, that player is more likely to prevail. As a result, many players have invented ways to compensate for an advantage in skill by breaking the fundamental symmetry of a game. These range from Golf handicaps to Go players allowing their opponents extra stones, but they are indicative that part of the pleasure and reward of such contests comes from the challenge that the opponent provides. If one's opponent is significantly inferior in skill, the game's balance is only a first step towards producing a challenge. The goal of this sort of handicapping is to balance the players as well as the game's design, though for the purposes of my case study, it will be necessary to broaden

the scope of handicapping as any means of modifying a game's balance after its release.

Creating Expectations: Structuring Audience Interactions in Games

The expectations of symmetry and/or fairness described above are the foundation of most audience members' expectations about games. Games can do a great deal to further shape audience expectations and structure how their audience interacts with them, however, and this can be seen most clearly by examining computer games, which (by their nature) constrain those interactions quite rigidly.[71] Describing the early computer game *Zork*, Janet Murray observes that:

> *Zork* transmuted the intellectual challenge and frustrations of programming
> into a mock-heroic quest filled with enemy trolls, maddening dead ends,
> vexing riddles, and rewards for strenuous problem solving... *Zork* was
> focused on the experience of the participant, the adventurer through such
> a clever rule system. *Zork* was set up to provide the player with
> opportunities for making decisions and to dramatically enact the results of
> those decisions. If you do not take the lamp, you will not see what is in
> the cellar, and then you will definitely be eaten by the grue. But the lamp
> is not enough. If you do not take water with you, you will die of thirst... if
> you drink the wrong water, you will be poisoned. If you do not take
> weapons, you will [be killed by] the trolls[, b]ut if you take too many
> objects, you will not be able to carry the treasure when you find it. In order
> to succeed, you must orchestrate your actions carefully and learn from
> repeated trial and error. In the early versions there was no way to save a
> game in midplay, and therefore a mistake meant repeating the entire

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[71] While the rules structures of non-electronic games (board games, card games, sports, role-playing games, etc.) are non-binding, allowing extensive variations in play using the same equipment (e.g. Go vs. five-in-a-row, bridge vs. 7 card stud, etc.), the interface constraints of computer games force them to communicate expectations through their design and interface in a much clearer way than traditional non-electronic games do.

correct procedure from the beginning. In a way, the computer was programming the player.[72]

While Murray says that the computer was programming the player, a more accurate description of the process at work here would be to say that, just as Bordwell claims that "Each film trains its spectator", Zork was training its player. While Zork (a text-based adventure game) had relatively primitive cues and incentive structures by modern standards, its trappings (those of a fantastic quest adventure) and its mechanics (the player must collect objects in one area which they will use in later areas to a) avoid dying and b) avoid or defeat impediments) both communicate expectations to the player. The game's genre trappings frame and constrain the action, allowing players to anticipate what kinds of actions will be appropriate (such as killing grues), and what kinds of objects will be needed to perform those actions (magic swords). The game's mechanics constrain the audience's expectations even further, by training them that certain objects (such as sources of illumination) are necessary for survival, and (more broadly) that those objects are necessary because of the game's internal logic, in which the world underneath the white house is full of hazards, both natural (such as thirst) and supernatural.

The incentive structure implicit in the game's design (in which death is "punished" by the player having to start from the beginning again) clearly rewards players for collecting the appropriate object to overcome a given challenge. This pressures players to collect every object they come across, and to prevent this (and preserve the game's challenge) the designers impose a limit on how many objects the player can carry. This, in turn, pressures players to collect objects which are known to be useful (light sources, food and water, weapons), as well as those that seem as if they might be useful in the future—and, when confronted

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[72] Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1997. p. 77

with a new obstacle, to attempt to use those potentially useful objects to overcome it, even in "inappropriate" ways:

> Part of the pleasure of the participant in Zork is testing the limits of what the program would respond to... if you type in "eat buoy" when a buoy floats by on your trip up a frozen river on a magic boat, then the game will announce that it has taken it instead and will add, "I don't think that the red buoy would agree with you." If you type in "kill troll with newspaper," it will reply, "Attacking a troll with a newspaper is foolhardy."

Such responses indicate that the game's designers were acutely aware that their game's interface would encourage players to attempt odd or inappropriate actions, either when frustrated or out of curiosity.

UI as Communication and Instruction

As noted above, *Zork* was a very early computer game, and in the absence of graphical and audio cues, the bulk of the expectations it inculcated in the player had to be communicated through text and gameplay. Modern game designers can deploy the user interface (UI) of their game to provide cues that will structure their audience's expectations and interactions with much more immediacy than that offered by text.

The most obvious example of a game genre that communicates volumes about how the player is meant to interact with the world is the FPS (First-Person Shooter) genre. The user interface typically consists of a targeting reticule in the center of the screen, with a gun or other weapon directed at that reticule from the bottom of the screen. While there are often other UI elements on the screen, the targeting reticule and weapon are the dominant elements of the UI, and as such clearly convey what the dominant activity of most FPS games is—targeting and shooting opposing characters. Since the 64-bit generation of video game consoles and controllers, the button assigned to firing weapons in FPS games

has typically been the "trigger" button, on the shoulder of the controller, which most closely corresponds to where the trigger of a gun would be.

Genre in Games

The clarity of interactive expectation that the FPS genre typically displays is an extreme example of transparent UI design, but is illustrative of the link between play mechanics, formal properties, modes of interaction, and game genres. While genres in narrative entertainment tend to be based around narrative elements (either structural [Mystery], diegetic [SF & Fantasy], or thematic [Romance & Horror]), in those games which have narrative elements, they typically play a very small role in determining which game genre they are understood to belong to.

This marginalization of narrative elements in the genre discourse surrounding games can be traced to the function of genre as a marker of familiarity. The whole reason audiences rely on markers of familiarity is that they want to be able to anticipate what kind of experience an entertainment property will provide them—and when one surveys the genre schemes typically used to divide games, it quickly becomes clear that while the form and medium (board games, card games, computer games, video games), the presentation (side-scroller, first-person, third-person), and the play mechanics and way the player interacts with a game (racer, adventure game, shooter, puzzle game, RPG) are all important to segregating different kinds of audience experience from one another, the narrative qualities of games are referenced with far less frequency in such classification systems.

While it is not reasonable to dismiss narrative elements as completely irrelevant to understanding games, as Espen Aarseth and the more extreme Ludologists are wont to do[73] (especially as some genres, particularly the RPG and adventure

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[73] See Aarseth's "Genre Trouble" (2004) http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/vigilant for one expression of this view. Aarseth even claims that games are not intertextual, which I dispute.

genres, are historically associated with narrative), the tendency of narrative elements to be glossed over or ignored in the genre classification of games indicates quite strongly that such elements are understood to carry less information (or at least less valuable information) about the experience which the game will provide its player than those genre descriptions which are more commonly used. This can be understood if one realizes that on the level of interaction, the "bare mechanics" of a game (i.e. form, medium, play mechanics) form the foundation of the audience's experience. As Raph Koster notes:

> The best test of a game's fun in the strict sense [is] playing the game with no graphics, no music, no sound, no story, no nothing. If that's fun, then everything else will serve to focus, refine, empower and magnify. But all the dressing in the world can't change iceberg lettuce into roast turkey.[74]

In other words, narrative is marginalized in the discourse of game genre because it is part of what Koster calls "dressing". As Koster goes on to point out, however, this does not mean that "dressing" elements cannot have a significant impact on the audience's experience:

> The bare mechanics of the game do not determine its semantic freight... Let's picture a mass murder game wherein there is a gas chamber shaped like a well. You the player are dropping innocent victims down into the gas chamber, and they come in all shapes and sizes... As they fall to the bottom, they grab onto each other and try to form human pyramids to get to the top of the well. Should they manage to get out, the game is over and you lose. But if you pack them in well enough, the ones on the bottom succumb to the gas and die.

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[74] Koster, Raph. *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Scottsdale, AZ: Paraglyph Press, 2005. p. 166

I do not want to play this game... Yet it is *Tetris*. You could have well-proven, stellar game design mechanics applied towards a quite repugnant premise. To those who say the art of the game is purely that of the mechanics, I say that [t]he art of the game is the whole [of the game].[75]

As this example demonstrates, "dressing" elements can magnify the audience's enjoyment of the game's mechanics or completely transform the experience by making enjoyable mechanics abhorrent, and as such are of undeniable importance to the overall experience which playing a particular game creates. However, the bulk of the player's experience will still be shaped by the "bare mechanics" of a particular game, and if a player does not enjoy the game's bare mechanics, it is unlikely that they will enjoy that game. As such, it is only natural that play mechanics, form, and POV-choice are the primary markers of familiarity in the discourse of game genre, for they allow players to differentiate between games they are likely and unlikely to enjoy more efficiently than secondary markers (such as narrative genre) do, even though the secondary markers may give a player more information about the magnitude of enjoyment they will derive from the game in question.

Case Study—Collectible Card Games

So far, we have seen how games, like narrative entertainment forms, train their players to play them, and determined why genre classifications in games focus on the game's mechanical implementation rather than "dressing" elements such as narrative. To fully appreciate the immense complexity of the expectations of interaction and consumption that can surround a game, however, we will need to examine a specific game genre in more depth.

The genre of collectible card games (CCGs) illustrates many dimensions of the expectations surrounding game balance and audience interaction. Today CCGs are a booming international industry, with several immensely popular games

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[75] Ibid., p. 168

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linked to children's media franchises, and several other games supporting professional tournament circuits. And yet, two decades ago, the idea of the collectible card game was almost undreamt of. While games and Cartophily (card collecting) were linked at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, that association was largely forgotten as the century went on, only to re-emerge with a vengeance once a game called *Magic: the Gathering* hit the market in 1993, hybridizing two marginalized media forms (collectible cards and strategy card games) in a way that resonated with the zeitgeist and eventually helped produce cultural phenomena such as *Pokemon* and *Yu-gi-oh*.

Collectible card games, as a subject of inquiry, have drawn relatively little critical or academic attention, and what little work has been done on them (by scholars such as Mimi Ito) has concentrated on the social dimensions of these games. While the social and hypersocial dimensions of trading for cards and finding opponents should not be dismissed, to limit the study of CCGs to the communities that grow up around them is to overlook an extremely rich field of game design and its interactions with the marketplace. There is much to be learned from CCGs about fostering long-term engagement in an audience through creating and maintaining dynamic equilibrium, to say nothing of game and interface design.

What is a Collectible Card Game?

A collectible card game is a game that is played with cards which players collect and assemble into decks. Before the advent of the modern collectible card game, the composition of these decks was usually fixed (e.g. decks of playing cards could be assembled by collecting cigarette cards, and Carreras's *The Greyhound Racing Game*[76] [1926] required players to collect all the cards that were part of the game to play), though this was not always the case (Topps' first baseball cards apparently allowed collectors to play games with less than a full

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[76] http://www.stevetalbot.com/cards/related.php#PLAYING

set). [77] Since the release of *Magic: the Gathering* (the first modern CCG, hereafter referred to as Magic) in 1993, CCGs have required each player to assemble a deck that must contain a minimum number of cards (such as 40, or 60, or 90) [78] from the pool of cards they have access to.

Expectations of Consumption

Both the adjective "collectible" and the expectation that players will assemble decks from their own card collection put a premium on consuming (i.e. purchasing) cards. In light of the existence of other types of collectible cards, would-be CCG players can be assumed to have some expectations and knowledge of how card collecting works, even before they begin to purchase CCG cards for themselves.

