CONTESTED GENRE:
Locating US Fantasy Television in Conflicting Media Industry Discourses

Katarina O'Dette

University of Nottingham
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Abstract

Over the past two decades, fantasy has gone from an intermittent presence on United States television screens to one of its most popular genres. Despite this prevalence, there remains a persistent gap in the literature surrounding research on the televisual fantasy genre, with researchers claiming that the notoriously nebulous boundaries of fantasy complicate or even invalidate its study. This thesis argues that this contestation is in fact a core component, not just of fantasy, but of genre itself. Rather than considering genre a textual construct, I follow on from Jason Mittell's work to view genre primarily as a cultural construct that is expressed discursively. The thesis conceives of different groups within the US television industry as genre stakeholders, each with their own investment in the idea of genre more generally and fantasy specifically. Through their discourses, these stakeholders express differing definitions and impressions based on their unique investments in a particular genre, creating, responding to, and perpetuating the impact of contestation.

Drawing on media industry studies and discourse analysis, this thesis analyzes the genre discourses of channel brands, Over-the-Top streaming services, and television writers. Because of their differing stakeholder roles, their discourses are expressed in different media: primarily promotional materials, user interfaces, and interviews, respectively. Paratextual analysis of these stakeholder discourses traces the way contestation is created between and within stakeholder groups, and the motivations for those sites of contestation. By centering contestation rather than invalidating it, this thesis interrogates how and why a culturally-devalued genre like fantasy is contested, and what professional, business, and cultural roles stakeholders perceive themselves as fulfilling. Far from a methodological hurdle or a source of invalidating genre, contestation is part of the central appeal of genre, enabling it to operate as a tool that stakeholders can reshape however best suits them. Analyzing that tool reveals not just genre, but the stakeholders who wield it.

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Off on a Hero's Journey: Introduction

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
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> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."
>
> —Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

In a flashback in *Jane the Virgin,* protagonist and future romance novelist Jane Villanueva attends her first book reading with a specific mission in mind.[1] The speaking author has committed what in young Jane's eyes is an unforgiveable sin: the main couple in her romance novel is torn apart by untimely death. In front of a crowd of sympathetic book readers, young Jane lambasts the author, insisting that "Everyone knows in tragedies they end up dead, in comedies they end up happy, and in romance novels they end up together." When the author defends her craft choice as a need to "subvert the ending for the element of surprise," Jane fires back. "Great, fine, but then don't call it a romance novel. Call it fiction." Far from framing this as her opinion, she insists that the need for a specific type of ending is codified by a trade association: "There *are* rules to the genre. Go to the RWA [Romance Writers of America] website. All over it, it says you need an HEA [Happily Ever After ending]." Other readers chime in, agreeing that the book's ending left them dissatisfied and leading the author to kick Jane out of the reading. But on the bus ride home, her exasperated mother admits that Jane "made some good points about genre or whatever."

Far from a neutral descriptor, genre in this scene becomes a site of struggle between different participants. Readers, a trade association, and authors clash over what labels are appropriate for a particular text and what expectations those labels create. Each participant approaches the idea of the genre with a different understanding of what that genre means. They never arrive at a consensus: the readers continue to be disappointed by the ending, the author does not change her mind, the fictional book presumably continues to bear the same genre label, and the real-world RWA website continues to advocate for "An Emotionally Satisfying and Optimistic Ending" as a core component of the genre.[2] The scene is notable not because a consensus is reached about the genre, but because of the way that different groups come into

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[1] *Jane the Virgin*, season 3, episode 1, "Chapter Forty-Five," directed by Gina Lamar, written by Jennie Snyder Urman, aired October 17, 2016, on The CW.

[2] Romance Writers of America, "About the Romance Genre," Romance Writers of America, accessed March 13, 2023, https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx.

conflict over the different meanings they derive from the same term. The genre is contested and remains contested, but that contestation reveals the motivations and investments of the different participants.

This contestation is far from unique to the romance genre. In an infamous review of Margaret Atwood's *Year of the Flood*, Ursula Le Guin took issue with Atwood's insistence that her novel was not science fiction based on what Le Guin deemed "an arbitrarily restrictive definition" that she claimed was actually rooted in Atwood's desire to avoid the "literary ghetto" of genres like science fiction and fantasy.[3] Le Guin argued:

> I could talk about her new book more freely, more truly, if I could talk about it as what it is, using the lively vocabulary of modern science-fiction criticism […] As it is, I must restrict myself to the vocabulary and expectations suitable to a realistic novel.[4]

Genre definitions and terms are often highly contested, subject to at times intense debate that is often rooted in broader ideas of cultural value. With genres like science fiction and fantasy, these debates are so well-known that they inspired a Twitter meme in 2022, with users tweeting their interpretations of the differences between the two genres:

> Jon Sondow: Let me clear it up for you. Sci fi is when you have a sword made of light because the author believes that's possible, and fantasy is when you have a sword made of light because the author believes that's impossible. Hope this helps.[5]

> Adrianne White: Fantasy is when you pretend Black ppl didn't exist in the past and sci-fi is when you pretend Black people won't exist in the future[6]

Contestation is a core part of how genres are understood to operate. However, genre studies has historically treated them as theoretical categories that must be sharply delineated to be of value to rigorous research. These views have often located genre primarily in texts as a way to distinguish groupings of texts from one another. According to the textualist approach, highly contested genres such as fantasy are problematic, and in some cases even outright invalid, topics of research because of the difficulty of drawing clear distinctions between fantasy and other genres. However, this treatment of genre as a narrow classificatory tool stands at odds with the messy reality by which genres operate. The holistic approach taken by this thesis reveals that contestation is actually at the heart of how genre functions culturally.

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[3] Ursula K Le Guin, "Review: *The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood," *The Guardian*, August 29, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood.
[4] Le Guin, "Review."
[5] Joe Sondow (@JoeSondow), Twitter, September 25, 2022, https://twitter.com/JoeSondow/status/1573924203278917632.
[6] Adrianne White (@writersrepublic), Twitter, September 24, 2022, https://twitter.com/writersrepublic/status/1573762157195526150.

By taking contestation as its focus, this thesis centers the messiness of genre. If there is disagreement over the definition or existence of a genre, how does contestation between and within different genre stakeholder groups impact understandings of genre? How do the needs of genre stakeholders impact their definitions of and approaches to genre? What does their investment in genre reveal about genres in general, a specific genre like fantasy, and the stakeholders themselves? And how and why, when genres are so contested, do stakeholders use genre?

This thesis centers its exploration of contestation on fantasy television: a genre increasingly dominating the small screen, yet still largely ignored within academic circles, particularly television studies. As a culturally devalued and notoriously debated genre, fantasy is particularly susceptible to contestation as stakeholders navigate the baggage of pejorative associations and fuzzy boundaries. Whether and how fantasy is used tests the edges of the uses and functions of genre more broadly, exposing the relationships between its definers and the purposes stakeholders find for genre. Contestation, as this thesis explores, is not only central to the functioning of genre, but also to its appeal for stakeholders, enabling it to operate as a tool that stakeholders can reshape however best suits them. Analyzing that tool reveals not just genre, but the professional, business, and cultural investments of the stakeholders who wield it. In the wake of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) going off the air, as US channels scramble to greenlight series that will take up its cultural mantle, this project is a timely exploration of the different ways that academics, channel brands, Over-the-Top [OTT] streaming services, and television writers—crucial stakeholders in the genre's past, present, and future—conceive of fantasy television.

I've Got a Theory: Field

This thesis integrates genre studies, media industry studies, and fantasy studies into an innovative theoretical framework. Rather than approaching genre as an element of a media text that can be discovered purely through textual analysis or as a theoretical concept that can be strictly defined and imposed by critics, this thesis follows in the footsteps of researchers like Jason Mittell who frame genre as socially and culturally constructed. When genre is primarily identified as an element of a text or a theoretical construct, it can produce research that struggles with tautology: a researcher selects texts based on their initial assumption of how a particular genre or genres more generally are defined, and therefore their results often serve to confirm that definition. By viewing genre as a cultural construct, this thesis avoids imposing a

subjective definition onto fantasy television, and instead focuses on how the genre is understood and used culturally.

Rather than approaching genre textually, rhetorically, or linguistically, the thesis uses a media industry studies approach to find genre in industrial discourses. Mittell and Rick Altman focus on genre as authored in the discourses of industry stakeholders, with Mittell arguing that "television genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts."[7] Drawing on the work of John Caldwell, this thesis is particularly concerned with industrial reflexivity: the ways in which people working within the US television industry publicly reflect on their work to shape how others respond to it.[8] In doing so, this thesis conceives of the different participants in these discourses as *genre stakeholders*: participants in cultural discourse who have a stake in the idea of genre generally and fantasy specifically. This stake is not necessarily a positive stake, with stakeholders sometimes avoiding referencing a genre in relation to their work, speaking derogatorily about a genre, or disavowing the existence of a genre or all genres entirely. However, these neutral or negative engagements still reveal a stake in these concepts, arguing for a particular perspective on genre that is in line with the stakeholders' needs, values, and beliefs. Everyone is a genre stakeholder, and in fact many stakeholders will occupy multiple roles: writers, channels, platforms, academics, critics, policy makers, audiences (which may be further divided into viewers, readers, gamers, etc., with fandoms from different media sometimes approaching genre in different ways). This thesis focuses on four main stakeholders—academics, channels, OTT streaming services, and television writers—but these stakeholders all hold multiple investments in ideas of genre. By analyzing these investments, we can understand their investments in their work more broadly, unpacking why and how they conceive of themselves. Genre becomes a multiauthored concept that can be used to understand its authors.

In engaging with these different and often conflicting discourses from stakeholders, this thesis focuses on the notion of contested genre. When genres are viewed as defined culturally by different stakeholders with varying investments and perspectives, contestation becomes a natural component of discourse that arises from a cultural construct being defined and used by

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[7] Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xii.
[8] John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

individuals. The notion of contestation in genre is not itself new; scholars like Altman and Steve Neale acknowledge the existence of contestation in their works on film genre. However, they treat contestation as a bug rather than a feature, with some stakeholders identified as more authoritative sources of genre discourse than others, and with highly contested genres portrayed as less valid. The in-built assumption that genres should have a certain degree of consensus both as cultural constructs and objects of study has proved a hindrance to genre studies as it attempts to force metrics of objectivity and taxonomic value onto genre that do not fit with the reality of how genre operates. These metrics aim to make genre convenient to research, attempting to evaluate it by how useful it is as a rigid classificatory tool. In doing so, they avoid the messy, rich reality of contestation and genre. Though there have been short studies into single sites of contestation, such as Cherry Brigid's exploration of the differing definitions of horror film between horror fans and intended horror audiences, there has yet to be an extended study considering multiple stakeholders defining and disagreeing over a single genre that examines the broader implications and functions of contestation. Research into contested genres is particularly crucial for television: aside from Mittell's *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, which does not explore the issue of contestation in its analysis of genre stakeholders, there have been few major works analyzing television genre, and in particular contested genres. This thesis claims contestation as natural and central to an informed understanding of genre: a feature, not a bug.

While contestation is a feature of all genres to varying degrees, this thesis focuses on fantasy television as particularly rife for exploring contestation. Contestation over fantasy pulls in multiple directions, with those attempting to delimit fantasy contesting the boundaries between fantasy and fiction, fantasy and religious/spiritual beliefs, and fantasy and other genres like science fiction and horror. This thesis does not argue for a specific definition of fantasy, instead looking at the various ways the genre is defined, understood, and used. However, as a starting point for readers unfamiliar with the genre, a common theme in definitions frames fantasy as a genre of the impossible, often in contrast with science fiction which is framed as the not-yet possible presented plausibly (often through pseudo-scientific explanation). Fantasy is also frequently associated with specific subgenres and styles, such as the assumption that it takes place in a western European medievalesque setting in the vein of *The Well at the World's End* and *The Lord of the Rings*. However, these definitions are far from uncontroversial, reflecting only common themes in rhetoric amongst some stakeholders, and they are offered here only to give a sense of the broad space in which fantasy is thought to operate culturally.

In addition to media industry studies and genre studies, this thesis draws on fantasy studies. Fantasy studies has tended to be implicitly and explicitly centered on literature and textual analysis. For example, Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* offers a popular taxonomy of fantasy that explicitly focuses on how its proposed subgenres are constructed rhetorically in literature. The most seminal works that attempted to define the genre—Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, and Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy*—all take literature as their explicit focus. Though some work does center on other media such as film and animation, the overwhelming focus of fantasy studies remains literature and texts.

The discussion of fantasy as a contested genre is particularly appropriate to its manifestation on television because contestation over fantasy has limited the development of fantasy-specific academic work on television. Although individual series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) are identified as fantasy by stakeholders such as fans and extensively studied by academics, they are rarely researched *as fantasy*; *Buffy*, for example, tends to be approached as horror, teen drama, and telefantasy. Within television scholarship, fantasy is largely only discussed under generic umbrellas like cult television and telefantasy, a "supergenre" that encompasses (and often primarily focuses on) science fiction and horror, as in works like Catherine Johnson's *Telefantasy* and Sue Short's *Cult Telefantasy Series*.[9] Literature and film have their own supergenre equivalents: "the fantastic" and "cinefantastic," respectively. These supergenres allow scholars to circumvent thorny debates about the highly contested divisions between the genres they subsume and are well-suited to textual approaches where genre distinctions may be both less relevant to analysis and more challenging to rigorously argue for. However, for a cultural approach, these terms can prove less applicable as they are rarely used outside a single stakeholder group and combine genres with different histories and cultural and commercial values. Ironically, despite fantasy's central role in the terms themselves, the subsumption of these genres has often led to fantasy's marginalization within supergenres like telefantasy. As Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines note:

> Discussions of film genre rarely linger very long on the subject of fantasy except to remark that the borders between the three cinefantastic genres of horror, science fiction and fantasy tend to blur. Often this is all the mention that fantasy gets before the discussion moves on to the other two genres leaving fantasy to languish somewhere in the margins.[10]

[9] Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 2.; Sue Short, *Cult Telefantasy Series* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2011), 4.
[10] Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines, *Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 2012), 26.

The argument for the creation of academic supergenres like cinefantastic and telefantasy—that the textual boundaries between fantasy, science fiction, and horror are too thin to be rigorously defined—is used to justify the lack of specific scholarship on fantasy but curiously has not hindered science fiction and horror. These latter genres have been discussed in literature, film, and television scholarship for a longer period of time and in more extensive bodies of work. Indeed, while the bulk of fantasy film scholarship did not exist before the mid-2000s, horror has been one of the most studied genres for much of film genre history. David Butler observes that this "'squeezing out' or displacement of fantasy in favour of horror and science fiction is a recurring feature of much of the literature from the 1980s";[11] this continues to be a feature in genre research to this day, particularly in television scholarship. While literature and, more recently, film have accrued several monographs focusing on fantasy in their respective media, fantasy has only been discussed in television scholarship by scholars like Lorna Jowett, Peter Rans, and myself in brief articles or chapters in which genre serves as only a small piece of a broader argument.[12]

By contrast, this thesis places the definitional challenges that a term like telefantasy avoids at the center, focusing on contestation instead of dismissing it as an obstacle to analysis. This thesis draws fantasy studies and television studies into conversation for the first full-length work to focus specifically on fantasy television. Though it engages most directly with fantasy studies, by nature of the contestation, blurred lines, and genre-mixing rife between fantasy, science fiction, and horror, it touches on and contributes to these and other genre-specific fields. It also represents the first work in fantasy studies to draw on methods rooted in media industry studies, analyzing the industrial conditions under which fantasy is discursively understood and constructed.

One site of contestation that this thesis will not explore is that between countries. Genre categories, as scholars like Harry M. Benshoff note, vary greatly across country and television industries, and are often nationally or even locally specific.[13] This variation is particularly true of fantasy: Martin Barker, in his research on international viewers of *The Lord of the Rings*,

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[11] David Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2009), 12.
[12] See Lorna Jowett, "Spectacular Collision/Collusion: Genre, 'Quality,' and Contemporary Drama," in *The Television World of Pushing Daisies: Critical Essays on the Bryan Fuller Series*, ed. by Alissa Burger (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2011).; Peter Rans, "Un(Real) Humour: The Roles of Comedy and Fantasy in the First Season of Charmed," in *Investigating Charmed: The Magic Power of TV*, eds. Karin Beeler and Stan Beeler (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).; Katarina O'Dette, "Fantasy Worlds on the Small Screen: Worldbuilding in Original American Fantasy Television," *Extrapolation* 61, no. 1 (2021).; and Katarina O'Dette, "Yesterday's Tyrant: Evolving Evil in Fantasy Television's Reformed Villains," in *A Shadow Within: Evil in Fantasy & Science Fiction*, ed. Francesca T. Barbini (Edinburgh: Luna Press, 2019).
[13] Harry M. Benshoff, *Film and Television Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2016), 85.

reveals great variety across the primary genre labels that audience members from different countries apply to the film adaptations.[14] In order to focus the discussion of contestation on the differences between and amongst industrial stakeholders, this thesis will focus on one country's approach to a genre: the United States. The US proves particularly rich for examining the contestation over fantasy as Attebery has identified "a fundamental bias against fantasy" that resulted in the genre's later development than in countries with a more positive response to fantasy, such as the United Kingdom.[15] This dismissive attitude from some stakeholders has made the rhetoric surrounding the genre more charged, which has in turn contributed to its contestation, as will be explored in greater depth in chapter two. The US is also particularly appropriate for exploring fantasy television because of the volume of fantasy series being produced by the US television industry, both on channels and major over-the-top [OTT] platforms such as Netflix and Amazon. The US offers a rich combination of fraught discourse and an unusual plethora of texts that create numerous opportunities for the presence or absence of fantasy in discourses surrounding television.

Everything Changed When the Methodology Attacked: Methods

Because the discursive roles of the stakeholders in this thesis vary, the methods employed necessarily differ, though media industry studies and discourse analysis form a methodological throughline. Discourse and discourse analysis are themselves highly contested terms and methods, encompassing many and at times conflicting definitions of discourse and approaches to researching those discourses. A full accounting of these debates is beyond the scope of this thesis, which follows in the footsteps of Mittel and John Frow to consider genre as a discursive practice. In doing so, it takes an inclusive definition of discourse in line with David Crystal's argument that "both 'discourse' and 'text' can be used in a much broader sense to include *all* language units with a definable communicative function, whether spoken or written."[16] Discourses and texts span an expansive range from series trailers and Buzzfeed quizzes to streaming services' interfaces and blog posts about software design to written and podcast interviews with television writers. Genre is a discursive tool expressed across these variety of media and settings. As Roger Fowler argues:

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[14] Martin Barker, "The Functions of Fantasy: A Comparison of Audiences for *The Lord of the Rings* in Twelve Countries," in *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audience*, ed. by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 175.
[15] Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), vii.
[16] David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 120.

> "Discourse" is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs (etc.) constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience […] Different modes of discourse encode different representations of experience; and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which discourse is embedded.[17]

Each stakeholder provides their own communicative context to their discourses about genre, with those contexts even changing depending on which primary stakeholder role an individual is occupying at a particular moment. The varied modes of discourse encode those understandings of genre in different ways according to the stakeholder's perspective and medium of communication. As Sara Mills cautions, "discourses should not be interpreted at face value; individuals actively engage with discourses in order to forge particular positions of identity for themselves."[18] Discourses prove a useful site for understanding genre through a media industry studies lens precisely because of this central concern with the ways in which stakeholders actively use discourses to construct public performances of themselves. These performances give rise to fruitful tensions for researchers to explore, with Mills noting that "Discourses are thus not fixed but are the site of constant contestation of meaning."[19] Far from a neutral form of conveying objective information, discourses offer a rich site for exploring the stakeholder struggles that give rise to genre contestation.

Because of the variation in stakeholder and mode, chapters three through five draw on different methods to analyze their discourses. Chapter three, which focuses on channel brands, uses paratextual analysis and promotional industries studies to analyze the promotional discourses that channels author about themselves and their series. Chapter four, which focuses on OTT streaming services, draws on digital humanities and paratextual analysis to analyze the user interfaces that OTTs construct to satisfy their business practices. The secrecy often involved in the genre data and proprietary algorithms presents a particular methodological challenge, with business practices discursively translated into a controlled, one-way conversation about genre labels on interfaces. Chapter five, which focuses on television writers' discourses, draws on fields like creative labor and impressions management to analyze the ways that writers portray themselves and their craft in podcast interviews. Each chapter provides a more in-depth exploration of its own approach and the relevant literature, but this

[17] Roger Fowler, "The Lost Girl: Discourse and Focalization," in *Rethinking Lawrence*, ed. by Keith Brown (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 54.
[18] Sara Mills, *Discourse*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 81.
[19] Mills, 14.

brief accounting illustrates the range of methods and variation needed to appropriately engage with the variety of stakeholders under consideration.

Jeremy Bearimies: Running Themes

Throughout the thesis and across multiple stakeholders, there are several recurring themes about the nature of genre and contestation. The first theme is rooted in the way that contestation is contributed to or caused by lack of explicit definitions in discourses. While some stakeholders like critics and writers occasionally define the terms they use, most genre discourses operate on the assumption that terms are inherently understood as the speaker intends them, even when a term has multiple definitions or the stakeholder is explicitly proposing a new take on the genre. Academics invest considerable time in creating and sharing definitions because defining terms is a crucial component of academic discursive culture. The premium placed on definition is so embedded in this stakeholder group that it has influenced whether and how they engage with genre in the first place. However, the practice is much less common among other stakeholder roles, and the resulting lack of clarity in genre discourses makes contestation rife. Differences in meaning and usage are conveyed through implication and context more often than through explicit definitions. This lack of explicitness renders genre particularly rich with nuance in the case of fantasy due to the overlap between terms like fantasy, science fiction (or more commonly sci-fi), and genre itself. In some cases, the intended meanings can be derived from context, particularly by stakeholders familiar with a genre's discursive practices. In other cases, the intended meaning cannot be definitively determined, and the unresolved confusion becomes a form of contestation: the lack of resolution itself offering just as much potential for analysis.

A second theme is the use of hierarchies of genre to create contestation, sometimes as a result of value judgements. Genre-mixing, which is common among all texts but in particular fantasy television, means that texts never sit within a single discursive genre category. Rather, they exist in multiple categories of genre, tone, format, mode, and medium. However, discourses rarely allow these categories to exist side-by-side in a neutral fashion. Instead, categories are placed into hierarchies, with some terms deemed more relevant than others. These hierarchies can serve a neutral function; this thesis, for example, takes fantasy as its focus but does not claim that fantasy is a more relevant lens for viewing the texts, stakeholders, or discourses discussed therein. However, these hierarchies can also be invoked with covert or overt judgements about whether texts and/or stakeholders belong more to one category than another. Sometimes this is a comment on the text itself, with a discursive label framed as more

relevant to the text or its promotion (either to a broad audience or a niche one). However, in many other cases the hierarchy becomes a way for stakeholders to articulate a specific type of value for their work. In doing so, they draw on the perceived cultural and/or commercial value of a genre, both informed by and informing these value judgements as they make a case for their own work. These value judgements become particularly fraught with a genre like fantasy, as existing cultural biases within the US make acknowledgements of the genre more complex and loaded. Sometimes these biases incentivize stakeholders to minimize the relevance of the genre to their work: downplaying its role, avoiding the term altogether, or substituting it (either with another genre term or with a genre element, e.g., "a show about dragons" rather than "a fantasy series"). Other times, the protected niche that fantasy fandom perceives itself in becomes a boon for stakeholders who can claim expert knowledge and understanding of the genre. These stakeholders can position themselves as authentic champions of the genre as it has become more commercially viable. Genre becomes a carefully managed tool where the negotiation of hierarchies between genres reveals and reenforces the cultural and commercial value of the stakeholders themselves.

A third theme is the extent to which public discourses target different audiences, creating contestation between a single stakeholder's discourses. Stakeholders are conscious of the benefits of contestation, strategically presenting genres and texts depending on their assumed audience. Genre is a performance that is played out differently for different audiences. These audiences are what Philip Napoli refers to as institutionalized audiences: "the audience as socially constructed by media industries, advertisers, and associated audience measurement firms." [20] Rather than reflecting actual audiences, these institutionalized audiences are effectively discursive constructs imagined by the genre stakeholders who speak of them, reflective of who the stakeholder thinks they are speaking to, who they *want* to be speaking to, and what they believe those audiences are doing. While the variation in genre performance for these different imagined audiences creates more contestation surrounding genre, it also illustrates performers' awareness of their own investments in genre. Genre is not a stable identity label or perspective that a stakeholder instinctively applies to a text; rather, it is dialogic, offered by one stakeholder in specific situations with the intention of being received by another stakeholder. A crucial element of that dialogue is how rarely these discourses are acknowledged as dialogues. By using genre terms as if they are objective labels, and by not

[20] Philip M. Napoli, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

interrogating definitions or labels, stakeholders often frame their discourses as objective and uncontestable, even while benefiting from contestation.

Where Do We Go From Here?: Structure

The thesis focuses on four different stakeholder groups: academics, channels, OTT streaming services, and television writers, opting for depth in a thorough nuanced analysis of contestation in a small selection of stakeholders rather than a breadth of many types of stakeholders. This focus allows each chapter to unpack how widespread contestation is in each stakeholder role, exploring the plethora of sites of contestation even within a single stakeholder. Outwith the academic stakeholder group, the chosen case studies focus on stakeholders within the media industry, maintaining a methodological consistency of media industry studies.

Chapter one analyzes the academic stakeholder group, reviewing the existing literature on genre studies, fantasy studies, and fantasy television. In outlining the major text-centered approaches to genre and fantasy, the chapter makes the case for the necessity of culturally-centered approaches to genre. While approaches centered on texts and theory have struggled to accommodate contestation, cultural approaches naturally place contestation in a conversation about genre. In outlining these major threads of academic thought on genre, the chapter highlights the contestation between academic stakeholders, despite their tendency to present their own discourses on genre as neutral and objective. The approaches, methodologies, and theories used by academics become tools for them to argue for their own work and research interests.

Chapter two examines the forces that incentivize the contestation surrounding fantasy television, delving into the cultural values that have shaped and delegitimized both fantasy and television within the US. This chapter is unique in the thesis by not focusing on a particular stakeholder, instead laying crucial groundwork for understanding the forces that encourage US stakeholders to have a fraught relationship with a term like fantasy, particularly on television. Historically-rooted ideas about Puritan, Victorian, and capitalist values have created a cultural suspicion of departures from reality. Television has been perceived as enabling passive viewer behaviors, and fantasy (both the genre and the act of imagination) has been deemed dangerously escapist unless (or in some cases even if) it enables productivity and real world change. While these values have also impacted the reception of science fiction, SF's claim to science and reality has granted it a slightly different relationship with these forces, partially fueled by gendered assumptions about the genres' respective audiences. These values historically fed into and were fed by assumptions about the lack of commercial value of fantasy

television, though that has not been born out in reality, particularly in the first two decades of the 2000s. This struggle between the cultural and commercial value of fantasy, television, and fantasy television plays out throughout the stakeholder discourses analyzed in this thesis.