The bulk of the prior knowledge about CCGs which prospective players have will come from sports card collecting. Modern sports cards are understood as "trading cards" because they are released in sealed, randomized packs in which collectible cards are the primary product (as opposed to the "trade cards" they replaced, which were cards packaged with products like cigarettes or gum). In *A House of Cards*, John Bloom summarizes the evolution of baseball cards as follows:

> Tobacco companies in the 1880s were the first to produce and distribute baseball cards to mass audiences, using them as an advertising mechanism to sell their product as their industry became mechanized and sought new markets to avoid overproduction... It was not until after World War I that companies would package baseball cards with products such as candy [or gum], thereby marketing products directly to children. [A]fter World War II, companies regularly produced and sold yearly sets of

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[77] http://www.topps.com/AboutTopps/history.html
[78] Decks constructed from limited card pools in Magic must be at least 40 cards, while decks constructed from a player's whole collection must be at least 60 cards. The 90 card figure comes from Vampire: the Eternal Struggle, where a player's library (one of two decks used to play) must be at least 90 cards.

baseball cards to children for the first time... What had once been an advertising mechanism had now become an elaborately crafted form of entertainment.[79]

Some sports cards (typically premium cards featuring popular players) are less common and/or more desirable than others, and the demand from completist or specialty collectors for such cards pushes their prices up. This principle is also true in CCGs. The typical CCG has at least 3 rarity levels—common, uncommon, and rare.[80] Describing the Magic expansion *Stronghold* in an article in the *College Mathematics Journal*, Robert A. Bosch writes that:

> The *Stronghold* expansion consists of 143 distinguishable cards, of which 44 are said to be *rare*, another 44 are said to be *uncommon*, and the remaining 55 are said to be *common*. Each booster pack contains one rare card selected at random, three uncommons selected at random, without replacement, and eleven commons selected at random, again without replacement.[81]

This sort of rarity distribution (which is typical of the CCG industry) ensures that the supply of cards of "higher" rarity (rares and uncommons) will be significantly smaller than that of cards of "lower" rarity (commons), increasing their perceived value, especially if the demand for them is high. In addition, as Bosch discovered through mathematical analysis, such a rarity distribution pressures

[79] Bloom, John. *A House of Cards: Baseball Card Collecting and Popular Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997. p. 3–4

[80] Magic's rarity system has become more baroque since the days of Stronghold. In addition to the creation of "foil" versions of cards, the Time Spiral set introduced "Timeshifted" cards, which are more reprinted cards that (at least within the context of Time Spiral) are scarcer than rares. Yu-Gi-Oh, by contrast, has 4 "special" levels of rarity: rare, super rare, ultra rare, and ultimate rare. See: Ito, Mizuko. "Technologies of the Childhood Imagination: Media Mixes, Hypersociality, and Recombinant Cultural Form." *Items and Issues*, Vol.4, No.4, Winter 2003-2004, p. 33

[81] Bosch, Robert A. "Optimal Card-Collecting Strategies for Magic: The Gathering." *College Mathematics Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan. 2000), p. 15

collectors who want all the cards in the set to purchase large volumes of product. While I will omit the specifics of his mathematical argument, Bosch found that:

> [Optimal collecting] strategies always took the following form: if a collector is missing r_0 rares, the collector should purchase an entire box of 36 booster packs... In addition [we] found that as á [the discount rate for purchasing a box of boosters] increased... r_0 decreased. This makes sense: the greater the discount at which a collector can purchase boxes, the lower the expected cost of an optimal strategy *and* the more often he should purchase boxes.

> What surprised us greatly was that the values of r_0 were low. For example, when á $= 0.10$, $r_0 = 2$. This means that if the collector can buy boxes of 36 booster packs at a 10% discount, his optimal card collecting strategy is to buy a box whenever he is missing *more than two* rares to complete his collection! And when á 0.33, $r_0 = 0$. In other words, if the collector can buy boxes at a discount of 33% or more, he should always buy boxes.[82]

While Bosch ignores the existence of a secondary market for cards in order to simplify his argument, the fact that players often require multiple copies of specific rares to make a competitive deck means that the pressure for someone in the supply chain (collectors, retailers, or players) to purchase and open boxes of product for the rares is even greater than Bosch's analysis might suggest.

The same pressure to purchase large volumes of product which the collectible nature of CCGs exerts also manifests itself in other forms. One of these is the drive towards what Mimi Ito has termed "hypersociality" in her study of CCGs aimed at children, such as *Yu-Gi-Oh* and *Pokémon*:

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[82] Ibid., p. 18

Far from the shut-in behavior that gave rise to the most familiar forms of anti-media rhetoric, this media mix of children's popular culture is wired, extroverted and hypersocial, sociality augmented by a dense set of technologies signifiers, and systems of exchange. The image of solitary kids staring at television screens... has given way to the figure of the activist kid [t]rading cards in the park, text messaging friends on their bus ride home, and reading breaking *Yugioh* [sic] information emailed to a mobile phone.[83]

While Ito's description of hypersociality includes many details that are specific to the cross-media children's franchises her research is focused on, the idea of hypersociality—that is technologically- and exchange-augmented sociality like that produced by CCGs, where players continually seek to trade their excess cards to other players they've just met for cards they desire—is a key one in understanding how players interact with and consume CCGs. The hypersocial nature of CCGs affects the rapidly-evolving secondary markets and competitive meta-games that emerge around them, as well as the collective intelligence groups that emerge online to develop new decks and "spoil" the contents of new expansions before they are released. What is important about hypersociality is that while it is encouraged as a practice of consumption (gathering cards for a collection or for play), its implications reach far beyond mere consumption, fueling multiple modes of interaction which create long-term engagement with a CCG (or multiple CCGs), which in turn drives further consumption.

Expectations Regarding Presentation

In addition the elaborate expectations about consumption which CCGs create through their clear parallels to sports cards and internal rarity structures, CCGs also create clear expectations about presentation.

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[83] Ito, p. 32

One of the basic expectations created by CCG cards is that they will be designed and illustrated in a visually appealing manner. While there is no logistical impediment to the creation of a CCG whose cards are as visually simple as ordinary playing cards, or the cards used in board games like Monopoly or Trivial Pursuit, to create such cards would be terrible branding and marketing. While *Magic: the Gathering* was undoubtedly influenced by the design aesthetic of sports cards, which had little to sell themselves on other than their visual appeal and collectability, its 1993 release set the standard for CCGs to follow it, with visually appealing card designs and high quality art. The two CCGs that immediately followed the release of Magic (Wyvern and Spellfire) didn't measure up graphically[84], while later, more successful competitors and successors emulated the high standard of Magic's graphic design.

The need to make cards visually appealing is not the only expectation that CCGs foster, however. Just as the user interface of computer games can convey what the game is about and how to play it, the imagery, layout, and language used on each individual card in a CCG functions as that card's UI—which means that visual and linguistic ambiguity is to be avoided at all costs. A classic story about the playtest of *Magic: the Gathering* has a player bragging to Richard Garfield (the game's designer) he has the best card in the game: whenever he plays it, he wins on the next turn. Richard (who knew he had made no such card) asked to see it, and was presented with the card Time Walk, which was intended to grant its caster an extra turn. However, the card's text was "Opponent loses next turn"—a potentially game-winning ambiguity in wording![85]

This need for perfect clarity in expressing what a card does has resulted in several developments. The first of these is the addition of "reminder text" to

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[84] Wyvern's cards all more or less had the same border design, and the game's color palette was muted, with most of the art coming from a single artist, making the cards visually interchangeable. Spellfire drew on TSR's backlog of painted D&D art, but failed in its card design, framing the familiar art either poorly or not at all.
[85] Garfield, Richard. "The Design Evolution of Magic: The Gathering (1993 | 2004)" in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* (ed. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman), MIT Press, 2005.

many cards, which specifies with a reasonable degree of clarity what certain "keyworded" special abilities (abilities which are common enough that they are abbreviated by a single word, such as "flying", or "protection from [X]" where X is a card type) actually work.[86] The second is the decision to limit the use of very small fonts on cards, which keeps most cards comparatively simple and easy to read (the exception being rares)[87] as well as ensuring that they can be translated and printed in other languages (where the same card text can take significantly more or less space than it does in English). There are also a variety of iconographic conventions used on cards to convey information about the costs of special abilities concisely.

The final layer of expectations with which the cards in a CCG are loaded is the expectation that its visual and textual presentation will help cement the diegetic world in which the game's action takes place into the player's mind, present part of a narrative taking place in that world, or both. This occurs through the deployment of the card's art, which typically illustrates the card's effects or what it represents, as well as the inclusion of flavor text, which usually comments (sometimes through humor) on both the card and its role in the diegetic world that the CCG depicts. Most flavor text is meant to be read in conjunction with the card's art, but some of it functions on its own—consider the flavor text of Kobold Taskmaster, which is "The taskmaster knows there is no cure for the common kobold". This is a fairly weak pun, to be sure, but not dependent on the card's image of a larger kobold whipping its smaller brethren for its effect.

Expectations Regarding Play

The most complex cluster of expectations that surrounds collectible card games, of course, are the expectations that surround how the games function and should

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[86] Rosewater, Mark. "Keeping it Simple" (
http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/daily/mr21)
[87] Rosewater, Mark. "Rare, but Well Done". (
http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/daily/mr9)

be played. These are elaborate and often very specific to the game in question, but some general principles tend to be applicable to all CCGs.

A modern CCG is a game of strategic resource management. A primary resource type (e.g. cards in hand, or a player's "life total") must be expended to acquire a secondary type of resource (e.g. "mana", or character cards) which in turn can be used by players to play or use their other cards (tertiary resources) in an attempt to win the game. Such games typically allow for several roads to victory, most of which involve attacking some combination of an opponent's primary, secondary, or tertiary resources.

While this description is quite abstract, it applies to essentially all modern CCGs. Another nearly universal expectation about the course of play in a CCG is that mastery of the details and nuances of the game's rules is necessary to properly evaluate a game state and determine the optimal course of action. This is because a failure to fully grasp the nuances of the game's rules can result in a sub-optimal use of your resources, allowing your opponent to retain more of their resources, and thereby allowing them a greater chance of winning the game. While the level of detail which the rules of CCGs go into may seem comical to those unacquainted with their play, such rules systems are intended to clarify any and all ambiguities that may arise from sloppy wording or the accidental or deliberate misinterpretation of cards on the part of players. As a result, players who are more familiar with a game's rules can often leverage that familiarity to gain an advantage when they play the game in question.

Furthermore, in addition to the hypersocial elements which Mimi Ito described above, every CCG has a social context (typically known as a "metagame") which must be accounted for. Assuming that the CCG is not naïve (i.e. there is no single strategy that is clearly superior to all others), the viability of a deck is dependent on the field of other decks that are likely to be played against it. If deck A always beats deck B, but always loses to deck C, then in a metagame

where deck B is popular, deck A will be a good choice, while in a metagame where deck C is popular, deck A would be a terrible choice. While this example is overly simple, it conveys the concept of metagame analysis quite clearly. Players who "play" the metagame use their expectations about the field to create or modify a deck so that it will be more likely to be competitive in the environment they expect to encounter.

The idea of deck "matchups" and the kind of metagame analysis I engage in above (the idea that deck A tends to beat or lose to deck B is condensed down to "A has a good/bad matchup vs. B"), lead players to analyze CCG play through the lens of statistics. In this model of the genre, playing well causes a player to "gain percentage", while making mistakes "gives away percentage". While CCGs obviously contain a random element, the premise underlying the idea of "percentage" is that an initially unfavorable matchup can be turned in one's favor through play skill, while a matchup or board position that favors you can be squandered through error. This expectation is inherent in Zvi Moshowitz's discussion of proper play in Magic:

> Decide which play gives you the best chance of winning the game, based on your analysis. Ideally, this consists of calculating a percent chance that you will win the game under each scenario... [but p]eople's brains don't think that way, so you'll have to settle for relative chances... In the end, many decisions come down to what some people call "judgment calls." In common parlance, what that means is that you have two or more choices and there are arguments you can make in favor of all of them. Some would say you have multiple good plays, or sometimes no good plays and multiple bad ones. You're not [being] precise enough to decide between them. Here, Jon Finkel [one of history's most successful Magic pros] once

again has words of wisdom: "There's no such thing as a good play. There's the right play and then there's the mistake."[88]

While not made explicit in this example, the argument which Finkel and Moshowitz are advancing is that a proper analysis of the game state will always reveal that **there is one play that is more likely to lead to victory than any other**. This is the "right play", and as such, play skill in CCGs consists of the strategic maximization of the chance that you will win. In practice, this often means that players with only one path to victory remaining or one card that can win them the game must play as if they were sure they were going to draw that card—since the probability of their victory is zero if they do not.[89]

Beyond these universal expectations about CCGs, there are also some design-specific expectations (or perhaps conventions) which have emerged as a result of *Magic: the Gathering*'s central role in the field, and the fact that most professional CCG designers for companies other than Wizards of the Coast have either worked on Magic or had some degree of success on the Magic Pro Tour. It cannot be overemphasized that these conventions are as prevalent as they are because of *Magic: the Gathering*'s seminal status in the CCG field, and not because they are the necessary result of designing a non-naïve CCG.

The most influential of these Magic-derived conventions is there is a maximum number of any given card that can be included in any given deck. This idea of a "card limit" first emerged as a balancing mechanism in the early days of Magic tournaments, where it swiftly became clear that since certain cards were superior in power, quality, or flexibility than others, and that allowing players to use as

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[88] Moshowitz, Zvi. "Systemic Thought". (http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/daily/zm42)

[89] Notable examples include Kai Budde's final round victory in 2001's Pro Tour: New Orleans (http://wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/daily/mr136) which required him to "topdeck" (draw off the top of his deck) a Morphling and Craig Jones' topdeck of the "$16,000 Lightning Helix" in the semifinals of 2006's Pro Tour Honolulu (http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgevent/pthon06/sf2). Neither would have been possible without the player in question playing so that drawing an "out" would result in victory.

many copies of a card as they wished made the play environment degenerate to the point that it was no longer interesting or enjoyable. The idea was adopted in most of the CCG designs that followed, largely because the variations in card quality which had prompted the move in Magic were perpetuated by the swiftly-designed and released games that followed it—essentially, the idea that card limits were necessary to make a CCG enjoyable was created by imbalances in card quality, and the fact that many players felt card limits were necessary for a game to be balanced or enjoyable encouraged other designers to continue designing games in which the cards were of unequal power. At this point in time, card limits and the kind of asymmetric design typical of Magic have become inextricably linked, and their association and the unquestioned assumption that all CCGs must engage in asymmetric design and use card limits has resulted in what is effectively a subgenre of CCGs (albeit the dominant subgenre) being seen as representative of the entire field by many players and designers.

Case Study—Magic: the Gathering

Magic was the first modern CCG, and remains one of the most successful. Each player takes on the role of a powerful wizard, and the cards in their decks represent magical resources which they can draw on, or spells they can use to alter the game's progress. To play a spell, a player must use their resources to pay any costs marked on the card. Spells are divided into those with immediate, transient effects, and those with permanent effects. Players win by either reducing their opponent's life points to 0 or by drawing the game out until their opponent runs out of cards in their deck.

The Early History of Magic and the CCG Market

Magic was created by Richard Garfield, a mathematics PhD from the University of Pennsylvania. The game's story begins with Garfield pitching a board game, RoboRally, to Peter Adkinson, then CEO of the fledgling game company Wizards of the Coast (WotC). Since board games are expensive to produce and hard to market, Adkinson suggested that Garfield design a game that was portable and

could be played in a limited amount of time. Garfield came back a few days later with an idea that combined the collectible nature of trading cards and a card game.[90] That idea (originally called "Mana Clash") was the seed that would grow into *Magic: the Gathering*.

This premise was simple in the abstract, but complex in execution. Drawing on the marketing techniques used by publishers of sports cards, Garfield split the game's cards into 3 distinct rarities (as described by Robert Bosch, above). The 5 kinds of resource cards ("basic lands") that players needed to play the game were printed as commons, though they were more common than other cards at the same rarity. The rare cards, in turn, tended to be more impressive, powerful, or flexible than cards of other rarities.

Magic's initial set of 300+ cards was released in late July/early August 1993,[91] with a print run of 2.6 million. The game's fantasy trappings, strategic elements, and collectible nature allowed it to be sold and promoted through existing networks of specialty game stores and comics shops, and when demand proved higher than Wizards had anticipated, 7.3 million additional cards were printed. In December, a mere 4 months after the game first went to press, an additional 35 million cards printed for the "Unlimited" edition.[92]

Magic's Appeal

Magic: the Gathering's explosive success was due in large part to the fact that it appealed to players on many levels. The cards themselves were vividly illustrated, and often had entertaining text on them that told players something about the world the game was set in. While the game's rules were occasionally ambiguous, the basic premise and mechanics of the game were easy to pick up,

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[90] http://www.rpg.net/columns/briefhistory/briefhistory1.phtml This account is corroborated by Garfield in "The Design Evolution of Magic: The Gathering (1993 | 2004)". p. 540

[91] Sources cite conflicting dates as to the date of Magic's retail release. The rpg.net article cited above claims it was released in early August, while John Shuler's introduction to *Deckade* (Flores, Michael J. New York: Top8Magic.com, 2006. p. 2) claims that cards began appearing in stores in late July.

[92] http://www.rpg.net/columns/briefhistory/briefhistory1.phtml

so players could begin playing within a quarter of an hour of opening their first "starter" pack.[93] Players also had limited knowledge of the card pool, making the game exploratory—when opening a booster or playing an unfamiliar opponent, you never knew what cards you might see for the first time. Finally, Magic's adoption can also be traced to the fact that it was designed for downtime and fit smoothly into a niche (break time in schools & colleges).

In addition to its elements of novelty and hypersociality, Magic also had the advantage of being the product of years of testing. As a result, its resource system was multi-dimensional and robust, challenging players to determine what the right balance of resource cards to "business" cards was for each deck they created. In addition, as Garfield had deliberately made it difficult for players to get all the features players wanted in a deck by using only cards of a single "color" (resource type), players were faced with a choice between power & flexibility (playing a multi-color deck) and consistently being able to use their spells (playing a deck with only a single color).[94] Was it more effective to win the game by having lots of weak creatures, a few powerful ones, or running your opponent out of cards? The lack of simple answers to these questions made playing Magic intellectually challenging.

Imitators and Naïve Design

The overnight success of Magic quickly led to the release of copycat games, such as *Wyvern* and TSR's *Spellfire*. One problem common to many of these imitators (and Wyvern and Spellfire in particular) was that they were naively designed—that is, they lacked the robustness and complexity of Magic's resource system and its multiple paths to victory. Wyvern's resource system was one-dimensional (there was only a single resource, gold), and as a result, if one card was strictly superior to another (i.e. cost less gold for the same power or

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[93] Magic was initially sold in two forms: 60 card "starters", which contained fewer rares, more basic lands, and a rulebook, and 15 card "boosters", described above. This two-tiered model was adopted by all other CCGs for many years.
[94] Garfield, p. 544

was stronger for the same gold cost) there was no valid strategic reason for any player to play with the second card. Spellfire was even worse, as it had no resource system at all—if one card granted a +5 bonus while another of the same type granted a +9 bonus, there would never be a reason to play with the first card.

While both games enjoyed moderate sales early on, this was largely a consequence of the fact that new shipments of Magic: the Gathering often sold out on the day that they arrived, and the excess demand for Magic translated into sales for its competition. As the print runs of Magic expansions grew larger and the lack of depth to Magic's naïve competitors became clear, they fell by the wayside as players abandoned them.

Magic, Degeneracy, and Card Limits

Of course, as more Magic cards were printed and knowledge of the card pool spread through the Magic-playing community (via word of mouth and Usenet newsgroups) the intellectual challenge posed by the game began to fade. While the groups of testers who had worked with Garfield in developing the game often only had a pool of 4000 cards to work with, [95] over 45 million cards were in circulation by the end of 1993. The size of the player base and sheer number of copies of any given card that a player could assemble meant that the variations in card power which the game's testers had seen as acceptable (due to a card's rarity, for instance)[96] had their effect amplified by the game's wider distribution, and as a result, many players began to assemble what the original testers referred to as degenerate decks: "[N]arrow, powerful decks that [were] difficult to beat and often boring to play with or against."[97]

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[95] Ibid. p. 543
[96] "Sometimes a card was made rare because it was too powerful or imbalancing in large quantities". Ibid., p. 543
[97] Ibid., p. 544

While Garfield had originally believed that the game's social dimension would keep such decks under control[98], the game's immense popularity and the emergence of tournament play both handicapped the ability of peer pressure to curb degeneracy. Not only could players who enjoyed playing degenerate decks find new victims if their old opponents grew tired of being defeated before they could have a meaningful impact on the game, but the competitive advantage that such decks granted their players in tournaments meant that only players piloting such decks would stand a chance of victory. As a result, when Wizards of the Coast began to promote tournament play, they were forced to come up with rules that would bring the worst excesses of such degenerate decks to heel.

The solution which the Duelist's Convocation[99] hit upon was threefold. First, the minimum deck size was increased from 40 cards to 60 for tournament play[100]. Second, players could only include four copies of any card other than a basic land in their deck. And third, the most powerful cards were even more restricted: Only a single copy of each was allowed.

These "card limits" (referenced above) had significant implications for how Magic was played. While decks that used multiple copies of powerful rares like Time Walk and Black Lotus were reined in, so were those decks built around playing many, many copies of a single common card.[101] As a result, to stay competitive, players had to acquire copies of each card on the "restricted" list, which was expensive and could be downright impossible, since all of them came from card sets that were no longer widely available. And while not every competitive deck used every card on the restricted list, enough did that the short-term impact of

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[98] "In the end I decided that the degenerate decks were actually part of the fun. People would assemble them, play with them until they got bored or their regular opponents refused to play against them and then retire the deck or trade off its components..." Ibid, p. 545
[99] The organization that Wizards created to handle organized play. It has since been renamed the DCI.
[100] This measure was probably intended to increase variety in deck design and to minimize the chance of players drawing a combination of cards that would allow them to win on their first turn.
[101] Examples include the Lightning Bolt deck and the Plague Rat deck, in which the only cards that weren't basic lands were Lightning Bolts or Plague Rats, respectively.

the creation of card limits was to narrow the number of viable competitive decks even as it broadened the number of viable decks for casual play (since most players swiftly adopted the tournament rules as a means of keeping degenerate decks from ruining their enjoyment of the game).

In addition, the DCI's establishment of card limits affected how almost every subsequent CCG evolved. While Magic and the other early Deckmaster games designed by Richard Garfield (such as Jyhad/V:tES and Netrunner) were designed and tested without card limits, limits on how many copies of a given card could be in a deck were adopted, almost without exception, by subsequent designers.

Other Degenerate Designs

Unfortunately, Magic's example was not enough to prevent many of the CCGs that followed it from falling into degeneracy as well. White Wolf's *Rage* and Decipher's *Star Trek: The Next Generation* game are two examples of games that fell more deeply into this trap, to the point that the core design of both games could be said to be degenerate.

As I described above, Naïve CCGs are structurally flawed—they are designed in a manner which makes discovering an optimal strategy trivial. Degenerate CCGs are more structurally robust, but contain individual cards or combinations of cards which are so much more effective or powerful than other cards that they make a game with a robust structure function **as if** it was naively designed—in other words, they distort the game so that only a few cards are relevant, and only a few strategies are competitive.

The specific forms of degeneracy in Rage and Star Trek were quite different, but both are clear examples of the kind of design flaw I point to above. On its initial release, Rage had one dominant deck type (which used powerful rares such as Frenzy and Mangle to cripple or kill an opponent's characters) and one weaker

deck type (which used a swarm of weaker characters to overwhelm opposition), while its first expansion enabled a deck that could win on the first turn with the right draw.[102] With only a handful of deck types being viable at a time, and an extremely small pool of relevant cards, Rage was a classic example of a degenerate CCG.

Star Trek's degeneracy manifested in a different manner, though one closely linked to its origins as a licensed game. In order to make the most prominent characters, ships and events from the TV show feel special, the cards that represented them were designed to be strictly more powerful and flexible than more common cards. While players were restricted from playing with more than one copy of such "unique" cards in their decks, the superiority of these cards to their common counterparts essentially required players to use them if they wanted to be competitive. In addition, the game featured several powerful cards which could only be negated by using a card that specifically counteracted those cards. This (fairly clumsy) design choice put pressure on players to play both the powerful cards and the card that counteracted them to remain competitive. This resulted in a degenerate play environment with few relevant cards, the bulk of which were rare.

Magic and Dynamic Equilibrium

After the establishment of card limits and the restriction of the game's most powerful cards, the development of new decks in tournament Magic essentially ground to a halt, with only a handful of cards from new expansions seeing any kind of competitive play. Initially, this had little impact on Magic's sales, since demand for new cards exceeded supply, but with the release of the expansion *Fallen Empires*, supply finally surpassed demand, and Wizards of the Coast realized that if it wanted to continue selling new cards, it would either have to

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[102] The deck used a two-card combination to first double the "renown" of its most powerful character, and then gain victory points equal to that character's renown, immediately winning the game. A promotional card that came out around the same time also enabled a combination of cards that allowed the Frenzy deck to play an infinite number of attack cards each combat.

print cards more powerful than those already played in tournaments (making the game more degenerate and unbalanced, and angering players and collectors whose cards would be devalued as a result of "power creep" making them obsolete), or drive player interest in new releases in some other manner.

The solution, as before, came from changes to the rules of tournament play. The old tournament format (where all cards, no matter how old, were allowed) was preserved as "Type I" play, while "Type II" play, in which only cards from recent expansions were permitted, was established as the new tournament standard.[103] This move revitalized interest in Magic. Suddenly, new deck types were playable, and an environment which had been dominated by cards that most players could not afford was now open to innovation. Extensive strategic discussions emerged on Usenet newsgroups like rec.games.board and the newly created rec.games.deckmaster and rec.games.trading-cards.magic.strategy, pushing the colloquial theory surrounding Magic (and CCGs in general) to a new level.

Set Rotation & Play Formats

The creation of Standard (aka Type II) introduced the idea of set rotation, where expansions would be released, be playable in Standard for a year or two, and then "rotate out" of Standard as a new expansion was rotated in. This premise was Magic's first step towards true dynamic equilibrium, though it had a significant drawback—because of the high barrier to a card's adoption for play in Vintage (Type I), once a set rotated out of Standard, all but a handful of its cards would become utterly worthless to competitive players. In order to mollify players who felt that set rotations were making their cards worthless, Wizards eventually created two more play formats: Extended and Legacy. Cards are playable in

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[103] In order to reinforce this association, Type II was later renamed "Standard", while Type I was dubbed "Vintage".

Extended for most of a decade after their initial release,[104] while any Magic card ever released (other than the most powerful, which are only legal in Vintage) is allowed in Legacy.

While only Standard and Extended are affected by important cards rotating out (and crippling the decks that depend on them), even Legacy and Vintage can be affected by the release of new expansions, as cards that are relatively innocuous in Standard can combine with older cards to enable new strategies or cripple existing ones. As such, even the "eternal" formats, where cards are always legal, can be renewed by the release of narrow cards that have good synergy with pre-existing powerhouses.