Chapter three examines the contestation within and between channels, analyzing how different channels position fantasy in order to suit their brands. The chapter focuses on the promotional discourses of HBO and Syfy, with particular attention paid to the marketing of their two respective flagship fantasy series of the 2010s: *Game of Thrones* and *The Magicians* (2015–2020). In its attempts to portray *Game of Thrones* as similar to its other programming, and to emphasize the type of "quality" programming they are known for, HBO underplays the role of fantasy in favor of the elements of the series that fit with their brand. This deemphasis of fantasy helps create what R. Colin Tait refers to as the HBO-ification of genre, where the channel popularizes a particular approach to a genre that other channels try to mimic. Syfy carefully tries to negotiate its brand identity in the late 2000s and 2010s around these HBO-ified ideas of fantasy, ultimately attempting to use their knowledge of the genre to carve out a niche for themselves rooted in a unique expertise. For these channels, genres prove useful because their flexibility allows them to be strategically deployed in ways that suit channels' particular brands.

Chapter four examines the contestation within and between OTT streaming services, analyzing how Netflix and Amazon Prime Video use genres, particularly fantasy, as part of their programming and interface strategies. Netflix makes genre categorization central to their process of commissioning content and organizing it, with the personalization of individual's interfaces crucial to their brand. Contestation is a natural result of that personalization as different users are exposed to different genre identities depending on their viewing habits. Amazon Prime Video, on the other hand, is viewed by Amazon as just one of many incentives to encourage users to subscribe to their Prime service. Contestation on their service results from inconsistency with genre labelling that reveals the lack of priority the service places on creating a navigable interface. Instead, their series are treated as another catalogue item to draw in potential subscribers. Genre becomes contested within and between these services as a result of their comparative business needs.

Chapter five examines contestation between writers. Rather than focusing on case studies of specific writers, the chapter analyzes podcast interviews of over 360 television writers of all career levels. Contestation is born out of the differences between individuals, with writers ascribing genre to themselves and their work in varying ways in order to strategically perform their professional and personal identities. Their differing perspectives and professional

goals also inform the ways they describe the genre identities of the series they work on, with these descriptions forming another type of public performance they give as part of an argument for the value of their own craft.

While scholarly discourses have often portrayed genre as an irrelevant and prescriptive system of categorizing and defining, researching the ways that genre actually operates reveals a rich, living discursive construct that stakeholders use to manage and shape cultural and commercial perceptions of themselves. Viewed through a cultural and industrial lens, the notion of contestation is far from a methodological hurdle, but rather a methodological necessity. By primarily treating genres as rigid theoretical categories, genre studies has neglected the insights that both genre and contestation have to offer. This thesis invites scholars to embrace the messiness at the heart of genre, which in turn allows them access to the messiness of the stakeholders who wield it. When we free genre from the restriction of being convenient for us to study, what can it teach us?

Chapter One

Contesting Theories and Theorizing Contestation: Fantasy Television in Academia

> "Whatever you describe to another person is also a revelation of who you are and who you think you are. You can not describe anything without betraying your point of view, your aspirations, your fears, your hopes. Everything."
>
> —James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

In 2019, while putting together a bid for a research center for fantasy and the fantastic at the University of Glasgow, Robert Maslen remarked:

> It's not so easy to define fantasy, as many commentators have found. For me the word means the kind of fiction, the kind of films and paintings, music and TV shows and theatre and opera, even the kind of architecture I'm drawn to. I know it when I see it. I can feel its pull from inside the covers of a book I've picked off the shelves of a second-hand bookshop as I flick through the pages and spot some reference to magic, or an apparition, or a metamorphosis, or a country – preferably a world – that doesn't exist. But not everyone I've spoken to agrees that all the things I've just listed are definitive of fantasy, and if we are to have a discussion on the topic, a conversation across disciplines and practices and cultures and art forms, we need to know what we're talking about, have some sense that it is more or less the same thing.[1]

Maslen's musings highlight three key aspects of academic genre discourses. First, the difficulty of defining and agreeing on a definition of fantasy is notorious among its academic stakeholders. Second, there is a common perception that, in order to discuss a genre and create spaces for its research, academics must come to a consensus about what the genre is. Third, these genre definitions can be personal and instinctive, rooted in what each stakeholder is drawn to; there is an emotional component to genres that may be difficult to articulate, which can make them uncomfortable for academic stakeholders to engage with. So strong is Maslen's emotional connection to fantasy that he personifies the genre, describing it as pulling him into texts. These first two aspects of academic discourses will be discussed at length in this chapter, but the third aspect is a crucial and underacknowledged element of genre study: genres and their definitions can incite passion in stakeholders. Genres matter to them, though they may matter in a plethora of ways based on a plethora of instinctive definitions. Though that personal element of genre definitions is rarely acknowledged and difficult to codify, it runs through and shapes the genre theories of academic stakeholders, providing crucial context for the resulting contestation.

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[1] Rob Maslen, "What Does Fantasy Do?" *The City of Lost Books* (blog), June 23, 2019, https://thecityoflostbooks.glasgow.ac.uk/what-does-fantasy-do/.

This chapter traces the major threads of genre studies, examining the methodological limitations of the aesthetic, ritual, and ideological approaches to genre, particularly as they apply to fantasy studies. These limitations, compounded by the specific definitional challenges presented by the fantasy genre, build the case for the cultural approach taken by the thesis, and the centrality of contestation to such an approach. The further challenges presented by television genre and television genre studies augment that contestation, outlining why fantasy television is an ideal case study for researching genre contestation. This chapter also argues that that contestation can be found in these discourses themselves; far from neutral observers of genre, academics are themselves stakeholders whose discourses reflect their argumentative needs and investments. This thesis is not immune: participating in contestation as much as researching it.

The Inconvenient Subject: A History of Theorizing Fantasy and Genre

The history of genre theory has been dominated by attempts to define genres through their shared textual elements. In film and television studies, this textual focus is known as the aesthetic approach, expanding to include visual and audio tropes.[2] This approach has historically positioned genres as almost biological categories in which the presence of certain textual elements could be treated as a clear indication that a text belonged within a certain genre.[3] These definitions of genre have been increasingly criticized for their tautological fallacies: in order to determine the textual elements common in a genre, the genre theorist must first select which texts to analyze to find those elements and, in doing so, has already decided how they define the genre. The defining features of a genre that result from this approach confirm the theorist's preconceived notions of that genre, codifying them into definition.

Fantasy genre theorists in particular have been criticized for these tautological failings. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn observe a tendency amongst fantasy critics to "generate definitions of fantasy which include the texts that they value and exclude most of what general readers think of as fantasy,"[4] a tendency that has its roots in the beginning of fantasy theory. In the first major theoretical work to consider fantasy as a genre, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Tzvetan Todorov introduces his notion of "the fantastic," which

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[2] Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 145.
[3] John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 57.; Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 6.
[4] Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

he centers around the hesitation that readers experience when they are confronted with something that does not have an immediate plausible explanation.[5] Todorov's definition of the fantastic has been maligned by theorists from Brian Attebery to Joshua David Bellin, as its emphasis on hesitation derives from Todorov's focus on Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and has limited applicability to texts beyond that.[6] In fact, modern taxonomies of fantasy, such as Mendlesohn's, limit Todorov's definition to one specific, and comparatively small, subgenre of fantasy: liminal fantasy.[7] The fantastic is now more commonly used in genre theory to refer broadly to the collective of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction, creating contestation about the precise definition of this term across time. Yet *The Fantastic* remains a major text in the canons of fantasy and genre studies, with Brian Attebery insisting that "Todorov's title and his reputation as a theorist have given this work a greater prominence than its relevance warrants."[8] The disproportionately influential work is crucially shaped by Todorov's preferences in his stakeholder roles of reader and scholar, a personalization that creates contestation between his approaches and those of other readers and scholars.

Another major early fantasy theorist, Rosemary Jackson, goes a step further, as she openly admits to ignoring major fantasy texts like *The Lord of the Rings* in the pursuit of her specific thematic focus. Instead, she focuses on texts "which reveal most clearly some of the points raised in the theoretical section – not in order to prove a hypothetical argument, but because it is in these works that the subversive function of the fantastic is most apparent."[9] Though Jackson insists that her focus on certain texts is not in the pursuit of a specific argument, she claims that the texts she has focused on can illustrate trends in texts that she does not analyze. The result is an analysis of fantasy that deliberately excludes texts like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and the Earthsea Quartet: books that even Jackson admits are considered by many fantasy fans and scholars to be central to the genre.[10] These exclusions raise questions about the rigor both of Jackson's definition of the genre specifically and of these kinds of textual approaches to genre theory more generally, as they posit definitions based on a narrow selection of texts chosen to suit a particular argument or theorist.

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[5] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,* trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 31.
[6] Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3.; Joshua David Bellin, *Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 14.
[7] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 181.
[8] Brian Attebery, "Structuralism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 89.
[9] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 9.
[10] Jackson, 9.; Attebery, *Strategies,* 10.

As cultural and reception studies gained currency in literary and film studies, genre theory widened beyond the text, considering the role of creator and audience in the construction of genre. Frederic Jameson proposed the idea of genres as "social contracts between a writer and a specific public,"[11] in which writers and readers enable a genre to operate through their shared understanding of what that genre entails. This serves, as Jonathan Culler puts it, "to make certain relevant expectations operative and thus to permit both compliance with and deviation from accepted modes of intelligibility."[12] Contract theory has proven particularly popular in fantasy theory, which is seen as dependent on an agreement between writer and viewer about what constitutes reality. Kathryn Hume defines fantasy as "*any departure from consensus reality*"[13] [emphasis in original]; while this definition is not unproblematic in fantasy genre circles, it highlights that, for many theorists, fantasy requires that writers and readers draw upon a similar understanding of what constitutes reality in order to agree that a text depicts a departure from that reality.[14] W. R. Irwin defines modern fantasy as what happens when a "writer and reader knowingly enter upon a conspiracy of intellectual subversiveness."[15] Irwin's use of "conspiracy" is telling: genre definitions that utilize contract theory shift genre from residing solely in a text to a living category that is recognized, constructed, and defined between its users. Contract theory often draws on a textual approach to genre, simply attributing its definition to creators and audiences without empirical research of how these groups define a genre. However, it begins to center genres on their users and creates space for new conceptions of genre based on these users.

In film studies, theories of genre that center on users have generally manifested in two approaches: ritual and ideological. The ritual approach, as Rick Altman outlines, frames genres as something that comes from viewers, in which "the narrative patterns of generic texts grow out of existing societal practices […] ritual critics interpret narrative situations and structural

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[11] Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1981), 106.
[12] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2008), 172.
[13] Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Routledge, 2014), 21.
[14] This emphasis on "consensus" is considered so central that most literary fantasy critics avoid labeling texts from before the 1850s, or the late 1700s at the earliest, as fantasy. Mark Rose describes fantasy as a "post-enlightenment genre," emphasizing that "A spell cast by a sorcerer in a romantic epic of the 1590s simply does not mean the same thing as one cast by a sorcerer in a fantasy novel of the 1980s." Readers and writers are assumed to need to share a consensus of what is possible and what is not before it can be assumed that departures from reality are both intended and perceived as such. Mark Rose, "Fantasy and History," in *Genre at the Crossroads: The Challenge of Fantasy*, eds. George Slusser and Jean-Pierre Barricelli (Riverside, CA: Xenox Books, 2003), 52.
[15] W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 9.

relations as offering *imaginative* solutions to a society's real problems"[16] [emphasis in original]. According to the ritual conception of genre, genres enable audiences to make sense of and plan for improving the societies in which they live. The ideological approach, on the other hand, frames genres as manufactured by the industry in which their constituent texts are produced, "luring audiences into accepting *deceptive* non-solutions [to society's problems], while all the time serving […] industry purposes"[17] [emphasis in original]. According to the ideological conception of genre, genres allow an industry like Hollywood to impose specific ideologies onto audiences. However, as Steve Neale points out, both approaches are weakened by their narrow focuses:

> while the ritual approach tends to downplay the contentious and coercive aspects of Hollywood and its genres, the ideological approach tends to downplay the heterogeneity of Hollywood's output, of Hollywood's audiences, and of the uses those audiences make of Hollywood's films.[18]

The ritual approach assumes that audiences have more agency than they realistically may have, while the ideological approach assumes they have less. Even more problematic is their limited use of empirical audience and industrial research: their conclusions are usually based on theoretical conceptions of how these allegedly homogenous groups operate rather than on empirical research, which would fruitfully complicate these approaches.

Ideological approaches to genre studies that aim to be more in touch with that complexity would consider empirical audience research by scholars like Anna Oleszczuk, J. Richard Stevens, and Rachel Lara van der Merwe, who research fan and creative practitioner discourses like science fiction's Puppygate. Puppygate was a movement in 2014 and 2015 by groups of conservative science fiction writers and fans, self-named the Sad Puppies or the Rabid Puppies, to organize strategic voting for the science fiction Hugo awards in order to increase the number of nominations and wins for texts with conservative ideologies.[19] This movement was backlash against what these voters deemed the recent rise of "message fiction," texts that they insisted had won Hugos because of their liberal ideologies and diverse characters rather than their quality.[20] As Stevens and van der Merwe put it, "the rhetorical clashes between

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[16] Altman, 27.
[17] Altman, 27.
[18] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 214.
[19] Anna Oleszczuk, "Sad and Rabid Puppies: Politicization of the Hugo Award Nomination Procedure," *New Horizons in English Studies* 2 (2017): 128, http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/nh.2017.2.127.
[20] J. Richard Stevens and Rachel Lara van der Merwe, "The imagined communities of Toxic Puppies: Considering fan community discourse in the 2015 Hugo Awards 'Puppygate' controversy," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 15, no. 1 (May 2018): 221–223, https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/articles/sf268577r.

the Puppies and their opponents appear to revolve around the differing definitions and boundaries of the science fiction genre." [21] Puppygate has been understood as a creator/audience war over how a genre is defined and what ideologies it should espouse. Research on user discourses in movements like this raises questions about the validity of an ideological genre approach; by suggesting that an industry can import an ideology to its viewers through a genre, these approaches flirt with the assumption that audiences are homogenous and lack both agency and opinions of their own. Empirical audience research can complicate this assumption by centering the contestation that can erupt over genre.[22]

The methodological limitations of these aesthetic, ritual, and ideological approaches have reduced the popularity and prestige of genre studies in academic circles, particularly within television studies. As Alistair Fowler observes, some scholars "have concluded that genre theory, being unhelpful in classification, is valueless."[23] Benedetto Croce, one of the most extreme examples of this point of view, argues that genre itself is meaningless, and that every text has its own genre.[24] Scholars like Stuart Kaminsky are more reserved, instead arguing that "if [genre] is to have meaning, [it] must have a limited scope, a limited definition."[25] However, requiring genres to have a limited scope and definition leads to a similar issue faced by aesthetic approaches to genre: if the limitation is artificially imposed rather than an authentic expression of how the genre operates, the resulting definition is a purely theoretical conception that does not accurately reflect the genre's range and complexity. These frameworks create theoretical conceptions of genre that are argumentatively neat for the scholars proposing them, but may not align with the sprawling, messy reality of genres as other scholars and stakeholders recognize them. They have the potential to reveal more about the research interests of the scholar than the genre or genres they are claiming to theorize.

This insistence that genres have narrow, classificatory definitions is particularly problematic for fantasy. The breadth of fantasy has plagued attempts to define the genre because, as scholars like Jackson, Irwin, and Joanna Russ point out, it tends to be defined by

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[21] Stevens and van der Merwe, 212.
[22] A less ideologically-focused engagement with empirical audience research into fantasy television can be found in Martin Barker, Clarissa Smith, and Feona Attwood's work into how *Game of Thrones* viewers discussed the series's genre and storytelling, laying the groundwork for further research of a broader array of series. Martin Barker, Clarissa Smith, and Feona Attwood, *Watching Game of Thrones: How Audiences Engage with Dark Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 104.
[23] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 37.
[24] Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie. 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan, 1922), 457.
[25] Stuart M. Kaminsky, *American Film Genres* (Fairfield, NJ: Pflaum, 1974), 149.

what it is not.[26] As Russ puts it, "fantasy is *what could not have happened*; i.e., what *cannot* happen, what *cannot* exist […] the negative subjunctivity, the *cannot* or *could not*, constitutes in fact the chief pleasure of fantasy" [emphasis in original].[27] Though the specifics of how the genre is defined varies amongst stakeholders, fantasy is generally understood by genre scholars to be that which *could not have happened*. This negative subjunctivity allows the genre the potential for great variety, as the main uniting feature of discourses around fantasy texts is that they are not considered to be constrained by pretending to be possible. This breadth has led fantasy scholars from Attebery to Jackson to debate whether fantasy is more accurately described as a mode: "a broad but identifiable kind of literary method, mood, or manner that is not tied exclusively to a particular form or genre."[28] Fowler describes modes as categories that "never imply a complete external form. Modes have always an incomplete repertoire, a selection only of the corresponding kind's features."[29] While genres are framed as specific and contained categories, modes are broader categories that cross genres and never exist on their own.[30] When it is perceived as a mode, fantasy becomes an adjectival description that augments a genre label, something that adds flavor to the text rather than constituting one of its genres. Hume and David Butler take this a step further, describing fantasy as an impulse, with Hume arguing that every text in every medium utilizes a blend of mimesis and fantasy.[31] According to this conception, fantasy is not a genre or mode, but simply the opposing force to realism (itself a contested term, as chapter two explores). Concerned that the breadth of fantasy is at odds with the artificial constraints placed on genre, some scholars have attempted to recategorize fantasy under different theoretical concepts rather than renegotiate their understandings of genre.

While these theoretical frameworks for discussing fantasy offer interesting perspectives, the definitions constructed by scholars often fail to reflect the ways in which fantasy is understood by stakeholders outside of academia. Joshua David Bellin observes that "fantasy remains a fugitive genre; though few people older than ten have difficulty identifying a work as a fantasy, the genre itself has proved far more amorphous, and its study far more arduous,

[26] Jackson, 26.; Irwin, ix.; Joanna Russ, "Speculations: The Subjunctivity of Science Fiction," *Extrapolation* 15 (December 1973): 51.
[27] Russ, 16.
[28] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 213.
[29] Fowler, 107.
[30] Fowler, 108.
[31] Hume, xii.

than such commonsense classifications would imply."[32] Todorov frames this tension between 'commonsense' definitions and academic ones as the difference between theoretical genres, which are "deduced from a theory of literature," and historical genres, which "result from an observation of literary phenomena."[33] These theoretical genres and theoretical conceptions of genres can produce scholarship that differs starkly from how genres are treated and understood by other stakeholders. For example, some theorists like James Walters argue that musicals, due to their representation of the impossible in the form of spontaneously coordinated musical and dance numbers, are fantasy.[34] While the argument itself has internal logic, it does not reflect how many other stakeholders tend to discuss musicals. Some musicals such as *Galavant* (2015–2016) and *Schmigadoon!* (2021–Present) are also described as fantasy, but equally others like *Glee* (2009–2015) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–2019) are not.[35] By claiming that nonmimetic genre conventions are inherently fantastic, scholars who make these arguments risk suggesting that every work of fiction that contains an unrealistic element is fantasy, which does not reflect how the genre tends to be understood by other stakeholders. A medical drama like *House* (2004–2012) is not labeled as fantasy simply because it portrays patient care as unrealistically divorced from US health insurance, nor is a sitcom like *Friends* (1994–2004) described as fantasy based on the mismatch between the size of the characters' New York City apartments and their likely incomes. The lack of mimesis is not itself sufficient for most stakeholders to invoke the label of fantasy. Rather, the perceived relationship between fantasy and reality is shaped by more intuitive, nonclassificatory ideas.

Locating Genre in Culture

This plethora of challenges that inhibits scholars from satisfactorily defining genre, particularly fantasy, has often been interpreted as evidence that genre is not useful. However, as John Frow points out:

> In one important sense […] these shortcomings and inconsistencies are irrelevant. Genre classifications are real. They have an organising force in everyday life. They are

[32] Bellin, 14.
[33] Todorov, 21.
[34] James Walters, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 52.
[35] Examples of these distinctions can be seen on these series' respective IMDb pages. All four series have musical listed as one of their genres, but only *Schmigadoon!* and *Galavant* have fantasy listed. "Galavant," IMDb, accessed March 17, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3305096/.; "Schmigadoon!" IMDb, accessed March 17, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11808942/.; "Glee," IMDb, accessed March 17, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1327801/.; "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend," IMDb, accessed March 17, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4094300/.

> embedded in material infrastructures and in the recurrent practices of classifying and differentiating kinds of symbolic action.[36]

The fact that genres may not be rigorous, limited categories or theoretically useful is irrelevant: genres should be researched because they exist within culture, not because they are useful to scholars. Dismissing them as useless is not about their actual value or function, but about academic struggles to engage with the field in a manner that is fruitful, edifying, and reflective of genres as they actually operate. When non-academic stakeholders use genre definitions, they rarely fall into these same traps because they are not attempting to impose an inappropriate type of rigor. Frow notes that non-academic stakeholders "have constant resort to a kind of folk classification, an unsystematically systematic taxonomy which feels intuitive and yet covers most of the difficult and ambiguous cases they are likely to encounter."[37] Genres, particularly genres like fantasy that have historically been resistant to satisfactory scholarly definition, are more appropriately approached through methods that make space for these "commonsense" folk classifications.

In order to center the messiness of fantasy television specifically and genre generally, this thesis draws on Jason Mittell's cultural approach to genre. Mittell argues that "television genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but operates across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts."[38] This approach finds a genre like fantasy in discursive practices by various stakeholders in which "the discourses surrounding and running through a given genre are themselves constitutive of that generic category; they are the practices that define genres and delimit their meanings, not media texts themselves."[39] This focus on discourse avoids the traditional top-down approach to genre of imposing a theoretical definition of fantasy onto television series. Instead, the cultural approach focuses on how genres are discussed, defined, and utilized by stakeholders. Su Holmes observes that "there is much to gain from exploring the processes and practices of categorization, rather than simply mapping a textual category in itself."[40] A cultural approach centers genre analysis on the way that stakeholders discursively create and utilize those processes and practices, rather than enabling a handful of academic

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[36] Frow, 14.
[37] Frow, 13.
[38] Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xii.
[39] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 12.
[40] Su Holmes, "'A Term Rather Too General to Be Helpful': Struggling with Genre in Reality TV," in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, eds. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), 174.

stakeholders to impose convenient theoretical categories onto genres. In doing so, this approach denaturalizes the myth of academics as neutral reporters of genre theory, framing them instead as active genre stakeholders whose written and spoken arguments are just one of many discourses that participate in the cultural construction of genre. For example, the mode versus genre debate is reframed as an intrastakeholder discourse that, while revealing of scholars' priorities and argumentative concerns, does not dictate wider cultural understandings of fantasy, as the concept of modes is rarely used outside of scholarly (in particular literary) circles. By approaching fantasy television as a cultural construct, this thesis examines how various genre stakeholders like writers, academics, OTT streaming services, and channels define, discuss, and interpret genres.

This approach makes the concept of authorship an explicit and key component of genre terms and definitions. As Altman notes:

> All genre terms are implicitly authored; that is, they are always the product of a specific user group. Yet when generic terms are used they are rarely signed by their authors. Instead, they are typically presented as universal terms, and said to be dictated by tradition or to arise spontaneously out of textual structure. […] genres must be seen as a site of struggle among users.[41]

Widening the definition of genre to multiple stakeholders and making the authorship of discourses explicit introduces new complexities to the study of genre. Peter Hutchings notes the possibility for "contested genres, with one group of users disagreeing with another group's definition of a particular genre."[42] As scholars like Altman, Neale, and Janet Staiger have pointed out, stakeholders may define the same genres differently and acknowledge different genres. Altman emphasizes that these differences in genre serve a distinct purpose, as each stakeholder uses discourses "to define genres in a manner that suits its own institutional needs."[43] Rather than being "inert categories shared by all," genres are "discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations."[44] The differing ways in which genres are defined by these stakeholders are not simply due to differences of opinion or perspective, but to the different functions that genre serves for these stakeholders. Genre can mean category, corpus, or formula depending on who is defining it and what purpose they see

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[41] Altman, 99.
[42] Peter Hutchings, "Monster Legacies: Memory, Technology and Horror History," in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, eds. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), 217.
[43] Altman, 48.
[44] Altman, 101.

for genre.[45] This in turn impacts the definitions of individual genres that these stakeholders use, with stakeholders sometimes deliberately exploiting the variety of definitions and usage. As Lincoln Geraghty and Marc Jancovich point out, when the Production Code Administration viewed horror as a problematic genre in the 1940s, studios specifically developed films "so that they could be presented to the PCA as one kind of genre, and presented to audiences as another."[46] Studios can define the genre identity of a text one way when genre is a consideration for ratings and censorship, and another way when it is a consideration of marketing and distribution. Definitions of a genre vary, not merely between stakeholders, but also within a stakeholder in different contexts.

Altman emphasizes that no single stakeholder's approach to genre should be given priority over others, arguing that "no isolated part of this process actually *is* the genre; instead, the genre lies somewhere in the overall circulation of meaning constitutive of the process."[47] However, in spite of acknowledging the variety of definitions and the contestation between definitions and stakeholders, scholars like Altman and Neale who argue for considering contestation also invalidate contested genres. Altman refers to genres with greater consensus as "successful"[48] and claims that the fewer people who share a consensus of a genre definition, "the weaker the power of that genre to embody significant human problems and solutions."[49] He places a value judgement on consensus, without any supporting evidence about what a "weak" or "successful" genre is or how a "weak" genre might have less impact. Neale ignores entire stakeholders and sources of contestation by dismissing the definitions of viewers, critics, and theorists as "unofficial" or "improvised," only crediting those generated by the industry as true genre definitions.[50] This dismissiveness ignores two key components of genre. First, as Altman points out, Neale's argument "depends on the somewhat doubtful assumption that genres shaped by the film industry are communicated completely and uniformly to audiences widely dispersed in terms of time, space and experience."[51] Second, genres come from many stakeholders, not simply the industry that produces texts. Neale himself has written extensively on film noir, a genre term that did not originate from the industry but was applied

[45] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 238.
[46] Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich, introduction to *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), 4.
[47] Altman, 84.
[48] Altman, 214.
[49] Altman, 163.
[50] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 42.
[51] Altman, 15.

retrospectively by critics;[52] at the time of release, many of these films were described in industry trade press as melodramas.[53] This theoretical genre of noir gained currency with the industry from the 1970s to the 1990s, and the genre label began to be used in re-releases of 1940s films and in the postmodern genre cycle of neo-noir.[54] Neale's own research on film noir undermines his dismissal of genre labels used by "unofficial" stakeholders like academics. Though both Altman and Neale argue for the importance of considering contestation, they undercut their own arguments by insisting on relatively homogenous considerations of genre and on the validity of only certain stakeholders. Scholars have suggested that contestation is an interesting point of consideration, but it has yet to be extensively engaged with as a valid, central, and natural component of genre.