Block Design

The second major step towards dynamic equilibrium in Magic was the emergence of the block design model. Prior to 1995's *Ice Age* & 1996's *Alliances*, no two Magic expansions had been explicitly linked, either by mechanics or storyline, but with the release of *Mirage*, *Visions*, and *Weatherlight*, Magic entered an era where sets were released on a regular schedule (a large, 300+ card set in October, followed by smaller, 150+ card sets in February and June), and each "block" (set of one large and two small sets) was united by mechanical synergies between the cards of its component sets and a story that unfolded through the art and flavor text of those cards. The advent of block design meant that mechanics which had formerly been developed in one set and then abandoned in the next could be explored in more depth, and that cards and strategies which initially seemed powerful or weak could have assessments of their power shift dramatically when the next set in the block was released. Furthermore, based on the mechanical shifts between blocks, playing Magic with cards from one block is often quite different from using cards from a different block. Thus, each new expansion affects the experience of playing the game.

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[104] Cards from *Invasion* block, which debuted in September 2000, will rotate out of Extended in September 2008, along with the cards of *Odyssey* block (2001-2002) and *Onslaught* block (2002-2003).

Card Relevance and Limited Play

Another (albeit lesser) form of dynamic equilibrium resulted from WotC's decision to support play formats (such as sealed deck and draft)[105] in which players built their deck from a limited card pool. Such play formats help renew player interest in Magic because the specific card pool each player has to work with changes each time they play, while the overall card pool from which their cards are drawn changes each time a new expansion is released.

In addition to the sources of variation described above, limited play formats also force players to use and play around cards that they would never even have to think about if they were playing Standard. This is due to the fact that while over 1500 different cards are legal in Standard/Type II at any given time, only the most efficient and strategically relevant cards (perhaps 200 or 300 of them, if several strategies are viable) out that 1500 card pool will be played in competitive decks, as the bulk of the cards in the play format will either too expensive, too slow, too weak, or too specialized to win tournaments. This means that only a handful of cards in any given set will be relevant to constructed play, with the others dismissed as "chaff" or "jank". The same is not true for limited formats such as sealed deck or draft, where almost any card has the potential to be relevant—and the more common it is, the more relevant it is likely to be. As a result, while powerful rares tend to be the most relevant cards in Standard (and thus must be designed and balanced the most carefully), commons are the most relevant cards in limited (and thus must be designed and balanced the most carefully). While designing a set for limited play makes the design process more challenging, it also provides a wider range of play experiences, appealing to multiple audiences and helping maintain the interest of the players who are most deeply invested in the game.

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[105] In sealed deck, each player is provided with a random number of cards from a given expansion or block and must make a 40-card deck from them. In draft, players take turns "drafting" cards from booster packs (as professional sports teams draft players), and must assemble a deck from the cards they drafted.

Balance, Skill, and Dynamic Equilibrium in Magic

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Magic's dynamic equilibrium is the game's approach to balance. From its inception, Magic was designed asymmetrically, and while the imbalances that resulted from that asymmetric design initially threatened to destroy the game's viability, the game's designers introduced a variety of innovations (card limits, set rotation, limited play, etc.) which combined to turn the game's asymmetric design and the uneven power level of individual cards into an asset.

On its face, the claim that Magic's imbalance is an asset might seem to contradict the idea of game balance that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. However, it should be understood that Magic's concessions to the ideal of symmetric balance are purely structural, as when one examines individual cards, some are clearly superior to others. Furthermore, unlike chess, where each player's selection of pieces is predetermined, Magic allows each player to construct their own deck. As a result, both a player's financial resources (and thus the cards they have access to) and their skill (or lack thereof) at evaluating cards can impact their success.

Of course, as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, whether a game is balanced or not is not dependent on the skill of the players engaged in it. By allowing players to control the resource selection (i.e. deck construction) process, collectible card games like Magic *increase* the importance of skill to victory, making the game more intellectually challenging. This can be seen by the fact that a player who has built a deck with sub-par cards has effectively handicapped themselves. Furthermore, unlike games like Chess (where evaluating pieces is easy, as the queen is strictly superior to every other piece except the knight), in a non-naïve CCG, card evaluation is not a trivial process. As such, in a very narrow sense, Magic could be seen as a balanced game, as each player has an equal opportunity to leverage their skill into victory through deck construction,

meta-game analysis, and skillful play (assuming, of course, that they can acquire all the cards they need to play competitively). This narrow understanding of game balance has little relevance to the actual play of Magic, however, as the same could be said of naïve or degenerate CCGs, which are clearly not "balanced" in the colloquial sense.

A more accurate understanding of the way in which Magic is balanced can be derived from our discussion of limited play formats and card relevance. Out of the card pool available to any given format, only the most efficient, flexible, and powerful cards and strategies are likely to be competitively relevant. As a result, all that is necessary for that play format to avoid becoming naïve or degenerate is for the top-tier cards and strategies to be more or less balanced with one another. Furthermore, even if one strategy temporarily becomes dominant, as long as effective ways of attacking that strategy are available to other decks, the play format will not become truly degenerate.

Of course, if one strategy or deck becomes dominant despite other decks gunning for it (as was the case with Ravager Affinity in 2004), then the balance of power between top-tier decks has been disrupted, and drastic steps must be taken. In March 2005, eight cards[106] were banned to ensure that Ravager Affinity (a deck that could consistently win on turn 3 or 4) would no longer be playable in Standard. While Affinity was past the peak of its dominance, as Aaron Forsythe commented regarding the bannings:

> One of the most damning statements that can be made about a game is that it is *not fun*... ever since Affinity first showed up[,] people complained about it. I have plenty of anecdotal evidence [of] people quitting Magic, threatening to quit, or stepping away from Standard for some amount of time because of the dark cloud of Affinity...but recently the evidence of the

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[106] Arcbound Ravager (the deck's namesake), Disciple of the Vault, Tree of Tales, Great Foundry, Ancient Den, Vault of Whispers, Seat of the Synod, and Darksteel Citadel.

general public's disdain for what the format looks like has gone from anecdotal to measurable.[107]

While such a move may not have been necessary from a purely balance-oriented perspective, from the perspective of maintaining dynamic equilibrium (i.e. maintaining the audience's interest in Magic[108]), eliminating an unfun and historically dominant deck type was absolutely the right choice in terms of the implicit contract.

This move also illustrates a point that is worth emphasizing: balance is subordinate to dynamic equilibrium in Magic. While each of the game's five colors is more or less equal over the long run, at any given point in time, certain colors and strategies will be more competitively viable than others. This point was driven home most clearly in Odyssey block, when the second expansion (*Torment*) contained more—and more powerful—black cards than cards of any other color, and only a handful of weak white and green cards. For a time, black decks dominated limited and constructed play, and then the block's last expansion (*Judgment*) reversed *Torment*'s black skew, giving green and white more cards and more power while reducing the number and quality of black cards. This prioritization of dynamic equilibrium over stability or balance is one of the keys to Magic's enduring intellectual appeal, as each new expansion forces players to reassess the relative value of specific cards and strategies.

Forms of Dynamic Equilibrium

Having described the techniques by which Magic's designers have maintained the game's dynamic equilibrium over the course of time, it is worth considering how the form of dynamic equilibrium it exhibits compares to dynamic equilibrium

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[107] Forsythe, Aaron. "Eight plus One". http://wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/daily/af56
[108] In a follow-up article, Forsythe wrote: "When I said 'measurable' I meant measurable... Standard tournament attendance was down noticeably, an average of almost a player per event (which is a lot when you realize we're talking about every [small event] at the store level)... People were actively *not playing*" Forsythe, Aaron. "More about March 1st". http://wizards.com/default.asp?x=mtgcom/daily/af57

in narrative forms. It should immediately be clear that parallels between Magic and a serial or continuing narrative are far from exact. While each new installment of a continuing or serial narrative builds on past events, Magic actively disengages from its past through set rotations—while new expansions engage in discourse with other expansions in the same block through shared themes and mechanics, the ties between adjacent blocks are typically thin, and non-adjacent blocks often have little in common. As such, the form of dynamic equilibrium which Magic maintains more closely resembles that of a genre, in which dramatic variances between individual works or series are tolerated, than that of a traditional franchise, in which an ever-more constrained discourse is built around diegetic or game-mechanical continuity.

This genre-like property can partly be attributed to the emphasis on Magic's game mechanics over its narrative elements, but it cannot wholly be attributed to its status as a game franchise (as the next chapter's examination of the forms of dynamic equilibrium deployed by superhero franchises will show). The game's dependence on innovation and novelty to retain its commercial viability and the structure of block design are perhaps more important. By continually renewing and revitalizing Magic, the game's designers achieve something akin to the ageless, eternal present in which superhero comics exist. Just as clear and fixed temporality in superhero comics would lead to the hero's eventual death (from old age, if nothing else), a stable and predictable play format would lead to Magic losing its players' interest—and such commercially disastrous outcomes are obviously to be avoided. This structural parallel between a one-and-a-half-decade old game property and superhero properties that have endured for over half a century suggests that there may be a connection between a property locating its core appeal at a generic level and its long-term viability.

Convergent Media Properties and Complexity

It must be emphasized that the study of *Magic: the Gathering* contained in this chapter is, of necessity, a truncated one. In order to focus on expectations of

interactivity and consumption, the aesthetic and narrative dimension of Magic and how it impinges on the game's design and play has not been covered except in the most superficial manner. Similarly, the elaborate collective intelligence structures that surround Magic and other CCGs have only been alluded to, as hundreds of pages could be written[109] on the process by which the tournament meta-game emerges, or the process by which collective opinions of a card's power and worth are formed. These omissions are the result of the fact that collectible card games such as *Magic: the Gathering* are exactly the sort of convergent and multi-dimensional media forms that cannot be fully understood without the grammar of audience expectations which we are developing.

With that said, if we ever hope to be able to understand the inner workings of convergent and transmedia forms of entertainment, we must examine the interaction between different types of expectations. While a truly convergent media form may remain beyond us, we must examine a form that is sufficiently complex that its study will prepare us for the challenges which future media forms will bring. That particular challenge will be taken on in the following chapter.

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[109] In fact, given the incredible quantity of analysis which Magic strategy sites produce, it would be more surprising if hundreds of pages have *not* already been written on these topics.

Chapter 5—Hybrid Expectations

To date, I have restricted the scope of my case studies so that they could focus on one or two types of expectations (macro- and micro-expectations in narrative, expectations of consumption and interactivity in games) at a time. Such a narrow scope of inquiry does not address the complex interactions between different types of expectations, however, nor does it address how strategies to achieve dynamic equilibrium can emerge from such interactions.

As such, in this chapter I will be examining these issues through the lens of American Superhero comics. To begin with, superhero comics hybridize the conventions and trappings of many other genres into a mélange that nonetheless has its own conventions and trappings. In addition, superhero comics have historically been serialized as limited-run collectibles, producing a wide variety of tics and quirks that are particular to the narrative form. Finally, the structure of the comics business has sustained dynamic equilibrium in narrative for decades through a variety of means, and studying how those strategies emerged from the economic pressures of serialization and the need to stabilize valuable and iconic characters cannot help but give us a deeper understanding of how dynamic equilibrium is achieved in practice.

Superhero Comics as Hybrid Genre

The genre discourse surrounding superhero comics draws its roots from dozens of sources. Superman is probably the first superhero (though an argument could be made for the Phantom, a masked crime-fighter who first appeared in a newspaper strip in 1936, two years before Superman's 1938 debut in *Action Comics* #1), and is a good example of how the superhero genre hybridized and repurposed conventions from preexisting genres. Superman is an alien with superhuman powers (science fiction), who fights crime (action/mystery), and masquerades as reporter Clark Kent (newspaper drama; a prominent genre in the 30s and 40s). Other early superheroes drew on the hard-boiled detective

genre (Batman first appeared in issue #27 of *Detective Comics*), or the pulp tradition (the Phantom, among others).

By the 1960s, characters such as Dr. Strange (the "Sorcerer Supreme"), the Hulk (a visual takeoff on the monster from James Whale's *Frankenstein*, combined with the personality of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), Spider-Man (who gained his powers through a combination of radiation and scientific ingenuity), and Nick Fury (a military man turned super-spy) co-existed within the confines of the Marvel Universe, mixing threads of fantasy, horror, science fiction, war fiction, espionage and personal melodrama into the genre identity of superhero comics.[110] The impact which the coexistence of so many genre conventions had on the development of the superhero genre cannot be underestimated. It certainly has helped contribute to the infamous diegetic complexity of Marvel and DC's superhero "universes."

Despite this plethora of influences, superhero comics have also developed their own trappings (e.g. masks, skin-tight costumes, superhuman powers or nearly superhuman physical and mental abilities) and narrative conventions (e.g. dependence on continuity, recurrence of old characters, inevitable victory of the heroes, & a strong tendency to follow any radical and dramatic changes with a reversion to either the status quo or a close approximation thereof, either immediately or after a period of time has passed). The sources and implications of many of these conventions will be addressed below.