This critical avoidance of contestation is particularly ironic given the contested nature of the term genre itself, which has three main cultural usages. First, it refers to a type of classification, with genres delineated by shared plot, narrative, thematic and/or aesthetic elements. Academic debates heavily theorize the dividing lines between genres, modes, forms, formats, or media as classificatory systems. However, other stakeholders rarely use terms like mode, instead incorporating the concept under "genre," and the distinctions between genre and medium are often based on "commonsense definitions" rather than rigorous categorization. Second, "genre" collectively refers to fantasy and science fiction, and sometimes horror. This usage is particularly common in the US film and television industry, though it also appears within the fantasy and science fiction literary communities and fandoms. While "SFF" (sometimes "SFFH," when the acronym includes horror) is commonly used in writing, the more pronounceable "genre" proves valuable in verbal communication. Third, "genre" as a shortened form of literature's "genre fiction" is used to refer to a more inclusive list of genres. In addition to SFFH, these genres include crime, spy, western, romance, adventure, and sometimes historical fiction.[55] Genre is invoked here as a contrast to literary fiction, which is perceived as being "anti-genre, the category made up of works that defy categorization":[56] genre is differentiated by how visible its identities are perceived to be.[57] In this usage of genre, the term can be meant neutrally to refer to works whose generic identities are announced

[52] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 144.
[53] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 169.
[54] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 165–166.
[55] Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (London: Routledge, 2004), 42.; John Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 1.
[56] Rieder, 56.
[57] Gelder, 42.

"loudly and unambiguously."[58] However, it can also be used pejoratively, framing these genres as formulaic, repetitive, and unimaginative, particularly in contrast to "proper" works of art. These added value judgements create a slightly different definition of the term even when it is used to refer to the same grouping of genres. This pejorative variant also appears with the more SFF/SFFH-focused meaning of the term, though often with an added connotation of disapproval at the lack of realism and perceived escapism of the genres in question. (These concerns about realism and escapism will be explored further in the next chapter.) Outwith academic stakeholders, "genre" is highly context-dependent: its usage could draw on any of these three definitions and their variants, and it can be difficult to determine which usage is intended by the speaker. Particularly in the case of the latter two definitions, unless the context explicitly refers to a genre that is not SFFH, it may not be clear how many genres are included in the term and therefore what definition is being invoked. These definitional confusions and value judgement variants make contestation a core element of how "genre" itself operates in discourses.

The framework of contestation is particularly apt for fantasy, a genre with an extensive history of marginalization and definitional debate. Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines note that "fantasy is typically criticized for being the lowbrow, popular, pulp, childish and lightweight poor relation of more highbrow, grownup and serious forms based on the realist (mimetic) arts."[59] This hierarchy between genres like fantasy and science fiction, and more mimetic genres has resulted in "a complex of critical and social attitudes that have come to influence factors as disparate as authors' contracts, book design, the placement of popular reviews, the teaching of the genre, and literary fellowships and awards."[60] Fantasy has historically been maligned and separated from more mainstream genres and perceived as having less critical value in literature; as fantasy spread into new media, this attitude spread along with it. Altman notes that "Most generic labels carry sufficient prestige that they are retained for the designation of newly formed genres, even when they are only partially appropriate."[61] Fantasy is susceptible to being on the receiving end of this strategic discourse: because the genre lacks "sufficient prestige," stakeholders are incentivized to identify fantasy texts with other genre labels that carry more prestige, which can create contestation about whether the genre exists and what aesthetics it comprises. As Butler notes:

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[58] Gelder, 42.
[59] Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines, *Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 2012), 2.
[60] Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 47.
[61] Altman, 80.

> Put the question about fantasy's generic status to a representative of the film industry and you might receive a straightforward 'yes'. […] But put the same question about whether fantasy can be considered a genre to a film academic and you are likely to receive an answer in the negative."[62]

This often open disagreement between stakeholders over whether and how to define fantasy makes it a rich candidate for exploring genre contestation. Altman argues:

> There is sufficient cultural agreement on the existence and nature of certain genres to subtend clear understanding […] Unfortunately, genre theories have all too often been based almost exclusively on such special cases. Ironically, a more satisfactory understanding of genre may be built around generic miscommunication, for it is precisely in the apparent contradictions between differing genre practices that genre's discursive investment becomes apparent.[63]

Fantasy is a critical case study for illuminating the practices and principles by which genre operates *because* of the plethora of generic miscommunications that are central to its construction. Not only is contestation an ideal lens for researching fantasy, but fantasy is an ideal lens for researching contestation and genre.

Televising Genre Contestation

Not only is fantasy an ideal case study for understanding genre, but so is television. As discussed in the introduction, television studies has been slow to develop fantasy-specific studies, with the genre more often included in broader groupings like cult television and telefantasy that tend to focus on science fiction and horror. This lack of scholarship on fantasy television is influenced by three factors that complicate the study of television genre: serialization, genre importations across media, and genre mixing.

As a serialized television series progresses, it can evolve and change genres, with these textual evolutions complicating the discussion of which genre labels are discursively relevant. Graeme Turner observes that there is a chance that "the cumulative effect of repeated tweaking of the format and content amounts to a change in genre."[64] *Lost* (2004–2010), for example, was frequently associated with science fiction by various genre stakeholders in its earlier seasons[65]

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[62] David Butler, *Fantasy Cinema: Impossible Worlds on Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2009), 17–18.
[63] Altman, 111.
[64] Graeme Turner, "Genre, Hybridity and Mutation," in *The Television Genre Book*, 3rd ed., ed. Glen Creeber (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.
[65] Angela Ndalianis observes an ongoing tension with the series's generic identity in its earlier seasons, as the series "deliberately teases the viewer with fixing its affiliation to science fiction." SF was frequently invoked within the text, making it a popular lens through which to view the series, but the genre identity was never simple or clear. Angela Ndalianis, "*Lost* in Genre: Chasing the White Rabbit to Find a White Polar Bear," in *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, ed. Roberta Pearson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 184.

but was perceived as shifting more firmly towards fantasy in its later seasons.[66] These kinds of genre changes can complicate discussions of genre: some stakeholders may not watch all seasons and will have a different experience of the series's genre, and some may be angered or alienated by genre changes. Mittell notes that "fans can overly focus on the particular genres that they feel define the show, rejecting the other aspects that fall outside their pleasurable horizons."[67] Fans and critics who perceive the shift to fantasy as a violation of the genre contract established in the earlier seasons of *Lost* may reject the label of fantasy, viewing the change less as the inclusion of a new genre and more as a downturn in the series's quality: rather than the series becoming fantasy, it became a poor example of science fiction. Others may associate fantasy with the series but use genre as a value-laden explanation for a perceived change in the quality: the series became bad when it became fantasy. Serialization adds complexity to the study of genre both because the evolving texts themselves create contestation surrounding the generic identity of series, and because stakeholders can use these labels to indicate their judgements of quality and their allegiance toward a particular genre.

In other instances, the question of genre raised by a series may be an intentional component of the text intended to foster viewer investment. Robin Nelson describes the generic identity of both versions of *Life on Mars* (UK, 2006–2007) (US, 2008–2009) as an "ongoing serial narrative enigma" as viewers are invited to question whether the protagonist has travelled through time or is dreaming the events of the series while in a coma.[68] Genre in these cases becomes an aspect of what Matt Hills refers to as the perpetuated hermeneutic: a mystery whose endlessly delayed answer constitutes a core aspect of the text.[69] The genre of *Life on Mars* is left as a question that viewers must continue watching in order to answer. Though long-running series or franchises in other media can be confronted with similar questions, the complexity of genre becomes an unavoidable part of serialized fantasy television series. For anthology series, this genre complexity is baked into their structure. Series like *The Twilight Zone* draw on different sets of genres in each episode, creating contestation between a single episode and the overall series, and between stakeholders who may focus on some episodes and genres over others. The breadth of genres housed in series, particularly long-running series, makes the study of television genre complex and well-suited for analyzing contestation.

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[66] Sue Short, *Cult Telefantasy Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 127.
[67] Jason Mittell, "*Lost*," in *The Television Genre Book*, 3rd ed., ed. Glen Creeber (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 15.
[68] Robin Nelson, "*Life on Mars*: Genre Hybridity with a Twist," in *The Television Genre Book*, 3rd ed., ed. Glen Creeber (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10.
[69] Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 117.

A second aspect of television scholarship that makes its genre theory particularly complex is the importation of genre definitions from other media. As Neale notes:

> Radio, film, written fiction, theatre, journalism, music and other art and media forms have all played an important part in television and its history. The ways in which genre has figured in these forms, and in the theories and debates that have surrounded them, has had an important effect on theories and debates about genre and television itself.[70]

While not all of this borrowing is problematic, theories that are not adapted to the new medium are not always appropriate or applicable. Altman observes that "film genre's consistent connections to the entire production-distribution-consumption process make it a broader concept than literary theory has typically been."[71] In turn, television genre's repeated connections to this process, with an episode-by-episode feedback loop between the production team, studios, channels, and viewers shaping and developing series as they unfold, makes television genre a broader concept than film genre theory typically has been. Mittell notes that "genre theory, as produced within literary and film studies, has trouble accounting for many of the specific industry and audience practices unique to television."[72] Scholars like Neale and Mittell argue that the focus on specific narratives as a defining feature of genres—an aspect of genre theory imported from literature and film—does not translate well to television genre theory. Televisual narrative on an episodic level may differ from narrative on the season level, and some episodes may adopt a genre and narrative that is otherwise absent from the rest of the series (such as a single musical episode in an otherwise non-musical series). The emphasis on narrative can also exclude entire genres: Neale and Mittell focus on how this emphasis fails to account for non-narrative genres, such as game shows and talk shows, but it can equally fail to account for genres that are not defined by or do not draw on common narratives. Butler identifies the breadth of "narrative situations" utilized in fantasy texts as one of the key difficulties in defining the genre:[73] this is a genre, after all, that (depending on how one defines fantasy) includes narratives as diverse as that of *Pushing Daisies* (2007–2009), *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), and *The Good Place* (2016–2020). The priorities of literary and cinematic genre theory are not only generally ill-suited to television genre but particularly ill-suited to fantasy television.

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[70] Steve Neale, "Television and Genre," in *The Television Genre Book*, 3rd ed., ed. Glen Creeber (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 5.
[71] Altman, 15.
[72] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 1.
[73] Butler, 18.

The confusion caused by importing definitions of genre from other media extends to specific genre definitions. Butler notes that "Fantasy for the contemporary film industry has tended to crystallise around a combination of Tolkien/Conan/Harry Potter/Dungeons & Dragons sword and sorcery but […] that is only a small aspect of fantasy's range."[74] Helen Young observes that popular conceptions of fantasy, particularly amongst people who do not often consume fantasy texts, are strongly linked with the Middle Ages;[75] the white, Eurocentric medieval aesthetic common in literary subgenres like high fantasy and sword and sorcery dominates the perception of what fantasy is. However, these are only two subgenres within fantasy literature, and their medium of origin is crucial to their prevalence. As literature does not have to render its fantasy elements audiovisually, these subgenres are no more expensive to depict than any other fantasy subgenre. In film and television, particularly in television due to the greater constraints of budget and time, high fantasy and sword and sorcery become more difficult to produce and are largely only seen when adapted from another medium like literature.[76] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan emphasizes that all media have specific properties that "open up possibilities and impose constraints which [...] shape the narration, the text, and even the story."[77] Genres that are introduced into a new medium will shift and transform as they respond to the possibilities and constraints of that medium. Trying to import a definition of a genre into a different medium, particularly one that can be expensive and complex to produce, can complicate attempts to understand how genres actually manifest in that medium. This struggle disproportionately impacts television as a relatively new medium in comparison with literature and film;[78] television scholars often attempt to retrofit established literary and film theories to television, but do not always properly account for textual and/or industrial differences between the media in question. The importation of definitions from other media creates new sites of contestation between media, making television genre particularly rife for analysis of contestation.

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[74] Butler, 41.
[75] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 64.
[76] An exception is *Galavant*, a parody of sword and sorcery that was, notably, short-lived.
[77] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "How the Model Neglects the Medium: Linguistics, Language and the Crisis of Narratology," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 19, no. 1 (1989): 160, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30225242.
[78] This issue of retrofitting theory is not solely suffered by newer media. Patrick D. Murphy and Maria Arvaniti have observed a lack of research on fantasy theatre, a gap in the literature resulting from an overemphasis on realism in theatre scholarship. Though theatre predates literature, theatre is marginalized in fantasy studies in part because scholarship on fantasy literature predates that on fantasy theatre; theatre scholars, like television scholars, have to retrofit fantasy literary theory to their medium. Patrick D. Murphy, introduction to *Staging the Impossible: The Fantastic Mode in Modern Drama*, ed. Patrick Murphy (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 2.; Maria Arvaniti, *All the Worlds on Stage: A Defense of Fantasy Theatre* (master's dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2018), 9.

The final aspect of television that makes it a particularly apt medium for the study of contestation is the perception of a unique prevalence of genre mixing. Genre mixing, more commonly referred to as genre hybridity, is one of most persistent arguments used against genre theory, particularly with regards to television. Mittell summarizes this mindset: "According to traditional accounts of generic mixture, the process of blending two (or more) genres together results in a dilution of generic categories— as genres become less pure, they lose their distinction and their usefulness."[79] Genre mixing is frequently framed as a postmodern genre problem, treated as a recent development that renders the study of genre outdated. However, scholars like Altman, Neale, and Staiger point out that there has been genre mixing throughout the history of Hollywood filmmaking, and Rosalie Colie emphasizes the existence of genre mixing as far back as Renaissance literature.[80] This history calls into question the notion that genre purity has ever existed or been a realistic standard to hold genre to. It also reveals that, though television scholars may be the most concerned about the presence of genre mixing in their texts, it is hardly unique to the medium.

Mittell argues against viewing mixing as a hindrance to the study of television genre, framing it instead as an aid. As he describes it:

> genre mixing becomes a site of heightened genre discourse— industrial personnel, critics, and audience members spend more energy linking a mixed program like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997– 2003) to genre categories than more "pure" teen dramas like *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990– 2000). Even within texts themselves, mixed-genre programs like *Buffy* explicitly highlight and draw upon generic assumptions as they are placed in juxtaposition with other genres.[81]

Genre mixing brings the variety of genres present in or attributed to a series to the forefront of both the text and the discourses surrounding the text, making genre a more visible frame of reference. Indeed, the problem that mixing creates for genre theory may have less to do with the reality of genre mixing and more to do with the academic framing of these mixes as hybrids. Mittell argues that

> hybridity suggests a defined and bounded practice of crossbreeding— two species are combined, creating a hybrid. But generic practices are ongoing and disparate, not tied to a single act of combination to create a static hybrid. Thus, the term 'genre mixing' is more indicative of an ongoing process of generic combination and interplay, not rooted in biological notions of taxonomic purity.[82]

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[79] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 150.
[80] Rosalie L. Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 114.
[81] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 150.
[82] Mittell, *Genre and Television*, 147–8.

Consistent mixing of the same genres in multiple series may occasionally create a new subgenre, such as "monster of the week," the combination of science fiction and/or fantasy elements with episodic procedurals, or "science fantasy," the combination of fantasy with a stereotypically science fiction aesthetic. However, the mixed genres continue to operate distinctly in a series, and the interplay between them highlights their roles in the text and discourses about the texts. In recognition of the differences between hybridity and mixing, and in order to more accurately reflect how mixed genres operate, this thesis follows Mittell's example, using genre mixing over genre hybridity.

Although genre mixing has long been misrepresented in genre scholarship, it is nevertheless a crucial dimension of contested genres. The presence of multiple genres adds complexity to discourses as stakeholders debate which genre labels are the most relevant in a variety of contexts. Genre mixing particularly complicates the discussion of fantasy; rather than engaging with the contested territory between the genres, many scholars use the hybridity argument to avoid engaging with discursive boundaries or distinctions between fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Instead, umbrella terms like telefantasy are invoked. However, fantasy scholars like Katherine A. Fowkes note that

> It is imperative to see the profound relationship between science fiction, horror, and modern fantasy, but at the same time fantasy has certainly carved out a separate niche at the level of story, drawing on roots that long preceded the Industrial Revolution and the advent of science fiction.[83]

While there are texts that have been identified by stakeholders as both fantasy and science fiction, such as *Lost* and *Stranger Things* (2016–Present), there are equally series like *Game of Thrones* and *Pushing Daisies* where such discussions on the unclear division between science fiction and fantasy are less relevant and are not brought up in discourses. Dismissing fantasy as a valid genre for discussing a series like *Game of Thrones* because fantasy and science fiction mix in a series like *Stranger Things* ignores the "separate niche" fantasy has carved out for itself. Notably, the apparently thin and confusing boundaries between fantasy, science fiction, and horror only serve to slow research on one of these genres; horror and science fiction television have individual monographs to their names, with science fiction even enjoying a dedicated journal for the study of *Science Fiction Film and Television*. The genre hybridity argument has been used to target and limit only the study of fantasy, harkening back to Butler's argument about the squeezing out of fantasy in place of science fiction and horror.

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[83] Katherine A. Fowkes, *The Fantasy Film* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 53.

The use of telefantasy is not a problem in and of itself. Scholars like Catherine Johnson use the category to illuminate crucial similarities between fantasy, science fiction, and horror, examining how they build fictional worlds, deviate from the "consensus reality," and maintain fervent audiences. However, there are limits to the supergenre's usefulness for a cultural approach to genre, as the term is used largely only by scholars and is virtually unrecognized outside of specific scholarly fields. While telefantasy can prove useful for research that looks for genre in texts, it has limited relevance to research that looks for genre in discourses. More problematic is the way that telefantasy scholars struggle at times to utilize genre terminology with sufficient scholarly rigor, invoking contested genre terminology without acknowledging the contestation, justifying their usage, or defining their terms. Scholars sometimes use a single genre term to refer to the whole of telefantasy, such as Christine Mains using "science fiction" as an umbrella term for a variety of telefantasy series without explaining this usage.[84] In cases like this, the lack of context given to genre labels is merely a surface-level criticism, raising questions about the rigor of terminology research but not impacting the deeper logic of the arguments being made. In other cases, the lack of definitional rigor can undermine the argument itself. Lynn Spigel, in her discussion of 1960s "magicoms" like *Bewitched* (1964–1972) and *I Dream of Jeannine* (1965–1970), frames the rise of these domestic fantasy comedies as influenced by the space race, arguing that the "merge of science and domesticity thus became a conventional way of thinking about the fantastic voyage into space."[85] This argument assumes that depictions of witches and genies performing magic are influenced by real-world discussions about the science behind space travel. Spigel justifies the connection by insisting that

> Although these sitcoms were not science fiction narratives per se, they engaged elements of science fiction fantasy for similar purposes. Rather than portraying the future, the fantastic sitcoms presented critical views of contemporary suburban life by using tropes of science fiction to make the familial strange.[86]

Although she acknowledges that these series are "not science fiction 'per se,'" she then tries to brand them as science fiction in the same sentence by claiming them as "science fiction fantasy" series that use the "tropes of science fiction." This attempt to force series into an association with a certain genre weakens the overall argument, particularly given the lack of definitions

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[84] Christine Mains, "'Dreams Teach': (Im)Possible Worlds in Science Fiction Television," in *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader*, ed. J. P. Telotte (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 143.
[85] Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 122.
[86] Spigel, 122.

offered for the genres involved. This is by no means a problem unique to Spigel: critics like Tom Long use the terms science fiction and fantasy as synonyms without acknowledging the distinct histories between them or addressing the choice of usage.[87] The imprecision with which these genre terms are used by some television scholars can undermine the credibility of their scholarship, indicating a lack of understanding of the terms, contexts, and histories of key subjects.

Those who do engage with potential distinctions between fantasy and science fiction choose a plethora of ways to draw those distinctions. A common theoretical division follows along the lines suggested by Fowkes, who emphasizes that with fantasy:

> the audience must at the very least perceive an "ontological rupture"—a break between what the audience agrees is "reality" and the fantastic phenomena that define the narrative world. The word "rupture" distinguishes the fantastic elements in fantasy from those in science fiction, where fantastic phenomena are ostensibly extrapolations or extensions of rational, scientific principles.[88]

Scholars from Russ to Gary K. Wolfe generally separate fantasy and science fiction based on whether they attempt to position the impossible elements of the story as probable. This distinction can even become an element of text: Rod Serling summarizes the difference in an episode of *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964) as "science fiction, the improbable made possible; fantasy, the impossible made probable."[89] However, other critics offer different distinctions, such as Darko Suvin's infamous assertion that SF is tied to estrangement and cognition while fantasy is not.[90] Other theories focus less on clear definition and instead wax poetic about the philosophical implications of the genres in question, as in Thomas H. Keeling's assertion that SF, in contrast to fantasy, "assumes that the scientific perspective—even though it is imperfect and is the frequent cause of our crises—is still our best tool in dealing with those environments."[91] Wolfe observes that science fiction "has been defined so frequently that there is little critical consensus as to which works might be included or excluded":[92] the volume of academic discourse on definitions has contributed to the contestation surrounding these genres.

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[87] See Tom Long, "TV Fantasy and How It Grew," *Television Quarterly* 33, no. 2/3 (2002).
[88] Fowkes, 5.
[89] *The Twilight Zone*, season 3, episode 25, "The Fugitive," directed by Richard L. Bare, written by Charles Beaumont, aired March 9, 1962, on CBS.
[90] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, ed. Gerry Canavan (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016), 21.
[91] Thomas H. Keeling, "Science Fiction and the Gothic," in *Bridges to Science Fiction*, eds. George R. Guffey and Mark Rose (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 117.
[92] Wolfe, 108.

This thesis does not attempt to argue for any particular definitions of science fiction and fantasy. Rather, it examines whether and how the various genre stakeholders might draw a distinction between fantasy and science fiction, and how the genres' co-occurrence influences genre discourses surrounding fantasy, particularly given science fiction's propensity to dominate the conversation in academia.

Conclusion

As this chapter has explored, scholarly work on genre is rife with contestation, though it is rarely framed as such. The ritual, ideological, aesthetic, and cultural approaches are used to apply different definitions and uses to the idea of genre itself, forming conflicting discourses that reflect the argumentative needs of the scholars who author them. Differing umbrella terms, supergenres, subgenres, genres, and even media are employed and defined according to the scholar's needs. Contestation itself is admitted and navigated in conflicting ways depending on the scholar. While scholars tend to position their methods and terminology as rooted purely in logic and rigorous argument, genre scholarship would be richer for acknowledging that scholars are stakeholders, and their arguments just one of many examples of genre discourses. Rather than neutral parties, academics are invested in particular approaches to genres and (in some cases) to specific genres themselves. Their investments directly shape their methodologies, but their impact is rarely acknowledged. Scholars may admit to being fans of a genre, or to having a genre as a research interest, but they rarely take the extra step of explicitly acknowledging the incentives that those personal interests give them to research or construct arguments in particular ways.

I offer the transparency of my own investments in the hopes that future genre scholarship follows my lead. I am a lifelong fantasy and television fan, particularly fantasy television. My undergraduate education and subsequent (brief) industry work focused on writing fantasy television, fostering an interest in how media industries produce and understand fantasy television. I have a master's degree in fantasy and, as of the writing, am the editor-in-chief of a fantasy journal and on the organizing committee of a fantasy conference. These six stakeholder roles of viewer, reader, writer, editor, event organizer, and academic shape my scholarly investment in fantasy television, and incentivize me towards a methodology informed by media industry studies and discourse analysis. This thesis is a rigorously researched analysis of the genre discourses of multiple industry stakeholders. But it is also itself a discourse: inevitably and crucially shaped by my investment, needs, and interests as a genre stakeholder.

Altman argues that genres are authored; by writing and researching this thesis, I admit myself as one of its many authors.

Chapter Two

Incentivizing Contestation: The Cultural and Commercial Value of Fantasy and Television

PETER
Carl, your passion is admirable, but worlds coming to life on television? None of the good stuff is on TV. TV is…

SOL
TV is shit! It's for morons!

—Craig Mazin, *Mythic Quest*, "Backstory!"

Before delving into the specific sites of contestation that form the industrial case studies of this thesis, it is crucial to establish the cultural and commercial values that contribute to that contestation, aside from the definitional challenges explored in the previous chapter. The values ascribed to notions of realism, escapism, activity, and passivity have influenced the legitimacy granted to fantasy, television, and fantasy television. The historical devaluation of both genre and medium within the United States incentivizes stakeholders to exercise caution around these labels, particularly when the labels co-exist. Paradoxically, the processes of legitimation that have taken place over the past decades have served to cement this devaluation further, keeping contestation central to discourses despite the apparent commercial embrace of fantasy television. Fantasy television can be named, but only if it makes excuses for its genre and medium.

This chapter offers an overview of the cultural and commercial values that have shaped discourses around fantasy, television, and fantasy television in the US. The chapter first explores how attitudes towards fantasy have been influenced by notions of realism and escapism, giving the genre a starring role in multiple moral panics. It then examines how similar debates around activity and passivity have impacted the devaluation of television, before moving on to analyze how the assumed (devalued) audiences of fantasy and television have compounded the cultural and commercial value ascribed to them. It closes by exploring how these values have shaped the trajectory of fantasy television's legitimation, particularly when the two devalued subjects of fantasy and television overlap. This context of how and why that genre and medium are devalued is crucial for understanding why contestation surrounding fantasy television is so rife, and illustrates why US fantasy television in particular is such a fruitful subject for exploring contestation.