The Narrative Implications of Collectability

While comics were never collectables in the same sense as cards are in a collectable card game, the vagaries of newsstand sales during the Golden and Silver Ages of comics often made it difficult for readers to acquire consecutive issues of a given title (to say nothing of back issues). As a result of this, if stories were to make any sense to their readers, they would need to be as self-

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[110] Nick Fury and Dr. Strange even shared the same book for a time (from Fury's appearance as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent in *Strange Tales* #135 until issue #168).

contained as possible. As a result of this, for many years, comics contained either a single self-contained story, or several shorter stories. While the seeds of an ongoing narrative might be planted through the use of recurring villains or supporting characters, for many years stories were not serialized in the same way that Dickens or Dumas serialized their novels.

As comics continuity was developed and comics began to draw more on their readers' knowledge of previous events, however, both creators and readers learned to compensate for the fact that no one was likely to have access to all of a character's previous appearances. Visual and narrative protocols emerged so that readers would be provided with the key information they needed to understand who recurring characters were (often through a character announcing their name) and what their relationship with the protagonist was (through either exposition or drawing on known archetypes) without bogging down the narrative with too much back story.[111] The specifics of this inferential process are discussed at some length below.

The emergence of specialty comic stores (which catered to the collector's market by selling back issues of continuing series) and the spread of the Direct Market's "no returns" policy in the 70s and 80s both served to undercut the market forces which pushed comics towards stand-alone stories, as serialized narratives offered store owners more opportunities to induce their customers to buy previously unsold back-issues. The ready availability of back issues certainly enabled comics to develop more complicated and/or sophisticated narratives (such as Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams' run on *Green Lantern*, which ran from issue #76 to #89 and dealt with "relevant" issues, such as poverty, pollution, and drug addiction) which were serialized over multiple issues. While individual storylines were initially restricted to two or three issues in a row (for instance, the

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[111] Back story would typically be hinted at—as in the case of the footnotes in Marvel comics indicating which back issue a referenced event occurred in—rather than made explicit. The assumption appears to be that readers would either pick up the relevant back story from other fans or by reading supplementary content, such as the Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe or DC's "Secret Files" comics.

infamous "Speedy is a Junkie" storyline took up only two issues—85 & 86—of *Green Lantern*), by the late 70s creators such as Chris Claremont were producing extended serialized narrative arcs such as the Dark Phoenix Saga (which was composed of two interconnected "arcs", Uncanny X-Men #101–108 and #129–138) which essentially required readers to have read most, if not all of the issues in question. The need to have access to all the relevant issues in order to make sense of a book's narrative increased the perceived value (and thus collectability) of individual comics, particularly in the case of books that gained in popularity after their initial release. This was one of several factors which drove the speculation boom of the early 90s (where speculators bought up multiple copies of individual issues) and the glut and market collapse that followed in its wake.

One of the reasons that an issue's narrative significance could drive up its price was the fact that until the mid-90s, the American comics industry did not do a very good job of reprinting comics in collected form. While the trade paperback versions of milestone books like *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* were perennial sellers, it took the post-glut decline in the market for individual issues and the enduring financial success of collections such as Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (as well as significant lobbying on the part of both top retailers and creators) for all the major publishers to fully embrace the market for trade paperback collections.[112] Once publishers and retailers accepted the value of the trade paperback, however, content began to be shaped to fit the form. Today, the typical trade paperback collects a single narrative arc, typically composed of 6 to 8 individual issues, though some trades collect up to 12–13.

[112] DC comics embraced the trade paperback years before Marvel did, partly because of its experience selling thousands of copies of the *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* collections year after year. By the time Marvel began collecting major crossovers, such as the *Age of Apocalypse* books, DC was committed to reprinting every issue of series like *Sandman* in trade paperback form.

While the collectable nature of comics was not deliberately engineered (at least initially)[113], as it was in collectable card games, it has clearly had a significant impact on how comics were produced and received. After emerging as a result of the distribution practices of the newsstand era, the consumption of comics as collectables was encouraged both by the economic model of specialty retailers who sold back issues, and by creators who serialized stories across dozens of installments. After the notion of comics as collectables reached its summit during the Image era of the early nineties (with speculators encouraged to buy multiple copies of a single issue through gimmicks such as variant covers, and the "value" of comics being hyped breathlessly by price guides such as *Wizard* magazine), the speculative bubble burst, resulting in major disruptions in the industry,[114] and a shift away from individual issues as monthly sales figures cratered. While individual comics are still sold through specialty stores, the trade paperback collection and original graphic novel have essentially supplanted single issues as the primary source of the industry's income. The idea of collectability has survived, however, as publishers have taken to releasing hardcover versions of collections (usually, but not always before the softcover version is made available), as well as oversize and "special" editions of popular books for which they can charge a premium.

Superhero Comics & Dynamic Equilibrium

In examining the role that collectability played in shaping audience expectations of comics narrative, we have seen that the content of superhero comics is inextricably linked to the industry's economics. There is no clearer illustration of this than the approach towards dynamic equilibrium the comics industry has adopted. On the one hand, the most popular superheroes are brands and

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[113] The early nineties saw a variety of gimmicks that were designed to make comics more collectable, including alternate covers (such as the 5 variant covers for Jim Lee and Chris Claremont's *X-Men* #1), foil embossed covers (*Guardians of the Galaxy* #25), pre-sealed comics (*X-Force* #1), and the like. Even after the glut, Wizard Magazine continued to encourage such behavior by offering exclusive issues that could only be acquired through them (*Astro City* ½, *DV8* ½ , etc.).

[114] Many minor publishers closed shop in the wake of the glut, and Diamond Comics absorbed its competitors to become the only remaining "mainstream" (i.e. superhero) distributor in the comics industry.

franchises unto themselves, and as such their core appeals (i.e. brand value) should not be compromised or muddied by excess variation. At the same time, characters such as Superman and Batman have had stories told about them at least once a month for over six decades, and a certain amount of variation is absolutely necessary to refresh characters and narratives that might otherwise become stale and tedious.

Stabilizing Pressures: Narrative Progress

In "The Myth of Superman", Umberto Eco explores the first of these two ideas (that significant change—such as the death of the protagonist—is anathema) on a structural level, examining its narrative underpinnings and implications:

> [Once an obstacle] is conquered... Superman has still *accomplished something*. Consequently, the character has made a gesture which is inscribed in his past and which weighs on his future. He has taken a step towards death, he has gotten older, if only by an hour... *To act*, then, for Superman, as for any other character [m]eans to 'consume' himself.[115]

As we noted above, the progress towards death which is implied by a permanent change is intolerable, for the permanent death of a comic's protagonist is likely to bring an end to the book's success. As a result, both such changes and a clear sense of the progress of time are to be eschewed:

> Superman's scriptwriters have devised a solution [to this problem:] The stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not aware at all—where what has happened before and what has happened after appear extremely hazy.[116]

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[115] Eco, Umberto. "The Myth of Superman", from *The Role of the Reader*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979. p. 111
[116] Ibid., p. 114

While the specifics of Eco's argument here are problematic (the modern comic book fan typically being painfully aware as to what events happened before and after a particular incident), his more general point is valid: that is, within the bounds of continuity, superheroes such as Superman, Batman, and the X-Men exist in an ageless, eternal present. The passage of time does not make them grow appreciably older; rather, it shifts their entire life-narrative forward, so that their debut will remain relatively recent.

Stabilizing Pressures: Production Structures

There are, of course, other reasons why superhero comics tend to reinforce the status quo. The expectation that superhero comics will preserve the status quo stems from several historical sources. The first is the Comics Code, established in 1954, which laid out a wide variety of rules to prevent horror comics, crime comics, and comics that did not treat authority figures and societal institutions such as marriage with respect from being distributed. The code, which included strictures such as "Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for the established authority", and "In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal [be] punished for his misdeeds" [117], was a necessary imprimatur for the wide distribution of a comic from the code's creation until 1971, when Stan Lee published a drug abuse story in Spider-Man #96–98 without the code's approval. (The code was subsequently rewritten, so that a similar story proposed by Denny O'Neil and Neil Adams could be published under the code's seal in Green Lantern #85–86). From that point on, the comics code's influence declined, and by the mid 80s, the rise of the direct market and the success of "mature" content in books such as Ronin and Watchmen rendered it all but toothless. In 2001, Marvel abandoned the code entirely, choosing to adopt its own rating system.

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[117] The initial version of the code also included such gems as:
- "Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable excessive use should be discouraged and wherever possible good grammar shall be employed."
- "Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited."
- "Divorce shall not be treated humorously nor shall it be represented as desirable."

While the code itself may have become irrelevant, however, the habits which it had helped instill in comics creators were more enduring. In his essay "The Politics of the Paraliterary", Samuel R. Delany recounts a conversation with famed DC editor Julius Schwartz in which Schwartz described the process he made any new writer go through:

> "[E]very new writer who brings me a script... I tell him—or her—the same thing. I say: 'All right. The first thing I want you to do is change the ending.' We talk about comic book craft. Then after they bring in a second version, I tell them to change the middle. Then I tell them to throw the whole thing out and write me a new script. Then, I tell them to do still *another* one... And if they do everything I say, then I assign them a paying job on the least important character we have. You see, what we need in the comics industry is writers who will do what we *tell* them to... It's nice when I get a really talented writer, who gets through the whole set of tests. Sometimes they do. But, frankly, what we *need* are writers who have just turned in a wonderful, poetic, brilliant script with a downbeat ending, who, when an administrative decision comes down from upstairs that all our stories need to have upbeat endings from now on, will throw that downbeat ending out and substitute a gloriously happy, feel-good ending, sacrificing everything of worth in the story—and who will do it without batting an eye."[118]

This concept of professionalism or "craft" is clearly one that has emerged from an industry where content and creativity are subordinate to industrial interests such as brand stability and having books approved by the comics code. In addition, comics creators are almost invariably longtime comics fans, and comics fans are prone to indulging in nostalgia. As a result, when comics creators emulate the

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[118] Delany, Samuel R. *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary.* "The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism" Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999. p. 222

stories they enjoyed as children, those re-creations carry many of the code's strictures within them. As a result, while the code itself may have become a relic, its strictures and the idea of professionalism it helped create (i.e. creative subordination to industrial interests) continue to influence what kinds of content are considered acceptable in a mainstream superhero comic.

To return to Eco's point about the resistance to change (and consequent disconnection from the progress of time) inherent in superhero narratives, that resistance is reinforced by another property of a long-running comics series, which is that every major change can—and probably will—be reversed. Thus, even when major characters die in comics, it rarely lasts: Witness Superman's resurrection from his death at the hands of Doomsday, or the return of Jason Todd (The second Robin, who was killed by the Joker). Such resurrections and returns to the status quo are a consequence of the constant industrial roll-overs of creators and editors in the comics industry: Even if the creators involved in killing a character are determined that this time the death will be real and final, whenever a new writer and editor take over the property, they have the opportunity to grab the audience's attention by bringing about the return of the once "dead" character. Thus, the superhero comic's tendency towards stasis and support of the status quo is motivated both by economic factors and the weight of the genre's history. Perhaps it is unsurprising that those superhero comics which resist this tendency towards stasis most successfully involve second-tier characters or are set in second-tier universes (i.e. not the main Marvel and DC continuity streams).

Strategies of Variation: Secondary Universes

Second-tier universes are, of course, one of the methods by which superhero creators can renew and refresh long-established properties without risking the core of the brand. The practice has its origins in DC's "imaginary stories", of which Eco has this to say:

Along these lines the most original solution is that of the *Imaginary Tales*... the public will often request delightful new developments of the scriptwriters; for example, why doesn't Superman marry Lois Lane[?] If Superman married Lois Lane, it would of course be another step towards his death, as it would lay down another irreversible premise; nevertheless, it is necessary to continually find new narrative stimuli and to satisfy the "romantic" demands of the public. And so it is told "what would have happened *if* Superman had married Lois." The premise is developed in all of its dramatic implications, and at the end is the warning: Remember, this is an 'imaginary' story which in truth has not taken place.[119]

This passage is rich with implications for audience studies,[120] and it demonstrates a central principle of how dynamic equilibrium is achieved in comics: Major variations (i.e. the narratives of the imaginary stories) are typically restricted to the fringes of 'canon', such as alternate worlds or timelines, where they can serve as apocrypha of narrative interest without forcing creators to work through their implications.[121] That said, Eco's observations are also constrained by the time period in which they were made, as the near-endless elaborations on the notion of the imaginary story which were developed in the 80s and 90s (most of which required more than a single issue) had not yet come into being. In Chris Claremont and John Byrne's two-part "Days of Future Past" storyline (in *Uncanny X-Men* #141 & #142) an apocryphal future affects the present day, linking what would ordinarily be an imaginary story with continuity. DC comics took this

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[119] Ibid., p. 114–115

[120] For one thing, DC's "imaginary tales" may be the first split between a fictional "canon" and deliberately apocryphal texts produced by a single rights-holder or creator. While narrative apocrypha of other kinds date back to the days of Homer, and the division between fictional canon and unauthorized expansions to the unauthorized sequel to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, DC's move to 1) produce apocrypha, and then 2) explicitly mark it as such appears to have been a novel development in franchise narrative.

[121] If at a later point, elements from the fringes prove popular or useful enough, they can still be integrated into the core continuity in some way or other. One example of this is Harley Quinn, "the Joker's Girlfriend", who appeared in the Batman animated TV show before being introduced into the comics. Others include characters from apocryphal storylines (e.g. X-Man, Dark Beast, and Holocaust from Marvel's *Age of Apocalypse*) who were later introduced into mainline continuity.

connection between the apocryphal and the "real" one step further with *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which simplified DC's continuity by the expedient of destroying all of the alternate worlds that been created over the years and then transforming the main DC universe so that valuable elements from those worlds could be retained. This particular strategy allows apocryphal content to be introduced (thus stimulating audience interest) without destabilizing the core property overmuch.

Another strategy, which expands directly on the principles of the imaginary story, is to have apocryphal content exist in a narrative cul-de-sac, such as an alternate timeline that is unconnected to that of mainline continuity. DC's Elseworlds line (under which what DC once called imaginary stories are now released) depicts iconic DC characters in different contexts—a Victorian Batman facing Jack the Ripper;[122] the Justice League in a world without Superman;[123] Superman raised as a loyal communist in Stalin's Russia[124]—without ever connecting those stories with the main DC universe. Marvel's Ultimate and Marvel Adventure lines expand on this idea by re-envisioning several of Marvel's marquee characters in continuing storylines which occur within a version of the Marvel universe that resembles but is not identical to the original. This approach allows variations in content and themes to be more extreme (Elseworlds) or more permanent (the Ultimate line) than they could be if they were linked with the main continuity stream, while still retaining much of the brand appeal of the characters who are featured.

A final strategy bridges the two approaches I have outlined above, creating a narrative cul-de-sac which challenges or changes the core appeals of a property but is nevertheless linked to that property's continuity. Unlike variations like *Days of Future Past* or *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which focus on the impact of alternate realities on a primary universe, alternate universe variations like Marvel's *Age of*

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[122] *Gotham By Gaslight: A Tale of the Batman* (1989)
[123] *JLA: The Nail* (1998)
[124] *Superman: Red Son* (2003)

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Apocalypse and *Heroes Reborn* concern themselves primarily with the events and characters of the alternate universe, with the "primary" continuity from which they vary becoming significant only when the time comes to end the variation and return the properties involved to their core appeals. Other cases, such as Marvel's *House of M*, focus on the need to end the variation from their beginning, but still spend time exploring the differences between the alternate universe and the primary one, making it clear that much of the interest of such storylines is derived from exactly those variations which the protagonists of the storyline are striving to reverse.

Continuity & Coherence

This principle of maintaining internal coherence as not to distract the reader is a fairly straightforward one so long as one is working within the bounds of a single narrative. However, superheroes (especially popular ones) rarely remain contained by the bounds of a single title, and their storylines often overlap with those of characters from other books. In addition to the fairly simple "family" model (where a single character and their supporting cast appear in multiple titles, such as *Batman, Detective Comics, Nightwing, Birds of Prey*, and suchlike), there are crossovers (in which two or more significant characters temporarily appear in the same story), and team or team-up books (in which two or more characters who have appeared in other venues regularly interact with one another). The Byzantine convolutions which such crossovers and team books can result in are renowned, as characters who are depicted as deeply mired in their personal affairs in one family of titles may be engaged in a battle on the far side of the universe in another title published that same month. Matthew J. Pustz describes some of the consequences of such complexity in *Comic Book Culture*:

> Another set of rules that govern comic books, continuity—the intertextuality that links stories in the mind of both creators and readers— also helps to define and limit the audience. [B]ecause of the emphasis on

action and adventure, very little characterization usually can occur in a single issue or story. But over the course of years and scores of issues, those little bits of characterization and information can add up to something complex[.] The intricacies of continuity may please longtime readers but can also limit a comic book's (or even a company's). audience... [it can become] virtually impossible for a new reader to pick up a single issue and understand who all [the] characters [are] and what they [are] trying to accomplish.[125]

For those fans who concern themselves with such things, minor lapses in continuity can be explained away by contradictory stories being unstuck in time, with one happening before or after the other, but more significant continuity errors often draw the ire of readers. This has led comics publishers such as DC & Marvel to place approval for the use of major characters in the hands of high-ranking editors, who track and control their appearances, both within and outside of their own titles.

Of course, stories in which characters cross over into another character's title make no sense in the absence of a universe which all of those characters inhabit, and so the implication of the earliest team-ups and crossovers (the stories of the Justice Society of America in *All-Star Comics* and the Superman/Batman stories that began in *World's Finest Comics* #71) was the superheroes who appeared in those stories existed in a shared world. For reasons of copyright and economic self-interest, crossovers initially only included characters that were all owned by a single publisher,[126] and as a result, the universes that such crossovers implied were bounded by each publisher's stable of characters. When comic publishers failed, their characters were typically bought up by other companies, resulting in

[125] Pustz, Matthew J. *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers.* Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1999. p. 129–130
[126] In the 80s and 90s, cross-universe one-shots were common—e.g. Aliens vs. Superman, and suchlike.

characters such as Charlton's superheroes (the Blue Beetle, the Question, Captain Atom, etc.) being absorbed into the DC universe in the mid-80s.

The advent of what is known as the Silver Age of comics[127] complicated the cosmology of the extant superhero universes in a number of ways, and also set the stage for DC and Marvel's approaches to continuity over the long term. Both DC and Marvel brought back superheroes from the Golden Age, Marvel literally (with the discovery of Captain America frozen in an iceberg), and DC both literally and figuratively (with Barry Allen emerging as the new Flash, and then meeting Jay Garrick, the golden-age Flash). While Marvel maintained a single, unified universe, however, in which anything depicted in any of its comics was assumed to have actually happened, DC opted to explain away the disjoint between its Golden Age and Silver Age heroes by asserting that the Golden Age characters hailed from "Earth 2", an alternate universe that sometimes overlapped with the main DC continuity. This policy resulted in the ever-expanding complexity of the DC Universe (in which each new continuity-violating event was declared to have happened on a parallel Earth), which came to a head in 1985, with DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* maxi-series, in which the many versions of the DC universe were consolidated into a single, canonical world. Since the first *Crisis* series, DC has engaged in several related continuity reboots, most notably *Zero Hour* and the recent *Infinite Crisis*, and alternate worlds have begun to spring up in continuity once more.

Marvel, unlike DC, has not engaged in regular continuity reboots, although it has repeatedly engaged in line- or company-wide crossovers in which the known Marvel Universe is replaced by an alternate version of itself (e.g. *Age of Apocalypse, Onslaught Saga/Heroes Reborn, House of M/Decimation*). Such quasi-reboots differ from those engaged in by DC in two ways. First, the

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[127] A period that lasted from the late 50s or early 60s until the early 70s, and saw a resurgence in the popularity of superheroes, which had dropped off in popularity in the early 50s. The Silver Age of Comics was preceded by the Golden Age, which lasted from the 1930s to some time in the 1950s, and saw the superhero established as a cultural archetype, through such exemplars as The Phantom (comic strips began 1936) and Superman (Action Comics #1 printed 1938).

changes to the universe typically complicate Marvel's continuity rather than simplifying it, making stories less accessible, if potentially more interesting. Second, their effects have almost invariably been reversed, with the universe returning to something very close to its previous state after the quasi-reboot's conclusion.

As described above, Marvel has addressed the issues of accessibility and continuity baggage that DC dealt with through reboots like *Crisis on Infinite Earths* by establishing a parallel "Ultimate" universe similar in concept to DC's Earth 2. Titles with the "Ultimate" prefix exist outside of traditional Marvel continuity, though the imprint is quickly accumulating a continuity burden of its own. Marvel also maintains another parallel line of titles, under the "Marvel Adventures"[128] imprint, aimed at younger readers.

In addition to the differences in content associated with their characters and universe models, the editorial policies of comics publishers also create audience expectations about the tone of their books. For instance, during the Silver Age, the melodramatic storylines and institutionalized hucksterism which Stan Lee pioneered at Marvel gave that company's books an edge in "coolness" that DC lacked. As time went on and editorial policies shifted, DC became "cooler" in the 80s by publishing books with more mature content (e.g. *Swamp Thing, Dark Knight Returns*, etc.) and collecting their company's output in trade paperbacks long before Marvel made a habit of the practice. The short-lived "Image universe" of the early 90s took that era's anti-heroic attitude to ridiculous extremes, outdoing both Marvel and DC in hyper-stylized violence and attitude, and Joe Quesada's recent tenure at Marvel has seen the company pursuing publicity, relevance, and "edginess" in nearly all of its dealings.

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[128] Formerly "Marvel Age".

Expectations of Engagement and Consumption

In addition to the complex expectations of narrative continuity with which they are burdened, superhero comics also carry a significant body of expectations about how they are to be read. In order to decipher the narrative of an ongoing series, audience members must draw on information that is implied but not explicit. This inferential process by which readers decipher comic parallels the reading process by which the reader "fills in" what happens between panels. As described by Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics*, this process is:

> [A] phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole... In our daily lives, we often [use inference], mentally completing that which is incomplete based on past experience... From the tossing of a baseball to the death of a planet, [inference] is comic's primary means of simulating time and motion.

Inferential reading is vital to deciphering comics because it allows readers to assemble a narrative out of sequential images, drawing on contextual clues to fill in the gaps between panels. The inference of character history from a handful of details described above draws on a different set of contextual clues, which allow readers to make sense of the relationship between two characters even with no knowledge of their previous interactions. While it is not preserved specifically for this purpose, the relative predictability of many superhero titles can be very helpful to readers who are trying to situate themselves, as it provides simple categories into which characters can be classed (i.e. "villain", "sidekick", "love interest"), while the more baroque a relationship is (e.g. one character was the son of the other in an alternate timeline, which he escaped before it was destroyed[129]), the more difficult it will be for readers to grasp.

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[129] This is an abbreviated description of the relationship of Jean Grey and Nate Grey ("X-Man"), a Marvel character who was introduced in the *Age of Apocalypse* crossover.

Case Study: *52*

One comic which combines many of the expectation structures which we have discussed above is *52*, an experimental weekly title from DC that is being used to fill in the year-long narrative gap between the end of the *Infinite Crisis* continuity reboot and *One Year Later*, the relaunch of many DC books which followed it.[130] Planning for *52* has the series being 52 issues long, with each issue depicting the events of a week in the post-*Infinite Crisis* DC universe, and DC has declared that none of *52*'s issues will be collected until its last issue has been printed. This policy (along with the implication that 52 will contain back story which will help readers make sense of the *One Year Later* releases) seems likely to push comics readers to buy the book as it is released, as well as to increase the collectability of individual issues.

The book's narrative focuses on events in the DC Universe in the wake of the disappearance of many of its best-known heroes from the public eye. While marquee characters such as Superman, Batman, and Green Lantern make occasional appearances in the book, typically to explain their absence or advance other plotlines, its continuing stories revolve around a set of 8 B-list characters: Black Adam, Renee Montoya, Animal Man, Booster Gold, The Elongated Man, Will Magnus, The Red Tornado, and Steel.[131] The personal lives and circumstances of these individuals lead them into involvement or confrontation with various forces that have arisen in the wake of *Infinite Crisis*: Intergang's religion of crime and world takeover plans, Lex Luthor's "Everyman" project, a Kryptonian cult of resurrection, a Superman-like figure known as Supernova, Booster Gold's valet robot Skeets, and the Stygian Crusade, a

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[130] This year-long narrative gap is completely reliant on (as well as another example of) readers being able to use inference and narrative closure to read around holes in superhero comics.
[131] Of these secondary characters, only Magnus, Animal Man, and the Red Tornado fail to appear in the first issue. Magnus first appears in issue 2, and his plot is introduced in issue 1 with the kidnapping of Dr. Sivana. Animal Man and the Red Tornado are part of the space plotline, which is explicitly introduced in issue 4, after being alluded to in issue 1. All of the major plot threads in the comic branch off from either these 8 characters, or from marquee characters such as Batman or Superman/Clark Kent.

space-borne armada that's headed towards Earth, destroying everything in its path.

Due to its fast-paced production schedule and plethora of characters, the book has four writers (Mark Waid, Grant Morrison, Greg Rucka, and Geoff Johns), one artist doing panel breakdowns (Keith Giffen), and a rotating team of other artists penciling, inking, coloring, and lettering the full-size pages. It seems natural to suspect that each writer would be handling the characters they've written about most extensively in the past (i.e. Johns would be writing the Black Adam storyline, while Rucka would be writing the Montoya storyline, and Morrison would be writing the Animal Man storyline—it's less clear which storylines are penned by Waid), though of course there is no guarantee that such an assignment of authorship would be accurate. Furthermore, as many of these storylines intersect at various points in their development, it is highly probable that the writers are collaborating or passing off control of "their" characters to other writers, at least for certain scenes.