Panic! At the Realism vs. Escapism Debate: The Cultural Value of Fantasy

Part of what makes the US a rich case study for analyzing fantasy television is the country's fraught history with fiction, and the ways in which that history informs its relationship to fantasy and television. US American attitudes toward fiction are born from a confluence of Enlightenment, Puritan, Victorian, and capitalist ideals, which fuel the moral judgements behind cultural values associated with leisure time and imagination. These individual forces are not unique to the US: Alexander Sergeant argues that "European intellectual society created the necessary conditions for a fantasy genre of storytelling to emerge due to its historic struggle with the problem of what to do with the imagination when it comes to art."[1] Enlightenment discomfort with blatant nonreality and imagination necessitated the discursive construction of fantasy as a distinct genre. However, the ways in which these Enlightenment, Puritan, Victorian, and capitalist values combined and fed off one another in the US created a heightened, nationally specific anti-fantasy sentiment. This sentiment stands in contrast to a country like the United Kingdom, which has a long history of embracing the fantastic in literature and on screens, particularly with its televisual ghost stories.[2] National specificity is crucial for understanding the precise ways contestation operates within a cultural and industrial context.[3] In fantasy scholarship, the bias against the genre is often taken as given by US American scholars instead of explicitly rooted in specific cultural values and discourses. The stark cultural division between the real and unreal, and reality and imagination is specific (albeit not unique) to the Anglosphere,[4] and these divisions are core to whether and how fantasy is defined as a distinct genre instead of, as Richard Mathews puts it, being "more comfortably incorporated into mainstream literature."[5] These cultural discomforts not only fed into the creation of fantasy, but continue to be articulated in and to inform the present conception of genre.

The cumulation of these cultural ideals has encouraged a historic privileging of realism that is still felt to this day, with Warner Berthoff claiming that "the great collective event in

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[1] Sergeant, 11.
[2] Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 28.
[3] For example, Erin Mercer's work on non-realist genres of New Zealand literature explores the way that New Zealand's publishing industry and evolving discourses of cultural nationalism influenced genre contestation. Though she does not use the term contestation, her exploration of conflict over genre terms offers crucial insights into genre, publishing, and postcolonial national identity within New Zealand, enabled by her research's national specificity. See Erin Mercer, *Telling the Real Story: Genre and New Zealand Literature* (Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press, 2017).
[4] Alexander Sergeant, *Encountering the Impossible: The Fantastic in Hollywood Fantasy Cinema* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021), 11.
[5] Richard Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 20.

[US] American letters during the 1880s and 1890s was the securing of 'realism' as the dominant standard of value."[6] The term realism is itself highly contested and, although it is often invoked as if it is an objective replication of reality, scholars like John Fiske point out that realism is in fact ideological: an argument for what specific groups of people believe is real or would like to be real, rather than an unbiased truth.[7] This thesis does not focus on the contestation and debates surrounding realism, but rather on how realism is discursively framed as a standard of value in direct opposition to fantasy. This privileging of realism has a long history, with scholars like Sergeant and Kathryn Hume finding its roots in Plato and Aristotle, who argued for mimesis as a standard that fiction should aim for.[8] Other scholars point to more recent origins, with Mathews arguing that "the literary paths of realism and fantasy began to diverge in the 1600s as new systems of learning from the Renaissance brought about a rejection of superstition in favor of science and reason."[9] Tension with realism is not unique to fantasy: Frederic Jameson notes that realism has had many potential opponents, such as romance,[10] epic, melodrama, modernism, and even other types of realism, with conflict between bourgeois and socialist realism.[11] As a standard of value, realism is treated as the metric against which fiction is judged, often resulting in stakeholders trying to frame fiction they are invested in as somehow related to one of the many definitions of realism.

These competitions to align themselves with realism are even expressed within genres that fall under the science fiction, fantasy, and horror [SFFH] umbrella. Science fiction stakeholders often discursively tie the genre to science and therefore to reality in order to claim cultural value for the genre and legitimate it. Among texts that cannot or do not make a claim to scientific grounding, there is often emphasis put on other arguably realist elements of the text, such as the human characters (often framed as relatable) or the emotional storylines and character arcs (also known as emotional realism, which will be explored in greater depth in chapter five). As Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller observe, "Magic is, of course, acceptable, but only if it is contained within a rational setting. Thus, magical *realism* is highly praised by

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[6] Warner Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 1.
[7] John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2nd ed. (Routledge: London, 2011), 36.
[8] Sergeant, 11–12.; Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (London: Routledge, 2014), 5.
[9] Mathews, 2.
[10] Romance is itself contested. The nineteenth century use was often invoked as a broad opposition to realism or the novel itself, while the twenty-first century definition tends to focus on romantic love. Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History, and Propaganda, 1880—1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 12.; Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 103.
[11] Frederic Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 2.

the academic establishment. Magical fantasy is not" [emphasis in original].[12] Stakeholders who wish to claim a link between a text and realism are more inclined to label it as science fiction or magical realism,[13] sometimes regardless of the actual content of the text. When realism is the standard of value, fantasy can be, and has been, a dirty word.

This concern about realism is often expressed through debates about escapism, with fantasy texts accused by many stakeholders of enabling readers, viewers, listeners, and gamers to escape reality in favor of a fictional world or their own imaginations. As Sergeant argues:

> In a society dominated by rationalism and realism, we are taught not to value these experiences, at least not out loud. Instead, we ghettoize them into a leisure time in which we are able to "switch our brains off" (which of course we can never do), and to talk about that time only through how it relates to the world of reality.[14]

In some cases, the distrust of fantasy is born from a demonization of passive viewer behavior, which is rooted in Puritan, Victorian, and capitalist ideals that valorize productivity and denigrate leisure time.[15] If a fantasy text does not deal with reality and encourage active behaviors, it is at best a trivial use of time and at worst a dangerous enabling of delusion. Some of this concern about passivity is simply rooted in moral judgements about the physical act of leisure, but other times it is further inflected by fears that "passive" viewers do not engage critical thinking in their exposure to fantasy texts. They are conceived of as vulnerable to absorbing "bad" messages or taking the fantastic narratives literally, echoing the ideological approach to genre theory discussed in the previous chapter. Escape, in this conception, is dangerous because of the possibility that viewers may learn the values of a fictional world and absorb them uncritically. These alternate values and ideas are often framed as a danger to current society, but as Joseph P. Laycock argues:

> Hegemony can be resisted only if we can imagine new possibilities. In this sense, fantasy role-playing games, along with novels, film, and other imaginary worlds,

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[12] Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller, introduction to *Fantasy Fiction into Film: Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2007), 1.

[13] Magical realism is itself a highly contested genre. Frequently understood as a postcolonial (often specifically Latin American) and literary genre with a more ambiguous relationship between reality and nonreality, there is fraught debate over the use of magical realism as an alternative label for fantasy. Some fantasy authors and critics perceive the label as attempting to paper over fantasy with a literary quality, and some magical realist authors and critics perceive the label as a misapplied attempt at legitimation and, in some cases, as cultural appropriation. Ursula Kluwick, "Magic and the Literary Market," in *Magical Realism and Literature*, eds. Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 340, 351.

[14] Sergeant, 31.

[15] Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 27.; Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 14.; Steven Starker, *Evil Influences: Crusades Against the Mass Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 178.

> provide mental agency. Moral entrepreneurs interpreted this agency as subversion and a deliberate attempt to undermine traditional values. While fantasy is not an inherent threat to tradition, as long as humans possess imagination, tradition will never be secure. It is for this reason that fiction and fantasy have been regarded as especially dangerous in the hands of those members of society deemed most important to control, such as children, women, and adolescents.[16]

Stakeholders who claim to be concerned about passivity may in fact be concerned about the fragility of the status quo, particularly if they feel that they hold power in the current system. While criticisms of escapism discursively claim to fear passivity, they may be fueled by a fear of activity.

These concerns over the active behaviors that escapism allegedly enables are illustrated by the moral panics in the US surrounding fantasy texts, most infamously in the 1980s when tabletop role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons [D&D] was accused of being a satanic cult and in the early 2000s when Harry Potter books were burned for containing witchcraft. As Laycock observes about the critiques of D&D:

> Christian critics claimed that fantasy role-playing games were not simply an unwholesome form of media but a deviant religion. Playing these games, they claimed, was not really leisure but a religious practice in which players knowingly or unknowingly conducted rituals in the service of "occult" deities.[17]

These moral panics frame escapism as a dangerous way for players to avoid reality, or more specifically evangelical Christian doctrine, by engaging actively in their own "occult" religion. Similarly, book-burning critics of the Harry Potter books were concerned that the children's books would serve as instruction manuals for occult practices.[18] The active engagement that fantasy fans can have with texts—whether that engagement is the act of reading a book or playing a D&D campaign as intended, or the extratextual fannish activities that are often associated with SFF fandom—is treated by some stakeholders with suspicion because of the way it is perceived as replacing more "acceptable" active behaviors.

These concerns about active behaviors also exist outwith religious concerns about fantasy's link with Satanism and the occult. As Steve Starker puts it, the levels of excitement that drive fans' extratextual behaviors are pejoratively framed as "over-involvement" and sometimes pathologized,[19] with moral judgements translated into unsubstantiated mental

[16] Laycock, 215.
[17] Laycock, 22.
[18] Brian Attebery, "Burning Harry Potter and Other Ways of Misreading Fantasy" (public lecture), January 21, 2019, University of Glasgow, https://echo360.org.uk/media/5c053d99-da43-455f-94f3-7c52fde78153/public.
[19] Starker, 175.

health diagnoses. Enthusiastic fan behaviors are often culturally framed as undesirable and obsessive and the people who engage in them subjected to criticism and derision. While this fan behavior occurs in response to many genres, it has been strongly linked to science fiction and fantasy fans, particularly with regards to how these fans relate to fictional storyworlds.[20] Rick Marin illustrates this attitude in a 1990 description of *Quantum Leap* fans as "cult-vulnerable youth" who "have nerdily memorized every time-traveling, holographic, quantum-physical detail of the show's first season."[21] The active behavior of fans is derided as obsessive and cultish because they are invested in the details of a world that does not and cannot exist; this same level of investment in details of the real world does not tend to be derided in the same way. Escapism and the absence of realism are vilified for encouraging both passive and active behaviors, leaving fantasy wholly unacceptable for its assumed departures from the real world no matter how its readers behave.

In response to these accusations, stakeholders who are invested in fantasy tend to respond in one of two ways: denying the escapism or valorizing it. Those who deny escapism claim that fantasy enables its creators to tell stories about real world issues in unfamiliar or metaphoric ways, in some cases by avoiding outright censorship or in others by more vaguely avoiding viewers' preconceived notions. Fantasy is not escapist, according to these views, because it enables more realistic stories to be told that could not be otherwise. Realism is still treated as the standard of value, but in this case it is a standard that fantasy is positioned as meeting more successfully than mimetic texts. Other stakeholders, rather than denying escapism, claim and valorize it. Critics and prominent fantasy writers like J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin, and Neil Gaiman reject escapism as a criticism, with Le Guin infamously arguing:

> Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? […] if we value the freedom of the mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can.[22]

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[20] The association of fandom with SFF is not unfounded. Derek Kompare argues that "The origin story of organized fandom in most Western cultures is of young, overwhelmingly white, educated middle-class men writing science fiction for print publications like Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, which would then publish letters from fans […] and help publicize fan gatherings and other publications." Derek Kompare, "Fan Curators and the Gateways Into Fandom," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, eds. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2018), 110.

[21] Rick Marin, "'Leap' on without me; 'quantum' falls short," *The Washington Times*, June 25, 1990, E1.

[22] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 204.

In this conception, escapism is not only framed as a positive but as a duty, offering safe haven from reality and realism. Notions of escapism, and fantasy's relationship with realism and reality, are rarely discussed as neutral. No matter which argument they choose, stakeholders are discursively defending fantasy's departure from realism, either by positioning fantasy as realist or as better than realist. Attempts to argue for the legitimacy of fantasy remain closely tied to its relationship with realism. Attebery argues that "One way to avoid such critical misfirings is to accept that realism and fantasy can coexist in the same text, and that such blended texts are neither inherently superior nor inferior to stories made up primarily of one mode or the other."[23] However, these arguments are still relatively rare, and the continued centrality of realism to the debate reenforces its position as the standard of value, and a source of significant discursive contestation as stakeholders attempt to juggle the terms and connotations of fantasy and realism.

Undervalued Potato Chips: Activity and Passivity Discourses on Television

These concerns about realism and escapism become particularly crucial in discourses surrounding fantasy television because of the similar ways these cultural values have impacted television since its inception. In many ways, these concerns are not unique: Starker, Marshall McLuhan, and William Boddy have all observed that new media tend to be received with suspicion and at times moral panic, often recycling similar rhetoric about the threat that a new medium poses to society.[24] Starker argues that each new media form has been declared a threat to the "character and mental abilities of children, the behavior of teenagers, the morality and intelligence of adults, and the sanctity of the [US] American way of life."[25] These concerns often predate research into media's effects, and the research that is ultimately produced rarely backs up these concerns, certainly not to the degree of intensity at which they are initially delivered.[26] Television, as with many new media, has been blamed for society's perceived ills. In the 1960s and 1970s, critics liked Daniel Boorstin and Jerry Mander expressed concerns that television would cause viewers to confuse reality and fiction, and make fictional worlds more appealing,[27] while Marie Winn worried that "Not unlike drugs or alcohol, the television

[23] Brian Attebery, *Fantasy: How It Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 29.
[24] Starker, 5.; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical ed. (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2013), 13.; William Boddy, *New Media and the Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9, 43.
[25] Starker, 5.
[26] Starker, 5, 178.
[27] Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 17.

experience allows the participant to blot out the real world and enter into a pleasurable and passive mental state."[28] These passivity concerns about television echo those about fantasy, where "passive" viewers are conceived of as easily swayed by and confused about the distinction between reality and fiction. Perhaps in response to these concerns, networks in the early decades of US television focused on programming that was educational,[29] relevant,[30] and realist (particularly following in the culturally legitimated style of theatrical realism that "emphasized story construction and character relationships.")[31] While these were not the only types of television to be produced, they were forms and cultural ideals that were emphasized in response to claims about television being frivolous, dangerous, and escapist.

Concerns about the dangers posed by television were not limited to or solved by programming but were also linked to the physical object.[32] By virtue of being located in the home, television was regarded by some stakeholders as an incursion threatening domesticity. Lynn Spigel notes that, in the early days of television, the medium was perceived as a potential distraction for women who were expected to be completing household labor, and as a threat to the active leisure activities associated with men.[33] These concerns gave extra fuel to the perceived need for realist and educational programming. Television-viewing as a use of leisure time could be excused if it could claim to serve productive ends. While the specific rhetoric used against television has shifted over time, many of these same concerns can be heard to this day, with devalued series described as "guilty pleasures," "mindless viewing," or "like eating potato chips." For television to be deemed worthy of the time spent on it, it is expected to (claim to) meet certain standards of educational or artistic merit. This type of rhetoric is criticized by scholars like Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine for attempting to legitimate television as a medium by devaluing certain types of programming; however, sometimes these criticisms end up perpetuating the inherent value judgements they are attempting to critique. While the comparison of watching a series to eating potato chips can be used derogatorily, it can also describe a pleasurable viewing experience that does not conform to traditional ideas of productivity, activity, and artistic merit. The tension in these discourses about legitimation illustrates the continued difficulty that academic work on television has with discussing and

[28] Marie Winn, *The Plug-In Drug*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 24.
[29] Newman and Levine, 21.
[30] Newman and Levine, 22.
[31] Spigel, 142.
[32] Starker, 134–135.
[33] Spigel, 87.

analyzing series without being in conversation with or somehow responding to legitimation rhetoric.

Part of these judgement values are rooted in ideas that devalued programs encourage or enable passive viewing, with discourses such as those based on the hypodermic needle theory of media influence espoused by critics like Winn. While the explicit comparison of television to a needle drugging audiences into complacency has lost popularity, the idea behind it persists in subtler forms.[34] Academic stakeholders invested in this school of thought first established by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, with their legacy persisting in screen theory and media effects research, which has led to a defensive response in fields such as fan studies that argue for and champion behaviors associated with active viewers.[35] As Elizabeth Evans argues, regardless of which side of the argument they fall on, academics tend to uphold the cultural devaluation of "passivity" and the behaviors associated with it.[36] This preference for activity over passivity is echoed in the television industry, where active viewers are praised and used by marketing departments to promote their series, as will be explored in chapter three. Stakeholders have assigned scholarly, critical, and commercial value to active television viewership, which is then used to denigrate specific types of programming.

Despite the discursive preference for activity, cultural attitudes toward that activity remain complex, particularly when intersecting with SFF where active viewing practices can be deemed dangerous because of the "escapist" values and storyworlds that viewers are engaging with. In the US, these concerns sometimes build off the discourses of religious moral panic. One of the most infamous contemporary examples is OneMillionMoms.com [1MM],[37] a division of the fundamentalist Christian activist organization American Family Association. 1MM frequently organizes boycotts to "stand against the immorality, violence, vulgarity and profanity the entertainment media is throwing at your children."[38] While they target many genres and media, they have a particular concern about fantasy television, as illustrated in a recent call for a boycott of *Little Demon* (2022–Present):

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[34] Starker, 12.
[35] Elizabeth Evans, *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture* (London: Routledge, 2019), 72.
[36] Evans argues that the binary of passivity and activity is overly simplistic and obscures a nuanced understanding of how viewers actually engage with media. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage with that complexity, the oversimplification of the binary highlights that these categories of so-called passive viewers and active viewers are discursive constructs rather than real behaviors or people. Evans, 73.
[37] While it is unknown how many members 1MM has, the number likely does not exceed 170,000. 1MM puts a loud voice to an extremist cultural movement, but their name gives a misleading sense of their reach. Trudy Ring, "One Million Moms Is a Secretive Antigay Group That Can't Stop Failing," *The Advocate*, October 21, 2019, https://www.advocate.com/media/2019/10/21/one-million-moms-secretive-antigay-group-cant-stop-failing.
[38] "About Us," OneMillionMoms, accessed August 24, 2022, https://onemillionmoms.com/about-us/.

> We must do so because Disney is introducing viewers, including children who might stumble across this series, to a world of demons, witches, and sorcery. Along with the demonic content of this series, the minds of younger viewers will also be inundated with secular worldviews that reflect the current culture.[39]

Once again, there is a concern that engaging with fantasy and media will lead people, particularly children, to actively participate in witchcraft, and that fantasy media will supplant religion. These voices are no longer powerful enough to control programming to the extent that they used to; however, groups like 1MM are still genre stakeholders who explicitly voice persistent cultural concerns about active viewing practices that shape other stakeholders' responses to fantasy television. Even outwith religious concerns, SFF television viewers' activity is judged by the same secular disdain for socially contemptible behavior as in the earlier example from *Quantum Leap*. Despite the long-standing preference among multiple television stakeholders for activity over passivity, there is still significant cultural stigma around that activity when it relates to the "wrong" genres, media, and behaviors. While the boom in popularity of events like San Diego Comic-Con speaks to the rising commercial value of SFF fandom, that rise does not translate instantly or easily to an increase in its cultural value.

The Wrong Viewers: Assumed Audiences

This tension between cultural and commercial value has been a long-standing force shaping fantasy television. The moral panics and pejorative language surrounding fantasy's cultural value have historically consigned it to a niche and, most crucially in the context of television production, to its being *perceived* as niche. On television, particularly pre-1990s when the discursive focus in US programming tended to be on broadcasting to wider audiences, the perception that fantasy only appealed to a narrow audience led to an industry myth about its lack of commercial value. The tension between cultural and commercial value is so well-known that it is even acknowledged by stakeholders in discourses. As writer-producer Ronald D. Moore observes, there is a perception that SFF is

> not to be taken seriously. It's kids' stuff, and yet, I'm going to go pay my ticket for it and see it over and over again, it's my favorite thing in the world. It's this weird kind of, the eggheads and the nerds and the geeks make that stuff and they obsess and get all [He puts on a sneering stereotype of a "nerd" voice] *they talk about the warp drive and it's so stupid* and yet you'll go watch the show and enjoy it [...] there is this weird thing

[39] "Disney and FXX Air New Demonic Series 'Little Demon,'" OneMillionMoms, accessed August 24, 2022, https://onemillionmoms.com/current-campaigns/disney-and-fxx-air-new-demonic-series-little-demon/.

> about science fiction—and fantasy, for that matter—being looked down upon "officially" and yet completely embraced commercially.[40]

Despite the long history of commercial success for fantasy media such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*,[41] and Harry Potter, the genre only began to be perceived as having mainstream commercial value in the 2000s. Prior to that, commercial successes were framed as successful *despite* their genre, whereas commercial failures like *Hook* were perceived as failures *because* of their genre.[42] These myths limited production of fantasy on television, based on concerns that the (assumed) higher costs of producing the genre would not be compensated for with the necessary viewership at a time when US series needed broadcast appeal to be successful. This perception of the lack of commercial value of fantasy television was in part born from the perceived lack of cultural value of fantasy and television. However, when the US television industry moved into an era of narrowcasting, these values were renegotiated, with the shifting commercial value of a niche audience increasing the commercial value of the genre itself. As series like *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) and *The Witcher* (2019–Present) have become commercial successes that are viewed by audiences beyond their perceived niches, the cultural value of the genre has in turn increased (though as this thesis will explore, that cultural value is mitigated by the way some stakeholders will deny that successful series are fantasy). The niche appeal of fantasy has both fueled and been fueled by contestation as stakeholders attempt to negotiate assumptions about the genre's commercial and cultural value.

Part of this niche appeal and cultural devaluation is rooted in who is assumed to be the target audience of fantasy and television: women and children.[43] From its early days as a

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[40] Adam Savage, host, "Ron Moore," September 8, 2017, in *SYFY25: Origin Stories*, produced by SYFY Wire, podcast, iTunes app.

[41] *Star Wars*'s generic status is highly contested, with stakeholders like fans, critics, and scholars debating between fantasy, science fiction, or even science fantasy. By identifying it as fantasy here, I am not arguing for any particular side. Rather, because discourses associate it with all these genres, I argue that they are equally valid, fantasy being the more applicable in this context.

[42] Sergeant, 159.

[43] Fantasy is notably not associated with other culturally devalued audiences, though that lack of association is itself problematic. For example, both fantasy and science fiction are culturally and textually associated with Whiteness. In particular, Black and Native Americans are often ignored as stakeholders in SFF fandom and industry, as well as within the texts themselves: erased from the past, present, and future of both real and imagined worlds. Similar exclusions apply to other groups such as disabled people, with creators and audiences assumed to be able-bodied and with SFF texts often "curing" disabilities with advanced science or magic. These exclusions lead to the creation of subgenres and movements within fantasy such as Africanjujuism and Indigenous futurism that explicitly center perspectives and people who are marginalized within the genre. While discourses about these subgenres are rife in literary circles, they do not have the same currency in television and did not appear within the discourses researched for this thesis. These struggles over assumed audiences offer rich, fraught sites of genre contestation for future research. See Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016).; André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).; Sami Schalk,

household item, television was assumed to be watched by women during the day. As Michele Hilmes argues, "Television has always been associated with the feminine, because of its position within the home and its historically greater appeal to female audiences. Part of its status as low other has to do with this association."[44] Likewise, fantasy is sometimes perceived as a genre aimed at women, particularly when considered in contrast with science fiction, which has been tied to male audiences in the US since its early publication days in the 1920s in literary magazines explicitly aimed at boys.[45] These associations are not reflective of the actual genders of fans and practitioners, but they shape discourses about viewing practices and the value of fantasy and television. Fiske argues that "fantasy or escapism is often 'feminized,' that is, it is seen as a sign of feminine weakness resulting from women's inability to come to terms with (masculine) reality."[46] Escapism in this view is not only culturally derided because of the act of escapism itself, but because of who is perceived as escaping and what they are escaping.

This negative audience association is not just with women, but also younger, particularly child, audiences. Television has historically been associated with juvenile audiences, with Lynne Joyrich arguing that "Behind many critiques of the medium as exploitative, sensational, trivial, and inane lies an unacknowledged disdain for an audience that is deemed infantile and feminine."[47] Fantasy has also long been linked with children's literature, with Sergeant tracing the link back to early Grimm Brother's *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*.[48] These associations have been used to trivialize fantasy television. As Jodi McDavid and Ian Brodie argue:

> The same differentiation of labor that privileges and allows for a clear demarcation between work time and leisure time for those who work outside the home, while blurring that distinction for those tied to the home, occasioned what Edward D. Ives referred to as the 'two traditions' (1977), a public, male, 'serious leisure' performance and a personal, female, marginalized one. […] if an adult male is unlikely to be present, the material is largely trivialized. Thus, children's television, never intended for prime time, joins soap operas, game shows, and daytime talk as trivialized genres.[49]

Bodyminds Reimagined:(Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822371830.; Grace L. Dillon, introduction to *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, ed. Grace L. Dillon (Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

[44] Michele Hilmes, "The Bad Object: Television in the American Academy," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 113, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3661087.

[45] Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 119.

[46] Fiske, 320–321.

[47] Lynne Joyrich, *Reviewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 22.

[48] Sergeant, 159.

[49] Jodi McDavid and Ian Brodie, "Children's Television," in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*, eds. Pauline Greenhill et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 452.

While McDavid and Brodie are discussing programming explicitly targeted at children, the devaluation of genres associated with younger audiences occurs beyond so-called children's television. The assumption that fantasy is for children influences the discourses surrounding series aimed at adults and teenagers, with the genre framed as simplistic, trivial, and frivolous, and therefore only suitable for children. Fantasy is derided for being "only" suitable for devalued demographics such as children and women, and then subjected to paternalistic moral policing *because* of these associated demographics. Ursula Le Guin illustrates this tension in her critical work on science fiction literature:

> We asked children's librarians for SF and they said, "Oh, we do not allow children to read escapist literature." We asked adults' librarians for it and they said, "Oh, we do not carry children's books on this side of the building."[50]

Genres and media associated with culturally devalued demographics are deemed simultaneously only suitable for and uniquely unsuitable for those demographics. While the explicit nature of these tensions has mellowed over time and become more covert, these messy and conflicting value judgements still feed discourses around television and fantasy today.

This rhetoric is not only used by stakeholders who perceive themselves as outside of SFF, but also by stakeholders within SFF fandom to draw distinctions between different genres and fans. In some cases, these distinctions take on gendered and ageist associations. As Chad Wertley observes in his analysis of the reception of *Twilight* (a series of young adult fantasy romance literature and films) and its fans (commonly assumed to be teenage girls) at San Diego Comic Convention (historically associated with male comic fans):

> Having *Twilight* at [SDCC] brought in a large new demographic to the predominantly male convention. *Twilight* fans represent this perfect storm of the female stereotype as less knowledgeable combined with a new fandom whose members are predominantly not versed in the shared values and beliefs of the culture.[51]

The historically male-dominated comic fans of SDCC perceived the inclusion of *Twilight* as an incursion by the wrong types of fans and genres: young women, fantasy, and romance. In particular, there were value judgements attached to the types of behaviors that these fans were perceived as engaging in. They were simultaneously rejected for being passive (not having invested themselves "sufficiently" in learning the cultural norms and knowledge base of the existing fandom) and for being active in the wrong way (coming to the convention for the

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[50] Le Guin, *The Language of the Night*, 227.