In addition to its intriguing production and consumption models, 52 also contains an intriguing series of backup features. Issues 2–11 contain a narrated history of the DC Universe, which largely focuses on issues of cosmology and the events surrounding the universe's various continuity reboots, while later issues contain 2 page stories describing the origins of various characters in the DC universe, including most of the protagonists of 52 itself. As such, both types of backup story function as exposition: the history of the DC universe lays out the context for 52 for readers unfamiliar with Crisis on Infinite Earths and Infinite Crisis, while the origin stories fill in readers on where the characters they're reading about came from.[132]

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[132] Additionally, since Infinite Crisis was a continuity reboot, the origin stories provide a venue for DC to reaffirm the details of many characters' backgrounds. While they could also be used to introduce changes in a character's origin or background, as of issue #31 this does not seem to have occurred.

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Returning to the main body of the title, the multiple authors and interlaced story threads characteristic of 52 lead to a multi-tonal work that hybridizes many of the genres which superhero comics grew out of. The Renee Montoya/Question plotline is initially rooted in the grittiness of the hard-boiled detective genre, and later moves into martial arts mysticism, while the Elongated Man plotline is also a detective story, though its emphasis on the supernatural shifts it out of the hard-boiled genre. The Will Magnus plotline deals in the super-science typical of the pulps (and eventually crosses over into the Black Adam plotline), while Clark Kent's appearances are firmly rooted in the reporter genre of the same period, and Booster Gold's plotline centers on time travel. Steel's story is a family melodrama, as is Black Adam's, though the latter also involves magic and global geopolitics, and Animal Man's plotline is over-the-top space opera. Once the inevitable plot twists and interconnections between stories are taken into account, it seems likely that 52 touches on almost every genre that has ever influenced or fed into superhero comics.

In addition to representing the genre influences on superhero comics, 52 does an admirable job of representing comics' tendency to revert to the status quo. As its narrative exists in the one-year gap between the end of *Infinite Crisis* and *One Year Later*, informed readers are already aware of which of the major events chronicled in *52* are temporary and which will have permanent effects. Of the major events chronicled in *52* so far, only Black Adam's Freedom of Power Treaty (under which metahumans are barred from operating outside of their home country), the UN's decision to reform Checkmate after the US dissolves it, and World War III (started by Black Adam after Intergang kills Isis and Osiris, his wife and brother-in-law) have been shown to have a lasting impact on the DC universe, and the retention of Checkmate is itself a preservation of the status quo. Luthor's Everyman Project and the Stygian Crusade are both obviously doomed, as Earth will not be (permanently) destroyed, and *One Year Later* does

not feature an army of Luthor-created meta-humans.[133] Intergang's takeover of Gotham is similarly doomed from its inception, and readers can depend on *52*'s other mysteries being resolved in one manner or another (though as most of the book's characters are second-tier and do not have their own books, their individual survival is by no means assured).

This structural inevitability of the return to a status quo (if not *the* status quo) is characteristic of DC comics' comparative conservatism with regards to how its characters can be used. While a great deal of narrative savvy has gone into the construction of 52, it essentially functions as a limited experiment in form (witness the weekly release schedule and the tie-in website[134] that consists mostly of traditional promo materials, with a few "in-universe" pieces of journalism) that serves to buttress the relaunch of the DC universe in the wake of *Infinite Crisis* by addressing questions of continuity that are likely only of concern to hardcore fans. With that said, however, it is likely that fans who have the necessary background (i.e. knowledge of *Identity Crisis*, *Infinite Crisis*, and some knowledge of the characters involved) to appreciate *52* will find its development of and elaborations on an already well-known and -established world to be quite rewarding.

Case Study: *Civil War*

Marvel's *Civil War* contrasts interestingly with *52*, in that *52* is a book intended to follow a massive, continuity-reshaping crossover, while *Civil War* is a massive, continuity-reshaping crossover. Built around the premise that a devastating mistake on the part of a youthful super-team has led to a public outcry for legislation that requires the registration and government supervision of superheroes, the crossover traces the impact of the legislation's passage and its implications for the superhero community, as some heroes choose to support

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[133] John Henry Irons' recent discovery that Luthor's meta-gene therapy has an expiration date only confirms the structural inevitability of the Everyman Project's collapse.
[134] http://www.dccomics.com/sites/52/

registration, while others resist, based on concerns about civil liberties and the draconian enforcement system the government is building.

Civil War is structured along more traditional lines than *52*, in that it features many of the Marvel universe's marquee characters (Spider-Man, Captain America, the Fantastic Four, etc.) in prominent roles. Instead of adopting a weekly single-title model (as *52* did), Civil War plays out in the titular 7-issue miniseries, which chronicles all the most pivotal plot events, as well as two subsidiary mini-series (*Civil War: Frontline* and *Civil War: X-Men*), a plethora of one-shots[135], and narrative tie-ins to many continuing Marvel titles. This multi-threaded approach to the crossover builds upon the pattern of previous Marvel crossovers (e.g. *Secret Wars, Operation Galactic Storm, House of M*) by producing more mini-series and one-shots linked to the main story. Like most of those previous crossovers, however, reading all the *Civil War* tie-ins is not necessary to understand the story—readers can infer many of the details of what is going on outside the titular miniseries from context. For example, while the details of the government's recruitment of villains to serve in the Thunderbolts program are contained in issues #103–#105 of the *Thunderbolts* series, reading those issues is not essential to understand the role that the collection of villains seen at the end of Civil War #4 will be playing in the conflict between the government and Captain America. In fact, because each of the individual comics that is linked to Civil War must advance its own plotline as well as the overarching plot of the crossover, a great deal of inferential work may be necessary for a reader of the miniseries to decipher what is going on in a subsidiary tie-in if they are not already familiar with the book in question.

The main Civil War miniseries is written by Mark Millar, who is known for writing story arcs that feature brutality and extreme violence, and it would be fair to say

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[135] The list of one shots includes *Civil War Files, Civil War: Battle Damage Report, Civil War: Choosing Sides, Civil War: The Initiative, Civil War: The Return, Civil War: War Crimes, Daily Bugle: Civil War Edition, Iron Man/Captain America Special, New Avengers: The Illuminati,* and *Winter Soldier: Winter Kills.*

that the miniseries features both. (Goliath is killed by a clone of Thor in issue #3, Iron Man beats Captain America within an inch of his life, and Captain America surrenders in issue #7 because of the devastation which the conflict between his forces and those of Iron Man has wreaked on New York City.) It also delves much deeper into politically sensitive issues (Captain America's opposition to Iron Man and the forces supporting registration closely parallels the opposition of civil liberties groups to holding purported terrorists as "Enemy Combatants" at Guantanamo Bay—the government even has an immense holding facility in the Negative Zone where unregistered heroes are held without trial) than *52* does, another hallmark of Millar's writing. (Millar took over writing duties on *The Authority* after Warren Ellis left the book, and his version of the team was extremely politically active, overthrowing third-world dictatorships, working against American corporate hegemony and speaking out in favor of gay rights. His work on *The Ultimates* and *Wanted* took on politics from a different direction.) While the characters of *52* are what are associated with that book's creators[136], it is the themes and style of *Civil War* that are connected to Millar, rather than the characters.

The political overtones of Civil War are no coincidence, of course. Marvel's management has been courting the perception that its comics are culturally relevant and worthy of attention since 1998, when Joe Quesada (now Marvel's Editor-in-Chief) was brought on to start the Marvel Knights imprint. Another manifestation of this in Civil War was the attention-drawing revelation of Spider-Man's secret identity in Civil War #2, in which Peter Parker outed himself as Spider-Man in a press conference. As a result, it seems likely that Millar was hand-picked to make the miniseries as political and in-your-face as possible.

In addition, unlike DC, the continuity of Marvel's main universe has been more or less unbroken since the 60s. This may not seem significant, until one considers

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[136] In addition to the author-character connections noted above, Keith Giffen (the artist doing layouts for the book) co-wrote the version of the Justice League that featured Booster Gold as a team member.

that, unlike the case of *52* (where most of the book's developments will clearly not have long-term repercussions) the demonstrated willingness of Marvel's current management to make dramatic changes in their books suggests that *Civil War* is likely to shape the course of stories set in the mainline Marvel universe for some time to come. The post-*Civil War* death of Captain America (who is murdered on the steps of a federal courthouse) and establishment of the new *New Avengers* (made up of anti-registration hold-outs such as Spider-Man and Luke Cage) support this assessment, and suggest that the aftereffects of *Civil War* (such as the federalization of superheroes) will endure longer than those of previous crossovers, such as the *Onslaught Saga/Heroes Reborn* and *House of M*. While *52* fills in continuity, *Civil War* alters it—not necessarily irrevocably, because (as we have seen) not even death or continuity rewrites are irrevocable in comics—but as close to irrevocably as one can get.

By its nature, *Civil War* is a more fractured work than *52*. While it undoubtedly has a wider appeal and higher media profile, due to its focus on dramatic events involving Marvel's iconic characters (Spider-Man, Captain America, The Fantastic Four, etc.), the narrative is significantly more disjointed due to being spread across multiple series, one-shots, and miniseries. While some tie-in storylines were strongly linked with the core narrative and cast it in a different light (such as the groundless attempted arrest of Luke Cage by S.H.I.E.L.D. just after the Superhuman Registration Act came into effect), others had little impact on or insight into the events of the miniseries (for example, *New Avengers: Illuminati* provides a minimal amount of backstory re: certain characters' approval or disapproval of the Registration Act, while *Blade* #5 focuses on Blade's choice not to capture Wolverine for S.H.I.E.L.D.). Furthermore, the narrative density of the core miniseries was such that even a reader familiar with most or all of the tie-in storylines would have to tax their inferential abilities to follow everything that was going on.

Interpreting *Civil War*: Narrative Tension and Genre Expectations

Another interesting contrast between *52* and *Civil War* is how the dispersion of the creative team in *Civil War* led to the creation of narrative tension between the primary miniseries and the secondary books. As Mark Millar noted in an interview with newsarama.com:

> What's funny when you read the main book is that it's pretty much Tony's side that gets the better rep all the way through. A lot of the tie-ins were interesting because the other writers chose to go against registration, but I don't believe for a second people would feel that way in the real world... I was backing Tony all the way.[137]

Whether or not audience members interpreted the *Civil War* miniseries as being pro-registration or not is another question (which will be dealt with below), but contrasting Millar's claim that he intended to depict the Pro-registration forces as "in the right" with the depiction of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s unwarranted, brutal, and racially charged attempt to apprehend Luke Cage produces a very mixed message.

To return to the idea of genre expectations and character rape that were touched on by previous chapters, it is interesting to examine audience reactions to Civil War in light of Millar's reading of his own text. The Newsarama interviewer presented fan reaction to the mini-series in the following light:

> [v]ocal fans thought Tony Stark and Reed Richards especially were being written as heavies, going so far to say that they acted (i.e. were written) out of character, resorting to strong arm tactics to get their way – with the recruitment of the Thunderbolts (some cold-blooded killers) as an example. So much so that expectations that a Marvel villain would eventually be revealed as influencing them were present throughout.[138]

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[137] http://www.newsarama.com/marvelnew/CivilWar/millar_final.html
[138] Ibid.

Several forms of diegetic and genre expectations are clearly at work in producing this interpretation. The tendency towards stasis in Superhero comics; the historical expectation that the two sides in any conflict can be read as black hats and white hats (and for conflicts between two groups of "white hats" to be based on misunderstandings or manipulation rather than actual disagreements); the well-established diegetic connections between the pro-registration and anti-registration forces; and the weight of decades of characterization of Tony Stark and Reed Richards as not just heroes, but heroes who emerged under the comics code and were forbidden "excessive violence"—all these elements combined to cause many audience members to read Tony Stark and Reed Richards as supporting the "wrong" (i.e. pro-registration) side, due to their opposition to the vigilante traditions of superhero comics, creation of a superhuman gulag, complicity in the death of Goliath, and recruitment of and alliance with super-villains. Within the context of the genre's conventions, such behavior (as well as Captain America's heroism in escaping from the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier and Spider-Man's decision to switch sides) encouraged readers to interpret Tony Stark and Reed Richards as the villains of the series, creating a tension with their historical role as heroes. The expectation that a villain would be revealed as influencing Stark and Richards is based on a resistance to the idea that Stark and Richards would willingly take such actions, as well as the genre's historical conventions (as such a conclusion is a traditional means of absolving heroes of responsibility for misbehavior).

As such, when *Civil War* is read through the lens of the genre's history and conventions, Millar's claim that "Tony's side gets the better rep all the way through" comes off as laughable. Perhaps audience members would support a Superhero Registration Act in real life, but the events depicted in *Civil War* are fiction, not reality. As a result, the reading conventions of the superhero genre will be used to interpret the text, and those conventions load the triumph of the pro-registration forces with sinister meaning, particularly in light of its

consequences (such as the assassination of Captain America). Assuming that Millar was not being disingenuous, it seems as if his work unwittingly drew on genre conventions that undermined his own preferred reading of his work.