[51] Chad Wertley, "'You are not a true geek, I am': The Role of Communicative Aggression in Geek Culture," in *It Happens at Comic-Con: Ethnographic Essays on a Pop Culture Phenomenon*, eds. Ben Bolling and Matthew J. Smith (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), 111.

wrong genres and texts, and as the wrong people). The pejorative assumptions between audiences, genre, and medium are projected both from outwith and within SFF genre fandom.

Legitimation on the Margins

These inter-genre tensions also make themselves known outside of more explicitly[52] gendered contexts, with fantasy and television often pushed to the margins in favor of the more legitimated science fiction and literature. For instance, the World Science Fiction Convention, which confers the annual Hugo Awards, one of the major SFF awards, has historically awarded the top prizes to science fiction. And in contrast to their five award categories for literature of varying lengths, the Hugos only have two categories for dramatic presentations, which includes film, television, radio, live theater, computer games, and music.[53] Writing in 2000, Camille Bacon-Smith noted that

> most of the awards revolve around the world of print media and in particular science fiction rather than fantasy or horror, both of which are seen as adjuncts to the genre where 'true' meaning is found: science fiction, the fantasy of the rational.[54]

While there have been shifts in the two decades since, with texts identified as fantasy winning top prizes and the creation of the second dramatic presentation category allowing for more awards for non-literary works,[55] these types of SFF spaces still heavily favor science fiction and literature. It is notable that, among top prizes in US-based SFF fandom like the Hugos, the Nebulas, the Locus Awards, and the World Fantasy Awards, there are either no awards for television or no awards that exclusively center television (the vaguer "dramatic presentation" term used by both the Hugos and Nebulas for a variety of non-literary media).[56] Even a more media-centric body like the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films, which explicitly seeks to recognize SFFH media through its Saturn Awards, was initially intended only to award films and did not recognize television-specific categories for forty-three years.[57]

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[52] Given how pervasive and enduring the value judgements attached to texts, genres, and media associated with women and children are, implicit biases often inform the subtext of discourse, without being so overt as to be easily identified.

[53] "Hugo Award Categories," The Hugo Awards, accessed March 24, 2023, https://www.thehugoawards.org/hugo-categories/.

[54] Camille Bacon-Smith, *Science Fiction Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 61.

[55] Formerly a single category, dramatic presentation was split into long form and short form in 2003. Television tends to be recognized in the short form category with individual episodes, but sometimes full seasons are recognized in the long form category as in the case of *Game of Thrones* and *Good Omens*.

[56] "Hugo Award Categories."; "Nebula Rules," Nebulas, accessed March 24, 2023, https://nebulas.sfwa.org/about-the-nebulas/nebula-rules/.

[57] While the Saturns started recognizing television acting categories in the 1990s, they did not award the series themselves until 2015. "The History of the Saturn Awards," The Saturn Awards Organization, accessed March 24, 2023, https://www.saturnawards.org/Saturn-Awards-History.php.

While award categories do not capture the full complexity and nuance of attitudes toward genre and media, they illustrate useful benchmarks for which categories, and in particular which *overlapping* categories, are discursively recognized as having cultural value. Fantasy and television are recognized in some spaces individually, but fantasy television has only gained a small amount of discursive recognition very recently.

These types of discourses are informed by and feed into notions of legitimation. In an attempt to position television as a medium worthy of being viewed, studied, and awarded, stakeholders have often compared it to legitimated media such as literature and film.[58] Television series are discursively framed as worthy of attention based on how much they are not like television. This strategy was employed most infamously by HBO's "It's Not TV. It's HBO" campaign, but it appears across a wide variety of stakeholders, texts, and genres, bifurcating television into good and bad. Newman and Levine emphasize that legitimation

> works by distancing more respectable genres of TV and more technologically advanced modes of watching from those forms and viewing practices rooted in the medium's past, and associated with less valued audiences who had previously been seen as central to television's cultural identity— women, children, the elderly, those of lesser class status, people who spend their days at home. […] For some kinds of television to be consecrated as art, other kinds must be confirmed in inadequacy. New is elevated over old, active over passive, class over mass, masculine over feminine.[59]

In essence, legitimation operates by creating an idea of what culturally devalued television is, and then claiming that anything else is unique and other than television. Newman and Levine argue that legitimation "inherently […] depends upon a delegitimated 'other' television."[60] While there is scholarly debate about whether legitimation does require these kinds of hierarchies or whether there is the possibility for a more value-neutral form of legitimation,[61] the hierarchical logic of legitimation is rife in discourses, as chapter three and five discuss. At the time of writing, television enjoys a more legitimated status than it has in its history; however, that legitimation often depends on stakeholders denying its status as television and instead claiming that a series is like a novel or an eighty-hour film. In other cases, legitimation relies on denying specific types of programming or viewing practices (primarily passive ones, but

[58] Newman and Levine, 4.
[59] Newman and Levine, 5.
[60] Newman and Levine, 13.
[61] For an example of the debate, see the back-and-forth between Jason Jacobs and Matt Hills. Jason Jacobs, "Television aesthetics: An infantile disorder," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 3, no. 1 (2006): 19–33, https://doi.org/10.3366/JBCTV.2006.3.1.19.; Matt Hills, "Television Aesthetics: A Pre-structuralist Danger?" Journal of British Cinema and Television 8, no. 1 (April 2011): 99–117, https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2011.0008.

also active behaviors that are not culturally approved). Of those types of devalued programming, this thesis focuses on series that are perceived as insufficiently realistic and educational. The prominence of realism will be explored in greater depth in chapter five, but discourses that use the logic of legitimation emphasize the role of realism in programs, media, and genres. The more closely associated an object is with realism, the more legitimated it is likely to be, an emphasis that is often discursively at odds with fantasy.[62]

The legitimation of fantasy has often required stakeholders to struggle with the pejorative assumptions tied to genre. Here, "genre" refers to the value judgement of certain texts falling into formulaic categories. In literature, genre fiction is often framed in opposition to literary fiction,[63] which is granted legitimacy by how it fits with ideas of literary merit and how much it opposes formulaic categorization.[64] Literature that contains elements of the fantastic but seeks to be evaluated for its "literariness" is positioned by stakeholders like publishers, authors, critics, and fans as literary fiction. However, other stakeholders take issue with the way work perceived as quality is rhetorically divorced from fantasy and science fiction, Le Guin being an infamous example.[65] Stakeholders legitimate certain works of fantasy with the claim that, if they are perceived as adhering to a specific idea of quality, they cannot be works of fantasy.

This tactic has led some stakeholders to try to reclaim works as part of the genre, such as Joseph Rex Young's monograph on *A Song of Ice and Fire* [*ASOIF*], in which he claims:

> [George R. R.] Martin's contribution to fantasy is not a fundamental innovation of the genre but a wide-ranging example of what can be achieved with it. Martin has not

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[62] Newman and Levine would likely not designate fantasy as a devalued genre. In their discussion of cult television, they claim that "science fiction and fantasy elements typical of many so-called cult series" grant these series prestige due to their anti-mainstream appeal. However, their discussion is based on an assumption that these series are 1) valued enough to be produced and 2) called by name: in short, that the anti-mainstream elements of the series constitute value-added flavor rather than preventing series from being produced or acknowledged in the first place. Their discussion is more relevant to a specific type of cult television known paradoxically as the cult blockbuster, and does not consider the specific devaluation that comes from discursive genre labels (and, by ignoring any perceived distinctions between fantasy and science fiction, does not attend to the differences in the genres' discursive value). Newman and Levine, 98.

[63] This distinction between genre fiction and literary fiction can be rendered very literally. In the UK, literature classified as genre fiction is printed in a different size than literary fiction, making book dimensions one of the medium-specific sites of contestation for genre discourses in literature. Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 77, 79, 93.

[64] Scholars like Kim Wilkins have argued that literary fiction has itself become a genre with certain formulaic components. Kim Wilkins, "Popular genres and the Australian literary community: the case of fantasy fiction," *Journal of Australian Studies* 32, no. 2 (2008): 270, https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050802056771.

[65] See Michael Schaub, "Ursula K. Le Guin slams new Kazuo Ishiguro novel," *Los Angeles Times*, March 3, 2015, https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-le-guin-slams-ishiguro-20150303-story.html.; Ursula K. Le Guin, "Review: The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood," The Guardian, August 29, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood.

> actually circumvented or broken any of the commonplaces of fantasy. Rather, he has utilised the patterns and requirements of his chosen genre as tools.[66]

Stakeholders have portrayed *ASOIF* and its television adaptation *Game of Thrones* as uniquely legitimated works that subvert fantasy more than they belong to it. By undercutting the formulas pejoratively associated with the genre, the texts can be discursively positioned as separate from and above the genre. These discursive practices inspire work like Young's that challenges this rhetoric by emphasizing the ways a text is related to, rather than separate from, the genre tradition. *Game of Thrones* will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three, but this treatment of legitimated texts highlights the ways in which legitimation contributes to genre contestation. Just as with television, the creation of a low other form of fantasy bolsters the profile of a higher form of fantasy, which is then discursively separated from the genre. Fantasy is only called fantasy if it is "bad," which is then treated as proof that fantasy is a bad genre.

This tautological tendency creates contestation around the genre identity of specific texts and of the genre itself. Fantasy that wants to be considered good cannot call itself fantasy, and must emphasis how literary it is. Television that wants to be considered good cannot call itself television, and must emphasize how realistic it is. Part of what has made fantasy and television such awkward bedfellows, at least discursively, is that much of the rhetoric used against one is also used against the other. Producing fantasy television is less challenging than calling something fantasy television.

The tensions and value judgements discussed in this chapter inform and shape the discourses surrounding fantasy television that are explored in the upcoming chapters. In chapters three and five, these values are often overt, as channels and writers explicitly discuss genres, and their assumptions and theories about those genres. In chapter four, which focuses on online interfaces, these values operate more covertly, shaping behind-the-scenes conversations about what categories to use and influencing what algorithms are programmed to prioritize. This variability of how visible the influence of these values are on different discourses can make contestation difficult to notice and analyze. A channel executive or writer stating on the record that they do not value a genre is easy to identify, whereas a series not displaying with a particular genre label based on a company's proprietary algorithms is methodologically difficult to interrogate or even notice. The forces that incentivize contestation have varying levels of visibility, but they are crucial context for understanding how

[66] Joseph Rex Young, *George R.R. Martin and the Fantasy Form* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 8.

contestation operates and why there is so much incentive to contest devalued genres like fantasy. Charlotte E. Howell, discussing the legitimation of science fiction television, argues that:

> the hierarchy of quality is shaped by assumptions of lowness that must be overcome for the genre as a whole to gain access to discourses of quality. Particular assumptions of lowness and the strategies of legitimation that combat them […] reveal the power systems acting on the genre. Such structures of knowledge include the assumption that science fiction is a nonartistic, highly commercial and formulaic television genre, juvenile in both content and audience and achieving quality only through allegorical didacticism.[67]

While this thesis does not focus on legitimation, rhetorical strategies of legitimation and the pejorative assumptions that they are attempting to counteract have a crucial impact on genre discourses, with fantasy negotiating many similar assumptions as science fiction. Analyzing these genre discourses exposes the power systems that act on fantasy: the stakeholders and their motivations.

[67] Charlotte E. Howell, "Legitimating genre: The discursive turn to quality in early 1990s science fiction television," *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 12, no. 1 (2017): 38, https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602016682749.

Chapter Three
HBO, Syfy, and Filtered Fantasy: Defining Genres through Channels Brands

JAKE
(to Rosa)
I know you think it's dumb, but *Skyfire* is actually very smart and dark and adult. It's not for nerds at all!
(to Terry)
Should we sing the elvish hunting song?

—Neil Campbell, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, "Return to Skyfire"

In 2010, then-ABC Entertainment President Paul Lee claimed that "there were shows I was passionate about that we knew would never reach enough of a rating point, and […] you're calling out people […] to say, 'You know what? I think it would work on Syfy.'"[1] From Syfy's inception in 1992 to the early 2010s, the channel was frequently pointed to when fantasy and science fiction [SF] series underperformed on other channels, under the assumption that these series would have done better "on a targeted network like Syfy."[2] Channels and critics alike assume that there is a link between channel and genre, speculating that series of certain genres will perform better on certain channels (an assumption not necessarily borne out in fact, as will be explored). Channels are assumed to have specific identities, usually linked to their brands, that render them uniquely suited to air specific genres.

Because of their gatekeeping role in the television production process, channels are crucial to any discussion of television genre stakeholders, particularly for a genre like fantasy. Aside from rare exceptions like *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* that were sold into first-run syndication, the decision about whether a scripted series appeared on-screen was largely, particularly historically, made by channels.[3] As Alan Frutkin argues, prior to the 1990s, genres like science fiction and fantasy [collectively SFF] were viewed skeptically by channels who were seeking large audiences.[4] A stakeholder like channels was making decisions by trying to

[1] Marc Berman, "ABC Next Up at TCA," *Adweek*, August 2, 2010, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/abc-next-tca-115862/.
[2] Marc Berman, "Mr. TV: Putting the 'V' in DVR," *Adweek*, November 1, 2009, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/mr-tv-putting-v-dvr-113906/.
[3] First-run syndication proved popular in the 1980s and 1990s for SFF series like *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and was crucial for accruing popularity for the genres. This route to success highlights the gatekeeping role of channels for these genres: it was only by going around channels that SFF was able to prove its ability to engage audiences.
[4] Alan Frutkin, "Nets, HBO Turn to Fringe Genres to Draw Viewers," *Mediaweek*, September 8, 2008, Nexis.

anticipate how another stakeholder, viewers, felt about the genre. Fearing the perceived niche appeal of fantasy, channels developed a cautious attitude towards fantasy that limited the genre's appearance on television. In the 1990s, the turn towards narrowcasting made genres like SFF more viable for channels.[5] In a market centered around the niche, niche appeal was no longer as big a mark against a prospective series. Channels, both cable and broadcast, began to re-examine these genres in the 2000s, and the genres' presence on screens grew. There seems no more appropriate place to begin an exploration of fantasy television's industrial stakeholders than with those stakeholders who have played a major role in deciding whether or not there is any fantasy television. Examining whether and how channels acknowledge and position fantasy, and how their stake in the genre has shifted over time, is crucial to understanding fantasy television.

The continued relevance of channels has been subject to debate in wider television scholarship. In the 1990s and early 2000s era of media conglomeration, channel identities became increasingly important as a way for conglomerates to target an array of niche audiences. Conglomerates consolidated broadcast and cable channels, studios, production companies, and internet operators.[6] As John Caldwell observes, rather than trying "to standardize viewer-user taste into a mass demographic brand," these conglomerates used channels to organize their audiences and target specific viewers with distinct channel brands.[7] In an era "increasingly cluttered with dozens of marginal channels," [8] branding was a crucial strategy for differentiating channels from one another, with each channel's status, value, and niche defined in relation to other channels.[9] However, with the rise of digital technology and nonlinear viewing in the late 2000s and 2010s, scholars like Catherine Johnson and Amanda D. Lotz have claimed that channels are becoming less important, as dispersed viewing practices that shift away from watching television on linear channels challenge "the continued need for previous ways of organizing television."[10] Johnson argues that, with the rise of conglomeration, the emphasis of branding has shifted to individual series "extended across a number of different

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[5] Frutkin, "Nets."
[6] Barbara Selznick, "Branding the Future: Syfy in the Post-network Era," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 2, no. 2, (Autumn 2009): 178–179, https://doi.org/10.1353/sff.0.0070.
[7] John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 252.
[8] Gary R. Edgerton and Kyle Nicholas, "'I Want My Niche TV': Genre as a Networking Strategy in the Digital Era," in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 248.
[9] Joe Marconi, *Beyond Branding: How Savvy Marketers Build Brand Equity to Create Products and Open New Markets* (Chicago: Probus, 1993), 38.
[10] Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 15.

products."[11] Developments in policy, technology, and viewing practices over the past three decades have drastically impacted channel brands and left their status uncertain.

Despite the scholarly insistence that "channels [have] become increasingly superfluous,"[12] channels and channel brands are retaining a presence. A study by Viacom suggests that viewers make decisions about what series to watch faster when channel logos are present, and that for 81% of viewers, "seeing a channel logo is as important as knowing what a show is about and who is in it."[13] This may be because, as Adam Arvidsson argues, "the brand refers not primarily to the product but to the *context of consumption.*"[14] A channel brand gives potential viewers context for a series beyond its logline, suggesting how the series might approach its premise and what the quality and tone of the series might be. Channel brands are not simply tools for economic success, but also cultural contexts of consumption that can be vital for viewers trying to select series to watch in the current era of so-called peak TV.

Channels and channel brands do not only remain relevant for academic study because of their arguable value for viewers, but also as tools for communicating *within* the television industry. Derek Johnson argues that "even as new digital services threaten legacy television channels, it is through channel brands that legacy media conglomerates negotiate this disruption. The channel is both at stake in the digital revolution and a means to survive it."[15] Channels have become a tool for conglomerates to navigate the upheaval of this transition period, and "persist as the expression of different companies attempting to organize television in economically advantageous ways."[16] Channel branding campaigns have allowed channels to communicate with "gatekeepers of the networks, distributors and advertisers"[17] and, in particular, with channels' parent companies. As Selznick notes, "Branding offers television networks […] a way to reinforce [that what it does is distinctive and valuable] so that they can create a beneficial media product not only for themselves but also for the entire conglomerate."[18] It is particularly crucial that channels reinforce these ideas about the unique

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[11] Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (London: Routledge, 2012), 34.
[12] Lotz, 15.
[13] Christian Kurz, "On an On-Demand Platform, Channel Logos Help Viewers Decide What to Watch," Viacom, October 31, 2018, http://insights.viacom.com/post/on-an-on-demand-platform-channel-logos-help-viewers-decide-what-to-watch/.
[14] Adam Arvidsson, "Brands: A Critical Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5, no. 2 (July 2005): 244, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540505053093.
[15] Derek Johnson, "Pop: Television Guides and Recommendations in a Changing Channel Landscape," in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 8.
[16] D. Johnson, 7.
[17] John McMurria, "Long-format TV: Globalisation and Network Branding in a Multi-Channel Era," in *Quality Popular Television*, eds. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (London: British Film Institute, 2003), 72.
[18] Selznick, "Branding," 180.

benefits they provide their parent companies as the number of pay TV subscribers decreases in the face of an increasing number of cord-cutters, and so-called "cord-avoiders" and "cord-nevers."[19] There is increased pressure on cable channels to prove that "they can cultivate loyalty from a broad swath of viewers and establish a connection that extends beyond the TV screen" to ensure their continued existence.[20] Channel brands allow channels to communicate their unique cultural offering to their parent companies in order to justify their continued independence and existence in the face of a crowded market and increasingly scattered viewing practices. In this period of industrial transformation, channel executives continue to discuss their brands and wage extensive and expensive branding campaigns; rather than assuming that channels are no longer relevant, television scholarship should be questioning whether and how the primary audience and purpose for these branding campaigns has shifted.

As Caldwell observes, branding has moved from being "an on-screen concern of marketing personnel and ad agency research to a self-conscious form of promotional reflexivity."[21] A channel's brand is constructed by layers of what Caldwell terms the paraindustry: "an economic and cultural–industrial interface woven together by socio-professional media communities, through trade narratives, ritualized interactions and conventionalized self-representations."[22] The audience for this economic and cultural-industrial interface is not just audiences, but other members and bodies of the television industry. Because this thesis focuses on how various stakeholders position genre in public discourses, it is not always readily apparent who the intended audience of these discourses is; this contributes to the confusion surrounding the shifting purpose and primary audience for channel branding campaigns.

It is in this carefully constructed economic and cultural–industrial interface that genres become a pawn for channel brands. Just as brands operate as contexts of consumption, so too do genres, conveying a broad range of assumptions that can frame a series. However, the contexts of consumption for a genre and a channel are not always compatible, forcing channels to negotiate the genres of their series in light of their brand. Gary R. Edgerton and Kyle Nicholas note that, "Since the 1980s, genres have actually grown far more useful to the TV

[19] Georg Szalai, "Analyst: Pay TV Industry to Lose 200,000 Subscribers in 2012," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 28, 2011, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/analyst-pay-tv-industry-lose-266589.
[20] Brian Steinberg and Addie Morfoot, "Syfy, Craving New Viewers, Plans Revamp With Sci-Fi News, 'Krypton' Series,'" *Variety*, May 11, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/syfy-reboot-chris-mccumber-krypton-1202423409/.
[21] Caldwell, *Production*, 246.
[22] John Caldwell, "Para-Industry, Shadow Academy," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 4 (2014): 721, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.888922.

industry as marketing devices than as production strategies."[23] Cable, they argue, has been more successful than broadcast networks at courting audiences because cable "utilizes genre as a tactic to differentiate itself, rather than as a means of minimizing risk by assuring product standardization."[24] The rise of fantasy and science fiction in the 2000s is not inconsequential. This timing has had a crucial impact on the contestation surrounding fantasy. As Edgerton and Nicholas argue, a television genre nowadays is

> subject to the ongoing demands of branding a network. It is a shorthand tactic by which network programmers build a target audience; and since the endgame of networking is first and foremost attracting and holding a specific viewership, the conventions of any television genre are readily stretched, recombined, and repurposed with that goal firmly in mind.[25]

Fantasy television has grown in popularity and viability in a time when genres are increasingly important to channels as part of their brands. This is not a neutral environment in which genres are simply components of series. Different channels stretch, recombine, and repurpose fantasy in different ways to fit their unique brands. How they discuss the fantasy genre and the fantasy series they produce is dependent on their brand, which leads to the creation of at least as many different sites of contestation for fantasy within the stakeholder role as there are channels making series.

Fantasy is arguably more vulnerable to being repurposed in this way because of the breadth and inclusivity of the genre, as was explored in chapter one. Fantasy is not limited to a single type of narrative and, as Steve Neale and Jason Mittell have argued, there is a misleading tendency to base the genre identity of a text on its narrative. Fantasy's propensity for genre mixing becomes crucial here: promotional materials can draw other genres into greater prominence by focusing on the series's narrative. This focusing allows channels to strategically emphasize or de-emphasize elements of a series depending on what genres they feel most suit their brand. This can, in turn, render some subgenres of fantasy more appealing for certain channels than others. For subgenres like portal-quests or intrusion fantasies, the encounter with the fantastic is central to the narrative. In a portal-quest, the character(s) leaves the known world and encounters a hidden magical wainscot society and/or an entirely separate magical secondary world.[26] In an intrusion fantasy, a magical force intrudes upon the known

[23] Edgerton and Nicholas, "'I Want,'" 249.
[24] Edgerton and Nicholas, 248–249.
[25] Edgerton and Nicholas, 252.
[26] Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), xiv.

world (often seen in horror).[27] In both categories, the encounter with the fantastic is crucial to the premise. Immersive fantasy, on the other hand, takes place in a secondary world and, depending on a text's main narrative, the fantastic may not be necessary to a basic description of its premise, as will be explored later with *Game of Thrones* [*GoT*] (2011–2019).[28] How central the fantastic is to a series's narrative can vary within these subgenres, and is influenced by other considerations such as the level of active participation by magical elements of the series. Discussion of channels as a genre stakeholder does not stop at whether or not a channel produces a fantasy series but must consider that channels can be strategic about choosing to create or adapt certain types of fantasy.

This chapter examines two channels: HBO and Syfy. HBO and Syfy are central to a discussion of how channels interact with fantasy, as the former produced a series that completely changed the industry's perception of the genre, and the latter has held a unique relationship with the genre since the channel's inception. More broadly, HBO and Syfy usefully illustrate two different kinds of relationships between channel brands and genre: one centered around making a variety of genres in a particular style, and the other in making particular genres in a variety of styles. These differences, as well as the distinctions between their respective statuses as premium cable and basic cable channels, make them instructively different for an examination of how channels contribute to the contestation surrounding fantasy. This chapter examines how these channels have been "textualized, scripted and mediated,"[29] with their brands constructed in promotional campaigns conducted year-round, from trailers to interviews given by executives to television upfronts. In addition to using discourse analysis to examine how the channels' executives position the fantasy genre in promotional discourses, this chapter also draws on paratextual analysis to assess how their promotional materials position the genres of their respective flagship fantasy series of the 2010s: *Game of Thrones* and *The Magicians* (2015–2020). Unlike interviews with executives, which tend to be targeted at smaller, more specific audiences interested in the business side of the industry, series' marketing campaigns convey a channel's brand to a wider public, broadening the reach and impact of these niche discourses to multiple stakeholders.

[27] Mendlesohn, xiv.
[28] Mendlesohn, xiv.
[29] Caldwell, "Para-Industry," 721.

It's Not Fantasy, It's HBO

In the mid-2000s, as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) were ending their runs, HBO was under pressure to prove their staying power by finding new successful series. At the time, HBO's stated approach to programming was to court a variety of smaller niches rather than trying to find a tentpole series to replace *The Sopranos*, hoping that, as Steven Zeitchik put it, "the blitzkrieg of programming [could] collectively replace the David Chase drama."[30] HBO was not interested in creating another high-profile crime series and making the association between channel and genre more permanent: as James Hibberd observes, "HBO has always sought to defy any sort of specific genre branding for its network."[31] The question of what HBO would do next was important not just for the future of the channel but for the television industry as a whole. Scholars and critics alike noted that HBO set industry trends, as their hit series "forced broadcasters to rethink their development strategies and provided a guide for basic cable channels like FX and AMC as they created their own original series."[32] Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones term the channel's ability to establish television trends "HBO's aftereffect."[33] Even before *Game of Thrones* had been pitched to HBO, the rest of the US television industry was aware that HBO's next hit could change the landscape of contemporary television.

Pitching their proposed *A Song of Ice and Fire* [*ASoIaF*] adaptation as "*The Sopranos* in Middle-Earth," series creators David Benioff and D. B. Weiss were aware of the need to frame the series in terms of HBO's brand from the start.[34] As then co-president Richard Plepler recalls, while Benioff acknowledged that HBO might be nervous because the series was fantasy and "isn't typical HBO," he stressed that ultimately the series was "about archetypal power. […] it's Shakespearian, it's biblical."[35] By emphasizing the series's ties to a literary highbrow milieu, Benioff insisted that both channel and viewers would "quickly forget where you are, because the themes are universal."[36] Anticipating HBO's potential wariness of fantasy, the

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[30] Steven Zeitchik, "After 'Sopranos,' HBO plots spree," *Variety*, March 23, 2007, https://variety.com/2007/tv/news/after-sopranos-hbo-plots-spree-1117961727/.
[31] James Hibberd, "HBO conjuring fantasy series," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 12, 2008, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hbo-conjuring-fantasy-series-122810.
[32] Alan Frutkin, "Lazy Summer for HBO," *Mediaweek*, April 7, 2008, Nexis.
[33] Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, "HBO's Ongoing Legacy," in *The Essential HBO Reader*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 320.
[34] Sonia Saraiya, "Is 'Game of Thrones' Too Big to Build a Satisfying Ending?" *Variety*, June 27, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/tv/columns/game-of-thrones-season-six-finale-hbo-george-r-r-martin-1201804417/.
[35] Andrew Wallenstein, "Ep6 - HBO CEO Richard Plepler on Winning the Streaming Wars," May 8, 2018, in *Strictly Business*, produced by Variety, podcast, https://open.spotify.com/episode/2Ezn9u4R0hV0EI8aSjg7uV?si=44839fa2925a4c3a.
[36] Stuart Levine, "Plepler, Lombardo talk HBO programming," *Variety*, November 8, 2010, https://variety.com/2010/tv/news/plepler-lombardo-talk-hbo-programming-1118026455/.

creators reframed the series by de-emphasizing the role of fantasy and stressing how well-matched *GoT*'s themes were with the channel's brand.