Having concluded that the *Civil War* miniseries is written in a way that would cause readers who are familiar with the superhero genre to read the side which its writer claims to favor as villains, the question arises—how and why did this occur? Many of our previous examples of "failure" have resulted from violations of the implicit contract, such as misrepresenting a work's genre in promotional materials (*Twin Peaks*), or engaging in retroactive alteration of continuity/character rape (the ending of the second season of *Veronica Mars*). In this case, however, the "failure" is more complex, and inextricably linked with the internal workings of the superhero genre.

First, we must consider the underlying reason why the ending of *Civil War* rang false for so many readers. I propose that the bulk of the complaints prompted by the ending can be traced to a single catalyst—the story was <u>in continuity</u>, and therefore involved the original versions of Marvel's most iconic characters. If *Civil War* had occurred on the margins of the genre discourse (say, in an alternate or secondary universe, such as in Marvel's Ultimate line, or DC's Wildstorm universe), to which the majority of significant deviations from the genre's conventions are relegated, it would have lost much of the weight which dealing with the original versions of iconic characters lent it, but it would also not have drawn nearly as much outrage from readers. By virtue of its place at the center of the genre discourse, however, *Civil War* had to contend with the weight of decades of established continuity, as well as the genre's most entrenched conventions.

One might wonder why an experienced comics writer such as Mark Millar would be unaware of this (assuming, for the moment, that his claim that the pro-registration side "gets the better rep" is sincere). One explanation is that the

majority of Millar's prior work has either occupied the margins of the genre discourse (e.g. *The Authority, Superman: Red Son*, various Ultimate books, & *Wanted*), or was written in conjunction with Grant Morrison (e.g. *Skrull Kill Krew, The Flash*). The pre-*Civil War* work that Millar did in Marvel's main continuity (e.g. *Marvel Knights Spider-Man & Wolverine*) was written under an editor-in-chief who has produced and encouraged deviations from the genre's norms himself (Joe Quesada), and either featured a character that has traditionally deviated from the genre's norms (Wolverine) or was published under an imprint—Marvel Knights—that denoted "edginess" (i.e. deviation from genre norms).

In addition to Millar's lack of experience writing traditional superhero work and dealing with the creative and audience-based constraints that come with it, Millar also has a history of resenting any kind of constraints on his work. His split with DC and employment by Marvel was the direct result of what he perceived as interference with his run on *The Authority*. In Millar's own words, "my first real hit was *The Authority* in 2000 and this caused a lot of friction between management and me. It was a hot book, but they didn't like it at all and I just blew up at all the changes they both wanted me to make and which they made themselves."[139]

Millar's lack of experience working with characters at the core of the genre's discourse and resentment of creative constraints both suggest that Millar may not have appreciated the difference between working on the margins of the genre—with characters who have very little baggage and whom audiences are less emotionally invested in—and telling stories within the core continuity of one of the "Big Two" superhero universes. While working in the Ultimate universe, for example, there are few impediments to depicting Captain America as a jingoistic sadist or Professor Xavier as a manipulative schemer. To do so in the mainline Marvel universe would result in fans screaming about character rape.

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[139] http://www.newsarama.com/marvelnew/millar/millar_1.html

The effect Millar produces in *Civil War* is not so obvious or extreme. If we read his statement about the pro-registration forces as sincere, then he failed to realize that the codes and genre conventions which he regularly transgresses in his work at the margins of the genre still hold weight and meaning at its center, and cannot help but influence how his work will be interpreted. The savage violence and troubling authoritarianism of *The Authority* and *The Ultimates* do not map well onto Tony Stark and Reed Richards, as there is less room for ambiguity and moral compromise at the genre's center, and perceptions of who is in the right and who is in the wrong cannot help but influenced by the audience's awareness that the genre tends towards the status quo. As such, characters who are trying to impose a new regime (the pro-registration forces) which undermines genre traditions (the superhero as independent vigilante) through the use of deadly force and coercive incarceration (typically associated with villains rather than heroes) cannot help but be read as misguided, or even villainous, when compared to a group which is led by an icon of patriotism and is fighting for civil liberties. As a result of this, Captain America's capitulation at the end of the series causes a great deal of cognitive dissonance—not only is he "in the right" (and thus the expected victor), but the status quo is not restored. While this scenario is certainly filled with dramatic potential, it is at variance with the most fundamental expectation of the superhero genre (as laid out in the comics code): "In every instance good shall triumph over evil". Such a deviation from the genre's norms is expected, even desirable, in marginal works such as *Empire* or *Wanted*. In the context of a work such as *Civil War*, however, it is highly transgressive.[140]

Context and Hybrid Expectation Structures

The example of *Civil War* should make it clear that as expectation structures become more complex and elaborate, the specific context of a creative choice

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[140] One could argue that the cognitive dissonance produced by this ending is the result of Millar and Marvel's editorial staff deliberately choosing to have the pro-registration forces triumph in order to maximize the dramatic potential of their world and drive future sales. While this scenario is certainly plausible, it is not particularly instructive, as it involves the deliberate violation of the implicit contract, and as such we will not consider it further.

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becomes crucial to how it will be received. In addition, creative constraints such as continuity provide both benefits and limitations: The reason that the portrayal of Tony Stark and Reed Richards frustrated fans (the fact that *Civil War* was taking place in mainline Marvel continuity) was the same reason that Peter Parker's revelation of his secret identity had as much impact as it did. In contrast, Sobek's murder of Osiris in *52* and the subsequent revelation that he was one of the Four Horsemen of Apokolips did not prompt any great sense of loss or betrayal in most readers, as both characters had only appeared in *52* (and so existed on the margins of the genre's discourse). A similar reduction in affect could easily be achieved through a different kind of marginalization, such as having *Civil War* occur in a secondary universe instead of mainline continuity.

It should also be understood that the model of the superhero genre which I have been using (in which certain works or characters are more "central" to the discourse than others), while superficially straightforward, is based on an understanding of the genre that would require either firsthand knowledge or access to Geertzian "thick description", as it accounts for questions of ownership (i.e. whether characters are owned by Marvel or DC), the relative popularity and historical importance of characters and how well established those characters are, as well as when those characters were created, what that implies about the content and tone of their previous appearances, and what kinds of stories and variations the audience at large is likely to find acceptable. While the audience's response to how Tony Stark and Reed Richards were depicted in *Civil War* was entirely predictable, it was only likely to be anticipated by those with enough knowledge of both superhero comics and their audience to be able to predict how that audience would read Stark and Richards' portrayals. Since he was raised in the UK, Millar may not have had the necessary background to anticipate his story's reception.[141]

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[141] Alternately, given Millar's penchant for shock tactics—see the depiction of Seth in *The Authority* or the conclusion of *Wanted*—he might have known the likely reaction of fans and simply not cared.

While the American superhero genre is certainly not trivial to understand, it should be emphasized that, as I noted in the previous chapter, it was selected for examination precisely because it was *simpler and easier to analyze* than a fully convergent media form. If anticipating the reactions of American superhero comics readers (a relatively well-known audience) requires a depth of knowledge which seemingly exceeds that possessed by some of the field's highest-profile creators, it should be clear that understanding the hybrid expectation structures produced by convergent media forms and transmedia projects will be an even greater task. Contextual knowledge—such as personal experience with, colloquial theory about, and/or thick description of the hybrid form or its antecedents—will be a crucial component of that task, as will understanding the interactions between the traditional expectations (genre, diegetic continuity, interactivity, consumption, etc.) that a media form invokes. As old media forms continue to be combined in new ways and new media forms emerge, understanding how expectation structures are created and invoked will be vital to those working in creative industries as well as academia.

Applications & Areas for Further Study

In addition to their value in analyzing new media forms, the concepts and theoretical models I have outlined in this study also have immediate and practical applications. For example, the tension between narrative & interactivity in video games is a pervasive problem that seems rooted in conflicting expectation structures, and could likely be resolved (at least for a specific game) by ensuring that the expectations aroused by the game's narrative and play mechanics reinforced one another. The value of transmedia extensions of existing properties can be assessed in terms of the implicit contract, by evaluating whether the expectations of relevance aroused by the extension's association with the core brand are fulfilled. The theoretical apparatus of this study is best understood as a toolbox which both audience scholars and creators and producers of entertainment can draw on at need.

The next logical step in developing our understanding of audience expectations would be to move up a rung on the ladder of complexity and examine a convergent media form in all of its dimensions (such as a study of *Magic: the Gathering* that accounted for both the game's narrative trappings and the collective intelligence communities which have become an integral part of the game). Such a study would need to both go into considerable depth and account for a wide variety of expectation structures and the interactions between them, but any principles about how expectation structures interact that could be gleaned from it would be invaluable.

Regardless of whether anyone pursues such a study, it is my hope that the examples and theoretical analysis I've presented have made it clear that creating and fulfilling audience expectations is critical to the success of any entertainment property, and that understanding the processes involved in doing so is a valuable endeavor for both academia and industry. While the purveyors of entertainment do not have full control over how their work will be received and interpreted, they have considerable power to influence that reception through both marketing and the content of the work itself. By marrying colloquial theory and Geertzian "thick description" to the rigorous academic understanding of expectations which I have drawn on in this study, I am confident that even the most complex and multi-dimensional forms of entertainment can not only be understood, but also crafted in such a way that they train their spectator (or player, or reader) to develop the specific expectations which their creators mean to fulfill.

Appendix 1: House M.D. Opening, Act Out, & Ending coding

Table 1: Raw Coding Data

Episode #	Episode Title	Opening	Act 1	Act 2	Act 3	Ending	(contd.)
1.1	Pilot	P	C	C	E	Per	
1.2	Paternity	P	R	Esc/R	F	Pat	Per
1.3	Occam's Razor	P	C	R	DE	Exp	
1.4	Maternity	P	R	E	RIP	Per	Exp
1.5	Damned if You Do	H/P	C	E	C	Per	
1.6	The Socratic Method	P	F	R	R	Pat	Per
1.7	Fidelity	P	F	F	C	Pat	SC
1.8	Poison	P	C	C	C	Per	SC
1.9	DNR	P	C	R	R	SC	
1.10	Histories	P	C	R	Esc	RIP	SC
1.11	Detox	P	R	C	R	E	Per
1.12	Sports Medicine	P	C	R	R	Per	SC
1.13	Cursed	P	R	R	R	Pat	SC
1.14	Control	P	F	C	E	IC	
1.15	Mob Rules	P	IC/C	R	C	Pat	Per
1.16	Heavy	P	F	R	R	IC	
1.17	Role Model	P	R	R	R/C	IC	SC
1.18	Babies and Bathwater	P	IC	IC	C/E	IC	
1.19	Kids	V	R	C	DE	Per	SC
1.20	Love Hurts	H/P	R	F	Per	Pat	Per
1.21	Three Stories	H	C	R	R/Per	Per	Exp
1.22	Honeymoon	H/V	R	R	E/Per	Per	SC

Opening Codes

P = Patient of the Week Intro
V = Variant Patient Intro
H = In Hospital Intro
SC = Supporting Cast-focus

Ending Codes

Pat = Patient Focus
Per = House Focus
Exp = Explanatory Focus
RIP = Patient Death
SC = Supporting Cast Focus

Act-Out Codes

C = Patient Crash (Heart/lung failure, vegetative state)
F = Patient Frenzy (e.g. Spasms, Hallucinations)
R = Dramatic Revelation or Symptom (i.e. Plot Twist)
E = Social, Moral, Ethical, or Emotional Impediment
DE = Investigatory Dead End
Esc = Patient Escape
IC = Interpersonal Conflict (i.e. House/Voegler)

Appendix 1: House M.D. Opening, Act Out, & Ending coding

Table 2: Coding breakdowns by Act

Teaser		Act 1		Act 2	
S1 Standard Intros	17	Patient Crash	13	Patient Crash	7
S1 Variant Patient Intro	2	Revelation	8	Revelation	12
S1 House Intros	4	Personal Conflict	2	Personal Conflict	1
S1 Hospital Intros	2			Moral Dilemma	2
				Patient Escape	1
# Hybrid Openings	3	# Hybrid Outs	1	# Hybrid Outs	1
% Standard	77.3%	% Standard	95.5%	% Standard	86.4%

% Standard + House   86.4%

Act 3		Act 4	
Patient Crash	7	Personal Focus	13
Revelation	8	Supporting Cast Focus	9
Investigative Dead End	2	Explanatory Focus	3
Moral Dilemma	4	Interpersonal Conflict	4
Patient Escape	1	Patient Focus	6
Personal	3	Patient Death	1
Patient Death	1	Unethical Behavior	1
# Hybrid Outs	3	# Hybrid Endings	15
% Standard	68.2%	# House/SC endings	18

% Standard + Ethics   81.8%

Notes:
Hybrid Openings/Outs/Endings fall into multiple coding categories (i.e. IC/C)
"SC" is the code for Supporting Cast Focus in the ending of an episode

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