Initially, HBO was worried about the perceived expense of the genre due to the precedent set by recent big budget fantasy film franchises like *The Lord of the Rings* and Harry Potter. Programming president Michael Lombardo admits to an initial reluctance to greenlight the project because he "thought we shouldn't be doing a show with dragons and White Walkers […] we couldn't afford a production that would have to rival those feature films, and HBO had no record of successfully doing this genre."[37] The failure of recent series like *Carnivale* (2003–2005) was read as a reflection of HBO's struggles to satisfactorily produce fantasy and pair it with their brand.[38] The budget was of particular concern for Lombardo because "HBO has held out itself as a network that doesn't skimp on production value, and this is a genre in which the bar has been set very high."[39] This concern about cost was not wholly unfounded: George R. R. Martin, the author of the source material and a former television writer, had wanted to write a book series that did everything that he had not been allowed to do within the limits of "producibility" on television.[40] Lombardo's concerns about the incompatibility of the fantasy genre and HBO's brand of high-quality, high-cost drama were partially validated by the discursive context of the source material's creation.

According to HBO, *GoT*'s eventual greenlight came down to the pilot script and the creators' "conviction."[41] Lombardo particularly details a chance encounter with Weiss at the gym. As Derek Thompson reports, Lombardo saw Weiss

> hunched over an incline bike, reading a copy of the original George R. R. Martin book with copious annotations. […]
>
> "He was holding a highlighter in his hands," Lombardo told me, "and the book was absolutely covered in notes and dog-ears. That's what HBO wants, to bet on that sort of commitment and passion"—the sort that inspires an obsessive-compulsive approach to adapting a fantasy epic for a network that doesn't do fantasy. "Whatever reservations I had, they were gone. I thought, 'These guys aren't swinging for the easy hit. They're doing this because they love these stories.'"[42]

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[37] Derek Thompson, *Hit Makers: How to Succeed in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 247–248.
[38] At the time, *True Blood* (2008–2014) was not yet on the air, nor is it clear whether Lombardo would have considered it to be the same genre as *GoT*, as HBO has consistently and specifically described *True Blood*'s genre as "vampire."
[39] Sam Thielman, "Cabler Rises to Epic Challenge," *Variety*, March 12, 2011, https://variety.com/2011/tv/news/cabler-rises-to-epic-challenge-1118033764/.
[40] Dave Itzkoff, "His Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy: George R. R. Martin Talks 'Game of Thrones,'" *New York Times*, April 1, 2011, https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/01/his-beautiful-dark-twisted-fantasy-george-r-r-martin-talks-game-of-thrones/.
[41] Thielman, "Cabler."
[42] D. Thompson, *Hit Makers*, 248.

Lombardo's account of this encounter is illuminating, regardless of whether it is true, because of how carefully it aligns the promotional narrative surrounding the greenlighting of *GoT* with HBO's brand. Lombardo claims that HBO decided to disregard their concerns about the fantasy genre, not because their concerns had been addressed, but because of the writers' "commitment and passion" and their desire to tell a difficult story. This framing fits with HBO's long-standing branding strategy of portraying their original programming as crafted by auteurs, using promotional materials to "[celebrate] showrunners as producers of artistically-valuable quality television."[43] Benioff and Weiss were not considered television auteurs in the 2000s, having never written for television previously. Their auteur status was carefully constructed by HBO, foregrounded during the series's run with materials like post-episode behind-the-scenes interviews and constructed retrospectively through interviews like Lombardo's. As Tobias Steiner argues, this positioning seeks to perform a "'cultural upgrade' of the text in order to foster elevation from 'popular fantasy' to the purported prestige of quality television."[44] The retrospective narrative of the greenlighting of *GoT* positions Weiss and Benioff as auteurs, and HBO as a maverick bravely choosing to set aside their concerns about the fantasy genre because the series would be helmed by two passionate artists.

When HBO optioned the rights to *GoT* in 2007, executives began to reframe fantasy in promotional discourses. Plepler was quick to present the series in terms that HBO subscribers would value, emphasizing that "While it is a different genre, […] the themes that it takes up — power and strife and people vying for their piece of the crown, metaphorically — those are themes that have been all over the network for years."[45] As a premium cable channel, HBO needed to ensure that their subscribers perceived a link between *GoT* and the rest of HBO's programming so that they continued to perceive a fit between *themselves* and HBO. Lombardo praised the pilot script for de-emphasizing fantasy, stressing that "there is nothing that really gives you a full hint of the magic in the Martin books. It's a bunch of compelling and well-crafted stories. […] we were excited by the drama, not by the genre."[46] For Lombardo, the script was not fantasy; it was "well-crafted," and made stronger by downplaying the fantasy elements of the source material. Overall, HBO's aim was that the series would "satisfy the passion of its natural fan base, but also intrigue and satisfy those people who might not typically

[43] Tobias Steiner, "Steering the Author Discourse: The Construction of Authorship in Quality TV, and the Case of *Game of Thrones*," *Series: International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 183, http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6110S.
[44] Steiner, 182.
[45] Levine, "Plepler."
[46] Levine.

be connected to the sci-fi genre."[47] Just as HBO had been framed as "TV for people who do not like TV," *GoT* was framed as "fantasy for people who do not like fantasy."

Benioff and Weiss attributed *GoT*'s appeal for people who do not like fantasy to the channel. Benioff praised HBO's ability to reinvent "tired genres,"[48] and Weiss elaborated, claiming that what he, Benioff, Martin, and audiences love about HBO is "their success" with presenting genres "in a way that is at once respectful of that genre and completely blows that genre apart and […] turns it into something that you as an adult can engage with in a way you maybe never expected yourself to […], especially with fantasy." [49] Weiss, who elsewhere admitted to approaching the book series with "genre pre-expectations" and "internalized […] prejudices,"[50] portrayed the channel as responsible for turning fantasy into a genre for adults. *GoT*'s subversive "fantasy for people who do not like fantasy" was attributed to HBO and HBO's brand, rather than Martin, the source material, or even Benioff and Weiss's own work. While they had their own stakeholder roles as creators, writers, and producers, in this instance they served as mouthpieces for the channel. HBO's promotional discourses emphasized that *GoT* would be drawing on the sophisticated themes common of HBO series, that it would be well-crafted rather than focusing on fantasy elements, and that it would appeal to adult viewers who might not normally watch the genre because HBO would author a respectable, quality, and adult version of fantasy. They attempted to legitimize the text by delegitimizing the genre.

HBO claimed that *GoT* was unique among fantasy texts and that the source of its uniqueness was HBO. In doing so, the channel was ignoring that the gritty, subversive elements of *GoT* are common elements of established fantasy subgenres. Some scholars place the book series in gritty fantasy, a subgenre that developed in the late 1900s and is "marked by low-levels of magic, high-levels of violence, in-depth character development, and medievalist worlds that are 'if not realistic, at least have pretensions of realism.'"[51] Others place *ASoIaF* into grimdark, a subgenre that "values its gritty realism, […] attempts to overturn long-established heroic tropes" and embraces nihilism.[52] There were multiple strains of fantasy to which *GoT* could claim membership that shared its so-called subversive, adult elements. It did

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[47] In the pre- and early years of *GoT*, Lombardo and Plepler would use both "fantasy" and "sci-fi" to describe the series. In later years, they would come to use "fantasy" more specifically and consistently. Levine.
[48] Hibberd, "HBO."
[49] Alan Frutkin, "TCA 2011: HBO's Game of Thrones," *Adweek*, January 24, 2011, video, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/preview-hbos-new-fantasy-geek-out-game-thrones-tca-video-125523/.
[50] Jim Windolf, "The Surprising Connection Between *Game of Thrones* and *Monty Python*," *Vanity Fair*, March 24, 2014, http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/03/game-of-thrones-benioff-weiss-interview.
[51] Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 63.
[52] Liz Bourke, "Review: *The Dark Defiles* by Richard Morgan," *Strange Horizons*, August 13, 2015, http://www.strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/the-dark-defiles-by-richard-morgan/.

not exist in a subversive bubble separate from fantasy, but in subgenres of likeminded texts. Regardless of whether HBO knew that these subgenres existed, it was not beneficial for their brand to acknowledge that they were producing a fantasy series in an established subgenre: it suited their brand to claim that they subverted and redefined fantasy. Lombardo claimed that he was "not a sci-fi fan, and this show really transcends the genre";[53] despite admitting his limited knowledge of the genre, he still positioned himself as expert enough to know that this series was unique. By re-emphasizing existing "pre-expectations" about what fantasy was when not made by HBO (childish, poorly crafted, and niche rather than universal), they were not just attempting to separate themselves from negative associations with the genre, but deliberately contributing to the contestation surrounding fantasy by publicizing two different ideas about what fantasy was. This contestation was crucial to their brand: creating a sense of what they did as being in opposition to what other channels did.

These attempts to carefully manage the relationship between *GoT* and fantasy were demonstrated in promotional materials in two ways: minimizing fantasy and using the fantasy storyworld to generate buzz. Minimizing fantasy began with the logline in the initial press release: "Based on the series of books by George R.R. Martin, *Game of Thrones* is an epic struggle for power set in a vast and violent fantasy kingdom."[54] The emphasis was on the series's status as a literary adaptation, its epic scope, and its focus on violence and power struggles. Only then was fantasy mentioned. The series description on its official Facebook page did not even mention fantasy, instead focusing on political intrigue and power struggles, and describing the various regions of the unnamed kingdom in order to emphasize the breadth of settings the series would encompass.[55] The first season trailers stressed family drama, political maneuvering, and the medieval aesthetic, emphasizing the series's literary roots, epic nature, and use of intrigue: "from the best-selling books," "an epic new series," "the game begins."[56] The trailers also disproportionately foregrounded elements that linked to HBO's lineage, such as scenes in a brothel that highlighted the presence of soft-core sex and the character Petyr Baelish, played by Aidan Gillen, who at the time was best known to US audiences for his role on HBO's *The Wire*. The fantasy elements of the series were relegated

[53] Levine, "Plepler."
[54] Christopher Webster, "First image from HBO's GAME OF THRONES series.. yep, it's happening," Quiet Earth, March 3, 2010, http://www.quietearth.us/articles/2010/03/03/First-image-from-HBOs-GAME-OF-THRONES-series-yep-its-happening.
[55] "Game of Thrones – About," Facebook, accessed July 8, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/pg/GameOfThrones/about/?
[56] GameofThrones, "Game Of Thrones 'The Game Begins' Preview (HBO)," YouTube, March 4, 2011, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpJYNVhGf1s.

to a brief, vague mention of White Walkers (ice zombies) that, for viewers unfamiliar with the books, did not convey enough information about what White Walkers were to indicate much about the genre. Other early seasons' trailers featured staged shots of the characters standing before a black background and looking into the camera while voiceover lines and monologues played. The focus was on the dramatic use of "universal" themes like honor and vengeance, the high stakes of the series, and the cleverness of the dialogue, without mentioning the fantasy elements.[57] Posters and billboards for the first two seasons emphasized the genres of political drama and war with their focus on thrones, crowns, swords, and the taglines "You win or you die" and "War is Coming" (see Figures 1 and 2). *GoT* was well-suited for this select genre focus because genres like war, political drama, and family melodrama were major components of both the television series and the books and therefore provided natural alternate genres for HBO to emphasize over fantasy. The channel made use of the series's genre mixing: while television scholars tend to view a series's genres as hybridized and therefore difficult to

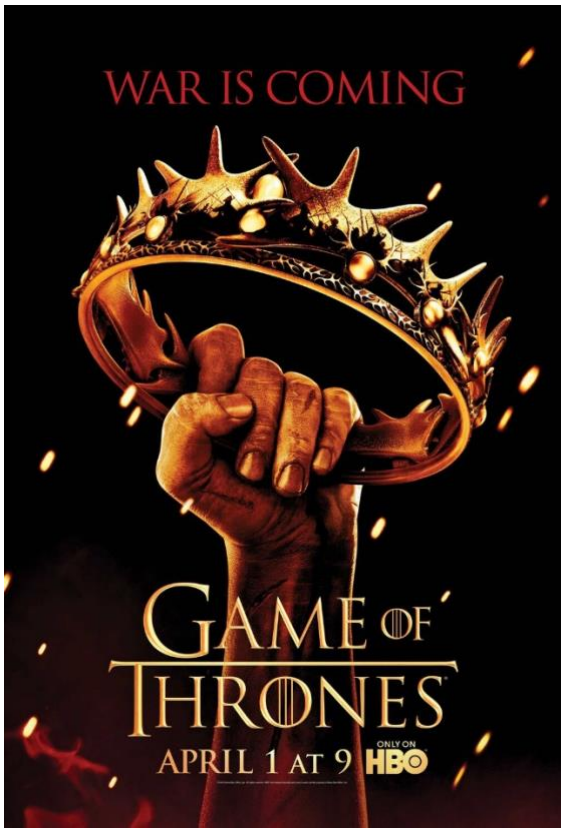

Figure 1. (left) Promotional poster for *Game of Thrones* season one. "Sean Bean in Game of Thrones (2011)," IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0944947/mediaviewer/rm2553427712.
Figure 2. (right) Promotional poster for *Game of Thrones* season two. "Game of Thrones (2011)," IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0944947/mediaviewer/rm2238952960.

[57] See GameofThrones, "Game of Thrones: 'Iron Throne Preview' (HBO)," YouTube, January 14, 2011, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhqRmcsWqac.; GameofThrones, "Game of Thrones: Season 3 - Chaos Preview (HBO)," YouTube, February 10, 2013, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iTg20x7w2s.

separate from one another, HBO used the multiple genres of the series as alternate points of engagement for audiences in order to minimize the focus on fantasy. Similarly, HBO utilized *GoT*'s specific subgenre of fantasy: immersive fantasy. Because *GoT* did not initially focus on an encounter with the fantastic,[58] but was simply set in a secondary world in which there was magic, the original premise and most main storylines were easily described in promotional materials with a focus on genres like war and political drama rather than fantasy. The genre mixing and immersive fantasy subgenre of *GoT* not only enabled HBO to create contestation surrounding the series's genre identity, but was crucial to HBO greenlighting it in the first place. Executives knew, and demonstrated in those early interviews, that *GoT*'s promotional materials could ignore the role of fantasy.

In later seasons, there was an increase in the presence of fantasy elements in traditional promotional materials like trailers, but these elements were usually relegated to a solely visual presence that conveyed ambiguous information about genre. Verbal references in the trailers were mostly reserved for genres like war, political drama, and interpersonal drama, and themes like vengeance, betrayal, and justice: the verbal priority was given to other genres and the themes of the series, which emphasized the "literary" quality of *GoT* and HBO. Fantasy elements like greyscale, The Mountain, and The Red Woman appeared in trailers, but viewers who had not watched the series would have lacked the context to read them as fantasy elements. The Mountain, for example, was a tall figure entirely enclosed in a suit of armor. Without seeing his face or having the knowledge from the series that he was (from season four onwards) a magically reanimated zombie, a trailer viewer may have read his presence as reinforcing the medieval aesthetic without indicating fantasy (see Figures 3 and 4). Similarly, The Red Woman looked like a regular human being. In trailers, she was usually depicted staring dramatically into the distance or taking off her clothes, rather than using or mentioning her abilities. In the series, she was one of the most consistent presences of fantasy: casting spells, making prophecies, reviving the dead, birthing a shadow demon, and supernaturally extending her life with a magical necklace. A series's viewer, who had already decided that fantasy was not a reason to not watch *GoT*, might have perceived more fantasy elements in these marketing materials than a non-viewer. A single trailer plays to multiple different audiences by presenting

[58] The White Walkers' incursion into Westeros pushed portions of later seasons into intrusion fantasy, but this encounter with the fantastic was so delayed and relegated to the background that it became a meme for many of the early seasons of *GoT*. For example, see a quip in an Honest Trailer about how the characters were "completely ignoring an invasion of ice zombies that threatens to kill them all. Seriously, someone should really get on that." Screen Junkies, "Honest Trailers – Game of Thrones Vol. 1," YouTube, April 1, 2014, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVaD8rouJn0.

Figure 3. (above) Still of the Mountain from the *Game of Thrones* season six trailer. "Season 6 Trailer," IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/video/vi4263163161/.
Figure 4. (below) Still of the Mountain without his helmet from series episode "The Bells." *Game of Thrones*, season 8, episode 5, "The Bells," directed by Miguel Sapochnik, written by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired May 12, 2019, on HBO.

the genres of a series so that they can be read differently depending on the viewer's experience with the series itself. With viewers and non-viewers being presented with different information about genre, these trailers create a contested understanding of the series's genre identity. This is not to assume what viewers of trailers do or do not glean from them, but rather to illustrate that when references to a genre are rendered largely only visually rather than verbally, and are

noticeably ambiguous and obscured, they can be used deliberately to target a wider array of viewers.

Across the many trailers for the eight-season run, there were only a handful of verbal references to fantasy, even in the later seasons when the fantasy elements began to play more central roles in main storylines. Almost all of these verbal references were to dragons, the fantasy element that made the most consistent appearance in promotional materials. In trailers, the dragons were introduced in quick, wide, sweeping action shots that emphasized the scale of the cinematography and the quality of the computer generated images [CGI] without conveying much information about how the dragons fit into the narrative (see Figure 5). David Franco, *GoT*'s director of photography, noted that the series's mandate was "forgetting about the conventional 'TV frame of mind' and thinking more in the lines of big canvas film, not being afraid of a wide vista shot."[59] By presenting the dragons in these wide canvas shots without providing narrative context for them, HBO reduced dragons to a symbol of the series's ability to create complex, cinematic CGI images. As Keith M. Johnston observes, when images of visual spectacles are spread across the promotional materials of a media property, these materials can reduce "the narrative thrust of the image, which was taken out of context and

Figure 5. Still of a dragon flying over a battlefield from the *Game of Thrones* season seven trailer. GameofThrones, "Game of Thrones Season 7: Official Trailer (HBO)," YouTube, May 24, 2017, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giYeaKsXnsI.

[59] Angela Natividad, "Game of Thrones' Cinematographer Shot This Homemade Movie on LG's V30 Phone," *Adweek*, September 25, 2017, http://www.adweek.com/creativity/game-of-thrones-cinematographer-shot-this-homemade-movie-on-lgs-v30-phone/.

used for display purposes only."[60] While some of the occasional verbal references to dragons in trailers tied them into the narrative, dragons in *GoT* marketing were largely treated as "a promotional entity that can be shown separately to grab viewer attention."[61] Turning into icons for the series, they appeared as shadows over a fake newspaper spread in the *New York Times* and in statues displayed in public spaces.[62] Dragons became a synonym for *GoT*, leading popular press to refer to series hiatuses as a "dragon-sized gap" in the television schedule[63] and Lombardo to refer to *GoT* as a "show about dragons." Dragons provided an alternate word to use in place of fantasy, which allowed HBO to align the series with the specific element of the genre that most suited their brand. The focus was on the promotional positioning of the series as "epic" and how HBO could do something that most channels historically could not: make dragons on a television budget and put them in well-lit, wide, sweeping shots.

The minimization of fantasy in promotional materials like trailers and billboards positioned *GoT* as a "political and war drama about dragons" rather than as a fantasy series. Prior to the fourth season premiere, Lombardo celebrated how *GoT* "'defied' any effort to pigeonhole it as a 'genre show' and is instead something much more broad."[64] He gave sole credit for the genre perceptions surrounding *GoT* to the text itself, without acknowledging the source material or the impact of HBO's extensive promotional campaign. As Jonathan Grey argues, "Genre can be established before viewing, outside the realm of the text, and […] when trailers or other forms of promotion propose a genre, it may prove hard for an individual viewer to easily shrug off."[65] While the series itself also impacts the perception of what genre it is, the promotional campaign frames a series for viewers in advance and can influence the generic lens through which it is viewed and discussed. By not acknowledging their careful positioning of genre in trailers and billboards, HBO presented *GoT* "defying" the label of fantasy as a positive and successful attribute of the series, rather than a deliberate effort by marketing. HBO

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[60] Keith M. Johnston, *Coming Soon: Film Trailers and the Selling of Hollywood Technology* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 118.
[61] Johnston, 118.
[62] Tim Nudd, "Game of Thrones Soars With Dragon Ad in New York Times," *Adweek*, February 27, 2013, http://www.adweek.com/creativity/game-thrones-soars-dragon-ad-new-york-times-147576/.; Brian Steinberg, "A Dragon Invades New York, Thanks To HBO's 'Game of Thrones,'" *Variety*, March 19, 2014, https://variety.com/2014/scene/news/game-of-thrones-season-four-premiere-party-dragon-1201138545/.
[63] Jason Lynch, "Without Game of Thrones, HBO Will Rely on The Young Pope and Murderous Moms," *Adweek*, January 14, 2018, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/without-game-thrones-hbo-will-rely-young-pope-and-murderous-moms-175572/.
[64] Steinberg, "Dragon Invades."
[65] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 50.

was again pushing the narrative that *GoT* was unique amongst fantasy series *because* it avoided being described as a fantasy series.

While HBO sought to minimize the role of fantasy in *GoT* promotional materials like trailers and billboards, the channel used the fantasy storyworld of Westeros to generate buzz in real-world activations. Buzz, the anticipatory communication surrounding a text or event, is something that HBO needs to court as a premium channel, prioritizing attention over high viewership. This has been a long-time strategy of HBO, with Plepler claiming in 2005 that "When people say, 'I never saw "Deadwood" but I heard it was good,' that's valuable to our brand identity."[66] Derek Thompson notes that HBO's "economic imperative is to build a television product that viewers feel like they have to pay for—*even when they don't watch it.*"[67] Even having paying subscribers is not necessarily HBO's short-term goal. Time Warner CEO Jeff Bewkes famously responded to the news that *GoT* was the most pirated television series in the world by arguing that that title was "better than an Emmy."[68] Having viewers watching through unofficial channels creates "a tremendous word-of-mouth thing" and eventually "leads to more paying subs."[69] This desire for buzz led to marketing initiatives like the season eight live billboards of Twitter streams. Fans were encouraged to tweet their excitement for the final season at the *GoT* Twitter account using the season's tagline #ForTheThrone so that their tweets would be displayed on the live billboards.[70] Marketing their series in a way that both generated buzz and *marketed the fact that there was buzz* was a crucial part of HBO's strategy.

In order to generate that buzz, HBO centered the fantasy storyworld in activations. Activations are "the art of driving consumer action through brand interaction and experiences. […] It's about bringing brands to life via experiences and forming long-term emotional connections."[71] For fantasy series, activations have proven to be a popular form of marketing because they invite viewers to participate in the storyworld. Mike Monello describes this as focusing on "making the fantasy world tangible to help people get a flavour of the show."[72] In

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[66] Claire Atkinson, "HBO Marches to Its Own Beat in Promotion," *TelevisionWeek* 24, no. 9 (February 28, 2005): 31.
[67] D. Thompson, *Hit Makers*, 247.
[68] Sam Thielman, "Bewkes: Game of Thrones Piracy 'Better Than an Emmy,'" *Adweek*, August 7, 2013, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/bewkes-game-thrones-piracy-better-emmy-151738/.
[69] Thielman, "Bewkes."
[70] David Cohen, "Twitter and HBO Are Taking Over Billboards in 3 Cities to Close Out Game of Thrones," *Adweek*, February 28, 2019, http://www.adweek.com/digital/twitter-and-hbo-are-taking-over-billboards-in-3-cities-to-close-out-game-of-thrones/.
[71] Alicia Beachley, "What Is Brand Activation?" April Five, August 27, 2018, http://www.april5.com.au/what-is-brand-activation/.
[72] Melanie Bourdaa, "This is not Marketing. This is HBO: Branding HBO with Transmedia Storytelling," *Networking Knowledge* 7, no. 1 (2014): 24.

some cases, "flavors" is meant literally: a pre-season one marketing campaign encouraged potential viewers to follow the *GoT* Twitter account in order to discover the locations of food trucks serving meals from various regions of Westeros.[73] This connected to a cryptic web-based game *The Maesters' Path*, in which critics and bloggers who received an exclusive Westeros-themed box in the mail could piece together clues to unlock exclusive content and obtain online stickers.[74] This campaign aimed to get fans of the source material excited about the upcoming series and encouraged them to use social media to spread awareness. As a result, when the mass marketing campaign came into effect, there was already a baseline of awareness among potential audience members who had not read the books.[75] By targeting the storyworld at existing books fans, HBO encouraged buzz that spread beyond those initial targets.

As the series became popular, HBO centered the storyworld in more of these buzz campaigns. #JoinTheRealm and "House of" encouraged viewers to use social media to share their own custom Westeros house sigils and tweet their house allegiance in order to receive a link to a trailer.[76] The "House of" campaign alone generated 2.9 million views across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Wikipedia, encouraging cross-platform interaction.[77] These kinds of campaigns engaged existing viewers in the fantasy storyworld in order to encourage them to spread awareness of *GoT* on social media. Sabrina Caluori, vice president of social media, referred to HBO as "conversation DJs" who "stoke the fires of fandom week after week."[78] The storyworld was central to this, with HBO focusing on how to "extend [the world of the show] in a way that feels authentic to the original programming."[79] In the context of activations, HBO used the storyworld to prompt conversation among the fandom and generate free marketing.

This embrace of the fantasy storyworld in activations seemingly stood at odds with HBO's avoidance of fantasy in trailers and billboards. However, as was discussed in chapter

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[73] Rebecca Cullers, "Tom Colicchio camps out in HBO food truck," *Adweek*, March 29, 2011, http://www.adweek.com/creativity/tom-colicchio-camps-out-hbo-food-truck-126887/.
[74] Bourdaa, "This," 24.
[75] Gabriel Beltrone, "Campfire Cooks Up Buzz for Game of Thrones," *Adweek*, April 20, 2011, http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/campfire-cooks-buzz-game-thrones-130803/.
[76] Justin Lafferty, "Shorty Awards: Which Facebook ad campaign was the best in 2013?" *Adweek*, April 4, 2014, http://www.adweek.com/digital/which-facebook-ad-campaign-was-the-best-in-2013/.; Janko Roettgers, "HBO Shares 'Game of Thrones' Season 6 Preview Clips with Fans on Twitter," *Variety*, January 22, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/digital/news/game-of-thrones-season-6-preview-clips-twitter-got-1201686376/.
[77] Jason Klein, "'Game of Thrones' Teaser Campaign Marks Buzziest Week Since Snow's 'Return,'" *Variety*, January 25, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/more/news/game-of-thrones-teaser-campaign-marks-buzziest-week-since-snows-return-1201687777/.
[78] Whitney Friedlander, "Cablers Study Social Media," *Variety*, June 20, 2013, https://variety.com/2013/digital/awards/hbo-game-of-thrones-social-media-food-network-1200498673/.
[79] Friedlander, "Cabler."

one, stakeholders may position or use the genre identity of a text differently in different contexts to satisfy different needs. This positioning can create further contestation, as a series's promotional materials present a variety of genre identities to different viewers. For activations to be effective, HBO needed to encourage viewers to not only engage with the promotional material, but to act on and share the materials. HBO's need for buzz has proven to be well served by the fandom of genres like SFF. As Brian Lowry notes, "pay channels are realizing that traits common among sci-fi and fantasy fandom — cultish devotion, viral communication and, perhaps most important, a willingness to spend money […] on that which tickles their fancy — dovetail nicely with the needs of pay-to-view subscription services."[80] SFF fans not only make for valuable subscribers for cable channels, particularly premium channels reliant on subscriptions, but their "cultish devotion" and "viral communication" make them an ideal target audience for activations. Chris Spadaccini, executive vice president and head of marketing, points to fantasy series as particularly suited to activations, especially "when you compare them to some of our other more prestige dramas like *Chernobyl* […] it's a big, epic, rich tapestry to play off of."[81] This tapestry made possible by the genre provides opportunities for marketing to engage with specific types of viewers, and encourages them to share in a way that might reach new viewers. In a new promotional industrial landscape, the commercial value of fantasy and fantasy fans has been renegotiated as channels realize they can benefit from the culturally devalued associations of these fans' "cultist devotion."

During the later seasons, activations allowed viewers to situate themselves more specifically in the fantasy elements of the series, rather than just within Westeros (which, without context, could be read as simply a historical medieval world). Augmented reality interactions allowed viewers to turn themselves into a White Walker and the Night King on Snapchat and Facebook, or even fight wights and White Walkers in AT&T stores.[82] At South by Southwest [SXSW], HBO staged numerous experiential activations. In SXSWesteros, visitors sampled a themed Three-Eyed Raven craft beer, took pictures in the Iron Throne, and

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[80] Brian Lowry, "Pay TV learns to speak geek," *Variety*, July 17, 2010, http://www.variety.com/2010/tv/news/pay-tv-learns-to-speak-geek-1118021854/.

[81] Andrew Wallenstein, "'Game of Thrones' Marketing No Mean Feat for Final Season," April 10, 2019, in *Strictly Business*, produced by Variety, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/strictly-business/id1367322664?i=1000434625951.

[82] Todd Spangler, "'Game of Thrones' Snapchat Selfie Lens Reached 45 Million People," *Variety*, July 24, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/digital/news/game-of-thrones-snapchat-selfie-lens-1202504900/.; David Cohen, "Facebook Pledged Its Allegiance to the Night King Prior to Game of Thrones' Season Finale," *Adweek*, August 25, 2017, http://www.adweek.com/digital/facebook-night-king-game-of-thrones-ar-camera-effect/.; Brittany Vincent, "Magic Leap Debuts 'Game of Thrones' AR Game," *Variety*, March 27, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/gaming/news/magic-leap-dead-must-die-game-of-thrones-1203173792/.

used augmented reality to confront White Walkers.[83] "Bleed for the Throne," a blood drive inside the Red Keep's throne room, was accompanied by a costume exhibit, a live twenty-four-person choir, twenty-seven minutes of original score, and a Dothraki language coach.[84] Another year, HBO set up a series of themed escape rooms based on *GoT*, *Veep*, and *Silicon Valley*, linking them together under the HBO banner as series that attract clever visitors who can solve intricate puzzles.[85] As Joanna Scholl, vice president of marketing for HBO, puts it, these types of experiential marketing installations are effective because they enable "the consumers to touch and feel the world of the show."[86] The impact of this tactile experience with a series goes beyond those who are personally able to visit, with visitors amplifying the reach of these installations by sharing their experiences on social media. For example, SXSWestworld, an award-winning experiential campaign for HBO's *Westworld* (2016–2022) that literally transported participants to a replica of Westworld, resulted in 1.9 billion social media impressions and months of press coverage.[87] By providing viewers and visitors the opportunity to immerse themselves in series' fantasy storyworlds, these campaigns can generate tremendous and long-lasting social media buzz.

The contrast between these activations and the channel's attempts to minimize fantasy in interviews and trailers is striking. In early discourses, Lombardo had celebrated that the pilot avoided "a full hint of the magic in the Martin books." In contrast, during the "Bleed for the Throne" activation, Trevor Guthrie enthused about their Dothraki language coach, stressing HBO's desire to make activations "as core and as pure to that fanbase as we can get."[88] In the different promotional context of activations, the channel encouraged viewers to turn themselves into magical creatures, fight fantasy villains, drink a custom craft beer named after a seer, and learn a constructed language from a costumed coach: completely embracing the "full hint of the magic." Fans, in turn, could reward an activation that was "core and pure" by

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[83] Alfred Maskeroni, "Take a Tour of HBO's Pretty Awesome SXSWesteros Game of Thrones Activation [Video]," *Adweek*, March 14, 2015, http://www.adweek.com/creativity/take-tour-hbos-pretty-awesome-sxswesteros-game-thrones-activation-163479/.
[84] Kristina Monllos, "To Enter Westeros, SXSW Attendees Must Bleed: Go Inside Giant Spoon's Game of Thrones Experience," *Adweek*, March 8, 2019, http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/inside-giant-spoons-life-saving-game-of-thrones-sxsw-experience/.
[85] Alfred Maskeroni, "HBO Built Fun, Intricate Escape Rooms at SXSW for Veep, Silicon Valley and Game of Thrones," *Adweek*, March 13, 2017, http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/hbo-built-fun-intricate-escape-rooms-at-sxsw-for-veep-silicon-valley-and-game-of-thrones/.
[86] Maskeroni.
[87] Erik Oster, "Giant Spoon | HBO, 'Best Western,'" *Adweek*, September 16, 2018, http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/2018s-23-most-effective-media-plans-used-next-level-innovation-and-creativity-to-reach-consumers/.
[88] Kristina Monllos, "HBO's Game of Thrones Activation at SXSW 2019," *Adweek*, March 8, 2019, video, https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/inside-giant-spoons-life-saving-game-of-thrones-sxsw-experience/.

helping the channel generate buzz. The contrast between these two approaches to the genre, and the resulting contestation surrounding the genre identity of *GoT*, harkens back to Plepler's initial desire to appeal to both "the passion of its natural fan base" and "those people who might not typically be connected to the sci-fi genre." By avoiding using the term fantasy to describe *GoT*, unless heavily qualified as being "much more than that,"[89] HBO allowed themselves the flexibility to avoid references to fantasy elements in promotional materials like trailers and billboards, and embrace the storyworld in activations to target different audiences. By the final season, HBO executives were less afraid of acknowledging that *GoT* was fantasy, but they used the genre only in specific contexts and in ways that benefited their brand.

After eight seasons, there are still no mentions of fantasy on the series's official HBO website or its Facebook page description. The website mentions that the series is the "Winner of 47 Emmys" before it even mentions the logline:[90] the first thing HBO wants viewers to know about *GoT* is that it is quality. Their efforts to avoid a strong association between *GoT* and fantasy have had some impact. Though the series can be found on fantasy genre lists of IMDb, the top three user-generated genre labels, and therefore the only genres that showed up on *GoT*'s profile at the time of writing, are action, adventure, and drama.[91]

In promotional discourses, HBO continues to create a sense of distance between the genre and the channel. Rather than courting viewers who are invested in any particular genre, HBO wants its subscribers and parent company to perceive the channel as housing a variety of genres that have a greater chance of creating "addicts" out of "a wide variety of viewers."[92] Similar to their claims post-*Sopranos*, HBO's claim post-*GoT* is that the channel is seeking an array of smaller series rather than chasing replicas of their most recent tentpole. Plepler insists that his focus is "curating excellence […] in an age of clutter,"[93] and claims that HBO's breadth of genres is one of its strengths in a competitive television environment.[94] Programming president Casey Bloys insists that he wants HBO to have series that are not fantasy and do not

[89] Levine, "Plepler."
[90] "Game of Thrones – Official Website," HBO, accessed July 8, 2019, http://www.hbo.com/game-of-thrones.
[91] "Game of Thrones," IMDb, accessed January 8, 2020, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0944947/.
[92] Jason Lynch, "To Thrive in the Era of Peak TV, HBO Is Turning Subscribers Into 'Addicts,'" *Adweek*, February 11, 2016, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/thrive-era-peak-tv-hbo-turning-subscribers-addicts-169572/.
[93] Jason Lynch, "HBO's New Owner, AT&T, Wants to Make the Network Bigger and Broader, Like Netflix," *Adweek*, July 9, 2018, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/hbos-new-owner-att-wants-to-make-the-network-bigger-and-broader-like-netflix/.
[94] Lynch, "To Thrive."

take place in "mythical realms."[95] And even when Spadaccini acknowledges that fantasy's global appeal makes the genre beneficial to the channel, he does not attribute the success to fantasy itself. Instead, he believes that "fantasy is the backdrop but what keeps you watching is just your emotional connection to the characters."[96] Even when HBO does acknowledge the value of fantasy to their channel, the appeal is still framed as in spite of rather than because of the fantasy elements.

What HBO does want to focus on is the idea that they have unique quality and bring in the top creators to do original work. Plepler has compared HBO to an art gallery "where the best artists want to hang their stuff,"[97] and insists that HBO's brand has been at its best when "artists have come in and done things that have never been done before."[98] It does not benefit HBO to admit that they want to follow genre trends and create more fantasy television series; tying themselves to a genre, particularly a now popular genre, would be in opposition to their brand of creating new and revolutionary programming. They need to reassure viewers and their parent company that they will not be turning into a fantasy channel. However, although HBO insists that they are uninterested in focusing on fantasy, they have followed *GoT* with a plethora of SFF series (some produced and others in talks): *Westworld*, *His Dark Materials* (2019–2022), *The Nevers* (2021–2023), *Demimonde*, *Watchmen* (2019), *Who Fears Death*, *Years and Years* (2019), *The Time Traveller's Wife* (2022), *Lovecraft Country* (2020), and *Circe* are only a short list.[99] Despite insisting that they are not looking for the next *Game of Thrones*, they have considered five proposed *GoT* prequels.[100] While it is important to their brand to claim a lack of interest in the genre, it is not reflective of the reality of their post-*GoT* current and proposed programming. This disconnect between their stated approach to programming and their series lays the groundwork for future contestation surrounding the genre identities of its series, and therefore potentially the broader understanding of fantasy.

HBO's interest in fantasy remains limited to certain types of series. When the *Lord of the Rings* prequel series was being shopped around, HBO passed because, as Plepler puts it,

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[95] Maureen Ryan, "HBO Boss Casey Bloys on Post-AT&T Outlook, What's Next for 'Westworld,' 'The Night Of,'" *Variety*, October 27, 2016, http://www.variety.com/2016/tv/news/westworld-renewal-the-night-of-hbo-casey-bloys-1201902681/.
[96] Wallenstein, "'Game of Thrones.'"
[97] Jason Lynch, "Why HBO Isn't Worried About Finding the Next Game of Thrones," *Adweek*, November 30, 2017, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/why-hbo-isnt-worried-about-finding-the-next-game-of-thrones/.
[98] Wallenstein, "Ep6."
[99] True to HBO's auteur-centered marketing, several of these series were positioned according to their showrunners' lineages: Joss Whedon's *The Nevers*, J. J. Abrams' *Demimonde*, and Damon Lindelof's *Watchmen*.
[100] At the time of writing, only one of these prequels has made it to air: *House of the Dragon* (2022–Present).

"I'd rather own our IP 100 percent, like we do with *Thrones*, and I'd rather have the ability to work with a product that is inextricably linked to our brand."[101] HBO is only interested in fantasy series that it can weave into the channel's brand. R. Colin Tait refers to this as the HBO-ification of genre, whereby HBO imports its house style of epic, subversive, gritty, auteur, and quality, as well as its lax nudity, content, and language regulations, onto genres to create a subversive "new" version of that genre.[102] Tait notes that "much of HBO's commercial and critical success is based on its unique exploitation of generic tropes."[103] This need to present genre through the filter of HBO's brand is key to how HBO framed *GoT* in promotional materials: before being fantasy, it was a war series, a political drama, a period piece. And when it was fantasy, it was not just fantasy, but an HBO-ified fantasy: it was quality, subversive, epic, auteur. Linda Antonsson emphasizes that *GoT* has played a crucial role in making fantasy tangible for the television industry: "It's not just 'fantasy' anymore. Fantasy means something."[104] But the definition that the genre has acquired, particularly for those channels who were not interested in it previously, has been written by HBO and HBO's brand.

This aftereffect on other channels is a crucial component of HBO-ification. Adam Whitehead credits *GoT* as the "battering ram" that knocked down the industry's final reticence towards producing fantasy for television.[105] Many channels now talk about finding "their *Game of Thrones*,"[106] leading to a rash of fantasy literature and comic books being optioned for adaptation to television.[107] These channels are not just trying to make series in the now popular genre of fantasy, but to replicate HBO's epic, subversive, auteur-centered version of fantasy. As Tait notes, "HBO has made a solid business of reviving and revising genre, while others have followed suit not only by emulating these changes, but by profiting from them as well."[108] At the time of writing, online SFF magazine Tor.com's list of upcoming SFF television adaptations exceeds 150.[109] For these series facing a market in which they are expected to

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[101] Lynch, "Why HBO."
[102] R. Colin. Tait, "The HBO-ification of Genre," *Cinephile* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 56.
[103] Tait, 51.
[104] Laura Antoniou et al., "Winter Came" (panel discussion, Worldcon 2019: The 77th Science Fiction Convention, Dublin, August 17, 2019.)
[105] Antoniou et al.
[106] Maureen Ryan, "Taking the Wrong Lessons from the Success of 'Game of Thrones,'" *Variety*, September 26, 2017, http://www.variety.com/2017/tv/opinion/game-of-thrones-success-hbo-money-wrong-lessons-1202573525/.
[107] Sam Thielman, "As Genre Shows Go Mainstream, TV Execs Look to Novelists for the Next Hit," *Adweek*, September 29, 2014, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/genre-shows-go-mainstream-tv-execs-are-looking-novelists-next-hit-160417/.
[108] Tait, "HBO-ification," 51.
[109] Stubby the Rocket, "(Almost) Every Sci-Fi/Fantasy TV or Movie Adaptation in the Works Right Now," *Tor.com*, November 25, 2019, http://www.tor.com/2019/11/25/almost-every-sci-fi-fantasy-tv-or-movie-adaptation-in-the-works-right-now/.

approach fantasy in a particular way, there is the potential for several new types of contestation. For series based on source material that does not fall into already HBO-esque subgenres like gritty fantasy and grimdark, the possible HBO-ification of these series could create contestation between the fantasy in the source and the fantasy in the adaptation. There is also the potential for series to be positioned as HBO-ified within marketing materials but not in the series themselves.[110] Other series will not be HBO-ified, and therefore will create contestation over whether fantasy television encompasses both HBO-ified fantasy and other types of fantasy. HBO-ification may seem to standardize fantasy television and reduce contestation, but it will likely actually introduce new sites of contestation between series and channels.

A single stakeholder is not accorded the sole power of defining a text's genre identity. Despite HBO's attempts to the contrary, the term fantasy *is* often applied to *GoT*. While it is outside the scope of this thesis to definitively claim the source of that genre label, there are a couple suggestive possibilities. One source is the original text: as an adaptation, the series came with a pre-established genre identity that may have proven hard to shake, especially considering HBO's reliance on *ASoIaF*'s existing fan base for *GoT*'s marketing in early seasons. However, another potential source is other channels. It is other channels, after all, that determine HBO's aftereffect by deciding why they think a particular HBO series is successful and attempting to replicate it. Regardless of HBO's marketing, what other channels saw as unique in *GoT*, and what they therefore began to option the rights to, was fantasy. Channels can function as stakeholders of other channels' texts, and create or contribute to contestation surrounding their genre identities. There is a distinct irony here. HBO was able to redefine the genre of fantasy television, but they did not get to define what genre label would be applied to their own series.

A Tale of Two Rebrands: Owning the Syfy Genre

In contrast to HBO, Syfy (originally Sci Fi Channel and later Sci Fi) has been viewed as the televisual home for fantasy and science fiction since its inception in 1992. However, despite the assumption that SFF series would perform better on Syfy, Barbara Selznick points out that, historically, science fiction series have significantly bigger audiences on broadcast networks, as "Light sf viewers seemed drawn to the broadcast network with a more inclusive brand image."[111] This point is echoed even by Syfy, with then-programming head Mark Stern arguing

[110] Grey notes a similar phenomenon occurred in film after *Lord of the Rings*, with many fantasy films "pitched as action films even when they are not" in order to position them as natural inheritors of *LotR*'s popularity. Grey, *Show*, 71.
[111] Selznick, "Branding," 195.

that if *Battlestar Galactica* "had been on another channel, or a channel that was called something else, it would have done even better. People who were forced to watch it said, 'Oh, this is a character drama! It's not sci-fi at all!'"[112] Although Syfy has been viewed as the natural home of SFF, it has not always had an easy relationship with these genres.

In 2009, Sci Fi rebranded as Syfy, the "house of imagination."[113] While far from Syfy's first rebrand (or even their first rebrand that decade), this was their most drastic to date, as it changed not only the spelling of their name, but also their relationship to their genre focus.[114] There were two main justifications given for the change at the time: trademark protection and a shift in their approach to genre. With more than fifty Sci Fi channels around the world, executives were frustrated with their inability to trademark their name.[115] As Bonnie Hammer, chairman of NBCUniversal's Cable Entertainment Group, put it, "We couldn't own Sci Fi; it's a genre […] But we can own Syfy."[116] Channel president David Howe emphasized their need for "a brand name that was own-able, portable and extendable."[117] Crucially, own-able did not simply refer to Syfy's ability to own their brand name, but to being able to own a brand itself. Howe stressed that "As a category generic, Sci Fi doesn't define us as a brand with its own point of view and attitude."[118] Syfy not only needed to separate their name from the genre term enough to be able to trademark it, but also to be able to craft a brand identity that was not solely tied to the genre.

The more controversial element of the rebrand was its attempt to change its relationship to the genres it supposedly housed. Howe insisted that, while "We love being sci fi and we're still embracing that,"[119] "the Sci Fi name is limiting. If you ask people their default perceptions of Sci Fi, they list space, aliens and the future […] That didn't capture the full landscape of fantasy entertainment: the paranormal, the supernatural, action and adventure, superheroes."[120] Syfy claimed that it was changing its name to better reflect the variety of genres beyond SF, like fantasy, that they were already producing. The channel's line at the time, coordinated and echoed across multiple interviews with multiple executives, was that instead of "changing the

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[112] Sam Thielman, "Syfy looks into the future," *Variety*, July 10, 2009, http://www.variety.com/2009/tv/features/syfy-looks-into-the-future-1118005855/.
[113] Marc Berman, "NBC Day at TCA," *Adweek*, August 6, 2009, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/nbc-day-tca-113113/.
[114] Selznick, "Branding," 187.
[115] James Hibberd, "Sci Fi Channel Rebrands," *Adweek*, March 16, 2009, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/sci-fi-channel-rebrands-98671/.
[116] Stuart Elliott, "Confused by Sci Fi Name? Can 'Syfy' Clarify?" *New York Times*, March 16, 2009: B7.
[117] Hibberd, "Sci Fi Channel Rebrands."
[118] Anthony Crupi, "Geeks Tweet Syfy Bleats," *Mediaweek*, March 16, 2009, Nexis.
[119] Hibberd, "Sci Fi Channel Rebrands."
[120] Elliott, "Confused," B7.

programming to suit some new brand strategy, we're changing the brand to fit the programming."[121] Syfy attempted to reassure existing viewers and SFF fans that, far from abandoning these genres, the name change would cement the channel's commitment to the variety of genres under the SFF banner that it was already programming.

Despite Syfy's insistence otherwise, fans worried that the channel was abandoning SFF, spawning a petition website nosyfy.com ("'We say no to the nonsense'") and tweets that mocked the similarity between "Syfy" and "syphilis."[122] Backlash to the channel name is certainly not new: Syfy has long struggled to balance courting a broad audience with keeping its niche fan base happy. During the channel's inception in 1992, some SF genre fans argued that the channel should rightly be called "SF Channel," while others conceded that "Sci Fi Channel" would draw a bigger audience and be more accessible to those outside of SF literary fandom.[123] This conflict speaks to the contestation between genre communities in different media: in literature, SF is the preferred acronym and any use of "sci-fi" is viewed as a sign that the speaker is outside the genre community.[124] By contrast, in film and television, "sci-fi" has gained currency and become the more popular shorthand.[125] Syfy had anticipated fan backlash over the rebrand, with Howe predicting prior to the launch that "Our core audience will use it [as] an opportunity to question our motives — they always do."[126] Syfy attempted to assuage fan concerns with gestures like an increased presence at traditional hubs of SFF fandom like San Diego Comic-Con [SDCC]. Blake Callaway, vice-president of brand marketing, emphasized Syfy's desire to "make sure fans knew we didn't abandon the genre and still deliver shows they love,"[127] trying to ensure that, as Syfy worked to broaden their appeal, they did not lose their existing audience.

However, fan skepticism over the channel's rebranding efforts were not unfounded. Some executives noted that it allowed viewers to "see us in a different light, beyond some of the perceptions as a narrow genre play."[128] Howe observed that it enabled Syfy to "keep the

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[121] Thielman, "Syfy looks."; Sam Thielman, "Syfy launches new name, shows," *Variety*, October 2, 2009, https://variety.com/2009/tv/news/syfy-launches-new-name-shows-1118009500/.
[122] Thielman, "Syfy looks."; Anthony Crupi, "Syfy Touts Brand; Announces Slate," *Adweek*, March 17, 2010, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/syfy-touts-brand-announces-slate-114950/.
[123] James Hibberd, "Sci Fi Channel founder bashes name change," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 23, 2009, http://www.reporter.blogs.com/live_feed/2009/03/sci-fi-channel-founder-bashes-name-change-.html.
[124] Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 114.
[125] Wolfe, 114.
[126] Hibberd, "Sci Fi Channel Rebrands."
[127] Marc Graser, "Syfy raises profile at Comic-Con," *Variety*, July 31, 2009, https://variety.com/2009/scene/markets-festivals/syfy-raises-profile-at-comic-con-1118006769/.
[128] Andrew Hampp, "Syfy Rebranding from Sci Fi Leaves NBC Smiling," *Advertising Age*, January 5, 2010, http://www.adage.com/article/media/media-syfy-rebranding-sci-fi-leaves-nbc-smiling/141308.

heritage, but also open up to a broader range of content."[129] This stated desire for a broader perception and range of content legitimized fan fears, both because of the stated desire to have non-SFF programming and because of the pejorative implication of SFF as narrow and limiting. By attempting to simultaneously direct discourses at SFF viewers and at a wider, genre-skeptical audience (including their parent company, NBCUniversal), Syfy muddied their rebranding message with regards to their relationship with SFF and threatened their relationship with their niche audience.

Beyond fans' particular genre concerns, scholars point out that rebrands can and should be viewed with critical scrutiny. Caldwell notes that rebranding serves to create "a media event in its own right."[130] The majority of trade press coverage of Syfy between 2008 and 2019 is focused on its 2009 rebrand and its 2017 brand reboot. While channels like HBO are regularly in the trade press, with executives centered in coverage of Television Critics Association press tours and in interviews about high-profile series, a less legitimated channel like Syfy has to create reasons for the trade press to talk about them. Caldwell observes that "Without 'paid' advertising's negative association with arm-twisting and hard sell, trade 'news' churns through the industry with the specter of sponsor partisanship stripped off."[131] Syfy's various rebranding efforts created events that trade press had to report, which provided the channel with advertising that had the veneer of authentic news even though "this news is almost always generated by corporate PR."[132] Through its lifetime, Syfy has regularly used its relationship with SFF to create a media event that generated free advertising.

Despite their insistence that Syfy would retain its devotion to SFF, the channel's programming for the first half of the 2010s ultimately veered more into alternate genres like paranormal reality shows, foreign acquisitions, and B-movies like *Sharknado*.[133] It was not until 2015, when *GoT* was in its fifth season and film franchises like *Star Wars* and Marvel were dominating the box office, that Syfy tried to shift back to original programming with series like *The Magicians*. According to Hammer, Syfy was attempting "to get back to its roots […] They are moving away from their alternative-reality shows and getting much more into

[129] Hibberd, "Sci Fi Channel Rebrands."
[130] Caldwell, *Production*, 251.
[131] Caldwell, 252.
[132] Caldwell, 253.
[133] Steinberg and Morfoot, "Syfy."

fiction, both high cost and lower cost."[134] In an era when SFF had become mainstream and popular, a return to their niche became beneficial for Syfy.

In contrast to HBO's approach to *GoT*, part of Syfy's approach to framing a series like *The Magicians* in promotional materials and discourses was to explicitly label the series as fantasy in order to publicize their return to their niche and their knowledge of the genre. Unlike Lombardo and Plepler, Howe described *The Magicians* as fantasy in a positive light. Rather than attempting to manage assumptions about the genre, he praised the pilot for "beautifully deliver[ing] a world filled with wonder, fantasy and intrigue."[135] The logline given in the initial press release foregrounded the role of fantasy and magic in its description of the series:

> Based upon Lev Grossman's best-selling books, *The Magicians* stars Jason Ralph […] as Quentin Coldwater, a brilliant grad student who enrolls in Brakebills College for Magical Pedagogy, a secret upstate New York university specializing in magic. He and his 20-something friends soon discover that the magical fantasy world they read about as children is all too real – and poses grave danger to humanity.[136]

In stark contrast with the *GoT* logline, *The Magicians*' logline mentioned magic three times and fantasy once and, crucially, highlighted these as major, positive elements at the forefront of the series. In part, this is the result of *The Magicians* fitting into the portal-quest subgenre. Quentin's entrance to Brakebills College, and later to the magical fantasy world of Fillory, are crucial elements of the premise: the series cannot be summarized without describing these encounters with the fantastic. Unlike HBO, who chose an immersive fantasy to adapt that could be described without reference to its fantasy elements, Syfy chose to adapt a series whose primary narrative centered around the genre.

The first season trailers similarly focused on magic as a selling point, particularly in one promotional trailer that centers around flashing definitions of how magic would be treated in the series: "Magic is a skill. Instinct. Magic is a gift. Curse. Passion. Hunger. Magic is a desire. Magic is a drug."[137] The first and second season taglines, "Magic is a drug. Get hooked" and "Fantasy Gets Real," explicitly mentioned the fantasy elements and genre and were

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[134] Jason Lynch, "To Drum Up Interest in The Magicians, Syfy Makes the Premiere's Ads Disappear," *Adweek*, December 9, 2015, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/drum-interest-its-new-series-syfy-makes-premiere-s-ads-disappear-168527/.
[135] Whitney Friedlander, "Syfy Greenlights 'Magicians' to Series," *Variety*, May 4, 2015, https://variety.com/2015/tv/news/magicians-syfy-lev-grossman-series-1201486728/.
[136] Robert Prentice, "Pilot Order: Syfy Greenlights 'The Magicians' To Series," Three If By Space, May 4, 2015, http://www.threeifbyspace.net/2015/05/pilot-order-syfy-greenlights-the-magicians-to-series/.
[137] TV Promos, "The Magicians (Syfy) 'Magic Is' Promo HD," YouTube, December 9, 2015, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQxr-lLZK30.

prominently displayed in promotional materials.[138] The second season posters and billboards in particular splashed the "Fantasy Gets Real" tagline next to images of characters performing magic, with the use of chiaroscuro contrast pulling the visual emphasis from the dark background to the bright images of spellcasting (see Figure 6). The Winter's Doe, an antlered-humanoid magical creature, was given particular prominence in the season two marketing campaign (see Figure 7): her inhuman and magical appearance emphasized that this was not just a series about humans who could do magic, but about otherworldly creatures. Transmedia extensions even allowed users to immerse themselves in the different fantasy subgenres that the series encompassed. A first season website invited visitors to take entrance exams for Brakebills University, emphasizing the season's focus on portraying an adult-centered variant of the magical academy subgenre.[139] A post-season two website, Welcome to Fillory, invited fans to explore the secondary world of Fillory through weekly quests "to discover fantastical creatures, monstrous enemies, ancient Gods and hidden worlds," encouraging viewers to

Figure 6. (left) *The Magicians* season two promotional poster for protagonist Quentin Coldwater. "Jason Ralph in The Magicians (2015)," IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4254242/mediaviewer/rm3767615232.
Figure 7. (right) *The Magicians* season two promotional poster for the Winter's Doe. "The Magicians (2015)," IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4254242/mediaviewer/rm206262272.

[138] "The Magicians," IMDb, video, https://www.imdb.com/videoplayer/vi2402925849.; TV Promos, "The Magicians Season 2 Trailer #3 (HD)," YouTube, January 4, 2017, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqZBbNOf4A8.
[139] "Welcome to Brakebills University," Brakebills, SYFY, http://www.brakebillsu.com/.

participate in the portal-quest subgenre.[140] While the variety of non-fantasy genres of the series, like university, romance, and coming-of-adulthood, were present in promotional materials, they were paired with fantasy rather than emphasized over it.

These marketing materials crucially positioned Syfy as not just being unafraid to label a single series as fantasy, but as a channel that understands fantasy and the experiences of fantasy fans. On Buzzfeed (a sibling company of Syfy under the NBCUniversal umbrella), Syfy posted native advertising from their "The Magicians" account in the form of sponsored quizzes and list articles [listicles] that were designed to mimic typical Buzzfeed content. Though a listicle of "13 Reasons We Want An Acceptance Letter To Brakebills University" urged readers to "Forget those other magic academies," it actually aimed to get readers to do the opposite by explicitly linking *The Magicians* to other fantasy series in the magical academies subgenre.[141] The emphasis on acceptance letters was a deliberate choice as Brakebills students do not receive acceptance letters in either the books or the television series. They are informed of admissions decisions in person. By invoking acceptance letters and referencing "other magic academies," Syfy explicitly linked *The Magicians* to other fantasy series like Harry Potter, and to popular memes in which fans of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry complain that they are still waiting for their acceptance letters.[142] This rhetoric tied Syfy's adaptation into the pre-existing positioning of *The Magicians* books as "Harry Potter for adults."[143] Unlike HBO, whose brand benefited from ignoring existing subgenres of fantasy and presenting themselves as the authors of a new version of the genre, Syfy's brand was strengthened by going out of their way to link series to existing subgenres and demonstrating their knowledge of these subgenres and the fan conversations surrounding them. A sponsored Buzzfeed quiz, "F@%k, Marry, Kill: Fantasy Genre Edition," explicitly linked *The Magicians* with the fantasy genre and sought to demonstrate that Syfy knows fantasy tropes and the debates that fantasy fans might have, asking quiz takers to decide between "fairy, centaur, and mermaid" and "griffin, unicorn, and dragon."[144] Establishing themselves as a

[140] Alexandra Jardine, "Explore the Mystical World of 'The Magicians' in Syfy's Interactive Experience," *AdAge*, January 26, 2017, http://www.adage.com/creativity/work/welcome-fillory/50690.
[141] The Magicians, "13 Reasons We Want An Acceptance Letter To Brakebills University," Buzzfeed, January 26, 2016, http://www.buzzfeed.com/magicianssyfy/we-want-an-acceptance-letter-to-brakebills.
[142] Even though Fillory is an in-universe version of Narnia and the Fillory books a version of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, both critics and promotional materials emphasize *The Magicians*' connection to the more recently popular Harry Potter over *Narnia*.
[143] Michael Agger, "Abracadabra Angst," *New York Times*, September 8, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/13/books/review/Agger-t.html.
[144] The Magicians, "F@%k, Marry, Kill: Fantasy Genre Edition," Buzzfeed, February 1, 2017, http://www.buzzfeed.com/magicianssyfy/fmk-fantasy-genre-edition.

channel that knew how *The Magicians* fit into the modern fantasy landscape and fandom aimed to increase Syfy's perceived authenticity among those fans.

Materials like the "F@%k, Marry, Kill" quiz emphasized a key shift in how Syfy marketed and produced SFF. In contrast to the pulpy style of their early 2010s fare, Syfy used series like *The Magicians* to, as Howe put it, "strengthen Syfy's ownership of premium quality sci-fi fantasy drama."[145] In a time when these genres had become popular on many channels, particularly cable, Howe stressed that

> the way for us to smartly stand out is to be the home of the best on the spectrum. We really want to be seen as tackling the absolute heart of the genre, whether it's science fiction, fantasy, supernatural, paranormal or even superhero. […] we do not want to be in the dumbed-down, sci-fi-lite space. We want high production value, smart-writing, smart acting and [to] really stand for some ambition and boldness.[146]

Syfy did not just want to be associated with SFF, but with quality and with the way that these genres are produced on premium cable channels. This was the impact of HBO-ification, as basic cable channels like Syfy increasingly pushed the boundaries of what they were allowed to do in order to mimic series produced by premium cable. Basic cable is not subject to the Federal Communications Commission restrictions, so "the channels' self-regulation is based on standard mores, and what advertisers are perceived to tolerate."[147] As Pop TV president Brad Schwartz puts it, in cable, "we all just decide what's best for our brands."[148] Historically, a channel like Syfy would not use certain curse words and would avoid nudity or soft-core sex scenes to appease advertisers. However, Sera Gamble, co-creator of *The Magicians*, notes that on channels

> like HBO that have been prestigious for some time, it's known that you're going to get edgy, adult content […] Places like Syfy and Lifetime and USA, part of being competitive is presenting content that competes with the premium shows at a content level. […] It signals to the audience we're not giving you the watered-down version.[149]

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[145] Nikara Johns, "Syfy Greenlights 'The Magicians' Pilot," *Variety*, July 10, 2014, https://variety.com/2014/tv/news/the-magicians-syfy-pilot-1201260552/.
[146] Laura Prudom, "Syfy Returns to its Roots with 'The Expanse,' 'Childhood's End,'" *Variety*, December 14, 2015, https://variety.com/2015/tv/features/syfy-sci-fi-the-expanse-childhoods-end-magicians-hunters-1201661266/.
[147] Kate Arthur, "When It Comes To Language, Broadcasters Increasingly Don't Give A Fuck," *Buzzfeed News*, January 30, 2018, http://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kateaurthur/saying-fuck-on-tv#.bcRm45w7y.
[148] Michael Schneider, "'The Magicians' Leads The Charge as Basic Cable Breaks the F-Bomb Barrier In an F—ing Big Way," *IndieWire*, January 31, 2018, http://www.indiewire.com/2018/01/the-magicians-syfy-f-word-basic-cable-language-fx-usa-1201923587/.
[149] Schneider, "'The Magicians.'"

Driven by an urge to compete with premium channels and streaming services, and *to signal that they were engaging in that competition*, Syfy pushed its content boundaries, which showed up in *The Magicians* in two ways: sex and language.

Channels like Showtime and HBO were the first to take "a major step in making soft-core sex respectable" by "claiming new cultural real estate in the name of quality TV."[150] Basic cable channels like Syfy, USA, and FX followed suit in order to remain competitive.[151] This change made its way into *The Magicians*' marketing materials, with multiple season one trailers prominently featuring a shot in which two characters magically floated to the ceiling while having sex. This shot emphasized the series's use of both sex and magic, and inextricably linked them. Magic is, to quote the trailer, passion and desire. Similarly, a trailer released the same year for Syfy's SF series *The Expanse* (2015–2022) had a shot of two characters floating while having sex in zero gravity.[152] These trailers advertised the combination of an SFF storyworld with the channel's willingness to show soft-core sex, turning Syfy's HBO-ified version of these genres into a point of marketing. In direct contrast to HBO, rather than presenting the fantasy and adult elements of the series as in conflict with one another or as subverting genre tropes by co-existing, Syfy centered the pairing of the two as natural.

Language has also evolved on basic cable. For the first two seasons, *The Magicians* used a steady supply of "fucks" but Syfy required the word be "dipped" by muting either the f or the k.[153] However, as Michael Schneider notes, "certain advertisers, particularly ones targeting younger audiences, have started to accept that edgy language is necessary for basic cable networks to compete with streaming services and premium cable networks, where language has always been unrestricted."[154] In 2017, the dipping requirement was lifted: Syfy now allows the full word to be used when it is "deemed important to the style or plot of a show."[155] The third season trailers for *The Magicians* celebrated this change. When major character Eliot Waugh was told that he was being sent on an epic quest, he responded with "That sounds like something I might really fuck up."[156] This line combined the channel's knowledge of and playful attitude towards fantasy tropes with its new language allowances,

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[150] Robert Thompson, "Art & Commerce: Nobody Does It Better," *Adweek*, November 19, 2007, http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/art-commerce-nobody-does-it-better-91090/.
[151] T.L. Stanley, "TV Gets Undressed," *Adweek*, August 24, 2014, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/tv-gets-undressed-159688/.
[152] IGN, "The Expanse Trailer," YouTube, January 16, 2015, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQuTAPWJxNo.
[153] Arthur, "When."
[154] Schneider, "'The Magicians.'"
[155] Arthur, "When."
[156] "Season 3 Trailer," IMDb, video, https://www.imdb.com/videoplayer/vi3636312089?.

and centered that combination in promotional materials. Making allowances for sex and language was a crucial way for basic cable channels in an era of peak TV to compete with premium cable and streaming services, and depicting this in marketing signaled basic channel's competitiveness and ability to produce HBO-ified genres to potential viewers. However, while Syfy centered the HBO-ified use of language and sex, they did not depict these elements as conflicting with fantasy, thereby contesting HBO's assertion that fantasy had to be "turned" into a genre for adults. And by making an HBO-ified fantasy series that was tied into the genre's literary history, Syfy was also contesting the distance HBO tried to create between "their" version of fantasy and the rest of the genre.

The continued popularity of SFF, and the need to inspire a new media conversation about themselves in order to stay competitive, led Syfy to a brand reboot in 2017, in time for the channel's twenty-fifth anniversary. Despite the success of series like *The Magicians*, Syfy's ratings had been struggling at the end of 2016.[157] Schneider argued that "Part of those declines may be due to a perception that Syfy had moved too far beyond its core sci-fi." In announcing the reboot, Chris McCumber, president of entertainment networks for NBCUniversal, admitted that the 2009 rebrand had aimed to broaden beyond SFF, and presented the 2017 reboot as a change in strategy:

> Just a few years ago the entire industry, Syfy included, really felt the need to go broader to gain market share and be successful. We believe now that the opportunity for Syfy is to do the exact opposite. It has become crystal clear to us […] that owning the genre is much more than simply making great science fiction shows. It's also about creating a universe for fans to come and celebrate the genre that they love.[158]

In an era when, as McCumber puts it, SFF "is more popular than ever. It tops the box office, it rules television and it dominate social conversation,"[159] Syfy publicly re-examined the distance they had tried to create from these genres in 2009.

The result was a brand reboot in which the logo and look of its platforms were updated from purple and white to green and black (see Figures 8 and 9). Although they discussed reverting the name back to Sci Fi, the channel settled on stylizing Syfy in all-caps, giving it a more futuristic appearance.[160] McCumber stressed that Syfy would "focus on four core

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[157] Michael Schneider, "SYFY Blows Up Its Brand, Orders 'Krypton' and 'Happy!' to Series As It Doubles Down on Genre," *IndieWire*, May 11, 2017, http://www.indiewire.com/2017/05/syfy-krypton-happy-george-rr-martin-nightflyers-the-purge-1201815269/.
[158] Steinberg and Morfoot, "Syfy."
[159] Schneider, "SYFY."
[160] Schneider.

Figure 8. (left) Syfy logo from 2009–2017. James Hibberd, "Syfy unveils new logo. Um, what do you think?" *Entertainment Weekly*, May 17, 2017, https://ew.com/tv/2017/05/11/syfy-logo/.
Figure 9. (right) Syfy logo from 2017–Present. Hibberd, "Syfy."

programming areas: Sci-fi and space programming (like 'The Expanse'), fantasy ('The Magicians'), paranormal and supernatural ('Channel Zero') and superheroes and comics."[161] Whereas the 2009 rebrand had framed Syfy's desire to encompass this variety of genres as broadening their genre appeal, the 2017 rebrand framed it as a return to their niche and specifically named each of these genres as core programming areas to emphasize the channel's knowledge of and commitment to each of these genres. Syfy announced that they would double their scripted content,[162] noting that series like *Happy* (2017–2019), *Futurama* (1999–Present), and *The Magicians* each brought in new audiences, particularly those who had never "sampled Syfy before."[163] This acknowledgment of new audiences was in direct conflict with earlier discourses. In 2009, Syfy had portrayed its genres as having a limited niche appeal, claiming that they would have to broaden beyond these genres to appeal to new viewers outside of SFF fandom. In 2017, Syfy framed different SFF series as bringing in new audiences from *within* the fandom, acknowledging the breadth and variety within its genres and series. Howe shifted from talking about his desire for a "broader range of content" to his desire to tackle the "absolute heart of the genre" and avoid "the dumbed-down, sci-fi-lite space." After eight years of changes in industrial practices and the perception of the genres, Syfy shifted how it portrayed its relationship with its genres and contested its earlier assertions about the genre's appeal and variety.

By making a media event out of their brand reboot, Syfy attempted to draw the attention of both SFF fans and their parent company to the fact that the channel intended to cater to the now-popular genres. McCumber insisted that the fans wanted "high-end scripted originals […] and we need to be servicing those fans."[164] As part of this focus on fans, Syfy's priority became

[161] Schneider.
[162] Jason Lynch, "In Brand Reboot, Syfy Doubles Its Scripted Series and Broadens Scope to Include Superhero Programming," *Adweek*, May 11, 2017, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/in-brand-reboot-syfy-doubles-its-scripted-series-and-broadens-scope-to-include-superhero-programming/.
[163] Jason Lynch, "USA and Syfy Prepare for Big Swings and New Franchises With Unsolved and Krypton," *Adweek*, February 27, 2018, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/usa-and-syfy-prepare-for-big-swings-and-new-franchises-with-unsolved-and-krypton/.
[164] Lynch, "In Brand."

series with established intellectual property [IP], rather than original series. McCumber stressed that "The heart of Syfy's brand is all about fandom" and finding series "that we believe will have not only a built-in fanbase, but a fanbase that we can grow from that."[165] These fans were considered one of Syfy's biggest assets, helping to generate buzz for upcoming and current series, as *ASoIaF* fans did with *GoT*. Mark Marshall, executive vice president of entertainment group advertising sales for NBCUniversal, emphasized that many brands have increased their presence at SDCC over the past decade "because of that passionate fanbase that they have. […] we're taking that weekend of Comic-Con and building it out into a 365[-day] event."[166] Syfy positioned itself as a year-round comic convention for SFF fans in order to court fans of the channel's new IP acquisitions and SFF fans who do not watch Syfy. In Syfy's "Don't Skip the Ads" YouTube campaign for *Childhood's End* (2015), spots played with trailer viewers' familiarity with actors from other SFF series like Charles Dance, *GoT*'s Twyin Lannister.[167] These ads were specifically targeted at YouTube viewers who were "fans of those other shows" but "may not have ever considered Syfy before."[168] Syfy positioned themselves as a destination that acquired established IP and celebrated series beyond their own programming in order to make themselves more attractive to a broader audience of SFF fans.

Aside from marketing for their own series, Syfy planned to engage these viewers with what Edgerton and Nicholas refer to as passion points. Passion points are extensions beyond the original television channel that aim "to keep the network brand in tune with the needs and desires of its niche target audience."[169] McCumber emphasized that "owning the genre" required these kinds of passion points; while in the past, Syfy "would spend the bulk of its time just talking about its own programming. […] we're still going to do that, but we want to talk about the entire genre."[170] Creating these conversations about genre may prove crucial for Syfy's survival because, as Edgerton notes, the risk "with basing a company's brand loyalty on the most prominent product that it provided was that there invariably appeared competitors who were willing and able to supply the public with the same service."[171] Given SFF's popularity on a variety of channels, Syfy needed to carve out a relationship with these genres

[165] Lynch, "USA and Syfy."
[166] Lynch, "In Brand."
[167] Tim Baysinger, "Here's How Syfy Plans to Hook Viewers on Skippable Ads," *Adweek*, December 10, 2015, http://www.adweek.com/tv-video/heres-how-syfy-plans-hook-viewers-skippable-ads-168509/.
[168] Baysinger.
[169] Edgerton and Nicholas, "'I Want,'" 253.
[170] Lynch, "In Brand."
[171] Gary R. Edgerton, introduction to *The Essential HBO Reader*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 7.

that was unique and provided something that other channels could or would not, creating what Cynthia Littleton and David Zaslav refer to as an "ecosystem of genre."[172]

Syfy currently has two main passion points: Syfy Wire and SDCC coverage. Previously known as Blastr, Syfy Wire is Syfy's news and content hub for "Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror News."[173] Syfy Wire is billed as providing "breaking genre news, analysis and other original content covering TV, film, books, comics, gaming and technology. In addition to digital and social platforms, that content will pop up in interstitials and lower thirds on linear programming."[174] Alexandra Shapiro, executive vice president of marketing and digital for NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment, equates Syfy Wire to "what E News is to E! […] It will give fans a reason to engage."[175] Syfy Wire aims to "bring [fans] into our ecosystem and have them watch our original series."[176] When visitors access the Syfy Wire website, they are using the website for the entire channel and, while the homepage displays articles on SFF series from a variety of channels, a button on the header follows viewers around the site and invites them to "Watch Syfy Shows." Syfy Wire provides a platform for non-channel viewers to engage with their genres of interest, but only by engaging with the channel and potentially being funneled into the channel's own programming.

Syfy has also expanded their presence at various yearly conventions and festivals, particularly SDCC, which Shapiro describes as "our Super Bowl."[177] With a "Syfy Live at Comic-Con" show, the channel seeks "to bring the Con to life for those people who don't have a ticket to San Diego."[178] The show does not emphasize Syfy series or panels, but instead uses the Syfy name as a platform for virtual access to SDCC. Syfy also establishes its insider knowledge as a fellow SDCC attendee with promotional materials on sites like Buzzfeed. Listicles like "8 Comics Everyone Going To Comic-Con Can Relate To" and "If Comic-Con Was An Old School Video Game"[179] portray Syfy's knowledge of the Con experience through media like comics and video games, promoting their con-goer credibility through the lens of

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[172] Cynthia Littleton, "David Zaslav: Why Brands and IP Matter More Than Channels," November 13, 2018, in *Strictly Business*, produced by Variety, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/strictly-business/id1367322664?i=1000423785886.
[173] Steinberg and Morfoot, "Syfy."
[174] Lynch, "In Brand."
[175] Steinberg and Morfoot, "Syfy."
[176] Steinberg and Morfoot.
[177] Lynch, "In Brand."
[178] Laura Prudom and Kristopher Tapley, "Comic-Con Preview: Networks Boost Presence as Film Studios Take a Back Seat," *Variety*, July 20, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/biz/news/comic-con-2016-preview-1201817483/.
[179] SYFY, "8 Comics Everyone Going To Comic-Con Can Relate To," Buzzfeed, July 19, 2016, http://www.buzzfeed.com/syfy/comic-con-comics?b=1.; SYFY, "If Comic-Con Was An Old School Video Game," Buzzfeed, July 14, 2017, http://www.buzzfeed.com/syfy/if-comic-con-was-a-video-game?b=1.

their geek credibility. One quiz invites users to determine the Dungeons & Dragons alignment of their cats with "What Kind Of Person Is Your Cat Actually?"[180] By not mentioning SDCC in the title or short description, this promotional material targets people who are interested in other aspects of fantasy fandom like D&D, and then encourages them to engage with their genre interest through Syfy's SDCC coverage and Syfy Wire. Syfy's SDCC online presence seeks to attract fans from various segments of SFF fandom, even outside of television programming, and draw them into the Syfy ecosystem.

In addition to the passion points of Syfy Wire and SDCC coverage, Syfy is also developing a news program and contemplating hosting their own award show for fantasy, SF, and horror.[181] McCumber claims that Syfy has "both the linear and digital platforms in order to capture this audience in ways that others can't."[182] By developing passion points to engage SFF fans, both those who do and do not watch Syfy, the channel is attempting to capture an audience invested in genre in a way that channels who only produce series in these genres are unable or unlikely to. In 2008, Hammer claimed that NBCU cable channels like Syfy operated with a brand filter, in which "nothing will get a green light—whether it's an entire series, whether it's a piece of marketing, whether it's an online piece of content, something on mobile—unless we check it off on our brand filter."[183] The 2009 rebrand cast doubt on this filter, as Syfy veered away from its genre roots into a more ambiguous brand. But the 2017 reboot made a media event out of their new brand filter. Not only did Syfy appear to be filtering its program and channel marketing through their brand, but they centered their brand filter itself as a point of advertisement. Rather than quietly changing the focus of their programing and adding passion points, Syfy turned its changing relationship with SFF into a media event.

Syfy's brand is crucial not just for letting the channel flourish in a time when the genres of its niche are so popular, but for the survival of the channel itself in a cord-cutting era. Passion points like Syfy Wire and Syfy Live are Syfy's attempts to prove to NBCUniversal that it has a unique connection to a loyal audience that transcends their programming, "extends beyond the TV screen," and benefits the entire conglomerate. Demonstrating this is particularly urgent for Syfy, as NBCUniversal has shut down and retooled some of its underperforming cable channels.[184] Establishing themselves as having a unique investment in SFF, emphasizing these

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[180] SYFY, "What Kind Of Person Is Your Cat Actually?" Buzzfeed, July 14, 2017, http://www.buzzfeed.com/syfy/cat-alignment?b=1.
[181] Steinberg and Morfoot, "Syfy."
[182] Lynch, "In Brand."
[183] Andrew Hampp, "Hammer: NBCU Cable is All About 'Brandwidth,'" *Advertising Age* 79, no. 15 (April 14, 2008), S14.
[184] Steinberg and Morfoot, "Syfy."

genres in promotional materials and discourses, and explicitly marketing series like *The Magicians* as fantasy and series like *Nightflyers* as "sci-fi horror"[185] allows the channel to establish, not just their niche, but their credibility to own that niche. That credibility allows them to offer sites of viewer engagement beyond their programming that reinforce the value of the channel remaining a distinct entity. At the moment, many channels have fantasy television series. Only one can tell me that my cats are lawful good and chaotic neutral.

However, this brand filter does not mean that Syfy's relationship with SFF is fully coordinated, scripted, and consistent. Syfy executives continue to use "sci-fi" to refer to both SF as an individual genre and SF as an umbrella term for SFF (and occasionally horror). Sometimes "sci-fi fantasy" or "genre" are used as the umbrella term instead, without any clear motivation for the change. Other times, "genre" is used to include the wider list of popular genres, rather than only SFFH. The umbrella term varies between executives and even within a single interview with a single executive, which suggests that there is no conscious agreement within Syfy as to what these terms mean. This lack of coordination contributes to the contestation surrounding these genre terms and their relationships to one another. The term "fantasy" shifts from being part of the umbrella term to being implied to be (though never explicitly labelled as) a subgenre of science fiction to being a genre in its own right. HBO understates their investment in fantasy in public discourses; Syfy's lack of coordinated attention to their use of terminology suggests that they overstate theirs. Given eight more years, and inevitable shifts in industrial practices and the perception of these genres, will they still be claiming to own the "absolute heart of the genre," or will they be back to the need for "a broader range of content"?

Channeling Fantasy: Beyond HBO and Syfy

While HBO and Syfy represent unique extremes for the discussion of fantasy, there are brand-specific echoes across other channels. NBC's *The Good Place* (2016–2020) provides one example. As Andrew J. Bottomley notes, because of their reliance on bigger, more general audiences, broadcast networks use less specific branding than that of cable channels because they are "not able to narrowcast to the same degree […] Rather, specific programs must be branded individually or, as is more common, blocks of programming will be branded

[185] Joe Otterson, "Syfy Orders George RR Martin's 'Nightflyers' to Pilot," *Variety*, June 23, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/syfy-george-rr-martin-nightflyers-pilot-1202477118/.

together."[186] *The Good Place* was a centerpiece in NBC's efforts at "rebuilding and redefining the comedy brand for NBC,"[187] and was therefore scheduled in their traditional Thursday night comedy block and explicitly marketed as part of "Comedy Returns to Thursday."[188] Although *The Good Place* was labelled as fantasy by other stakeholders, NBC's investment lay in blocks of comedy programming, so fantasy was largely sidelined to vague and occasional references to *The Good Place* being "otherworldly comedy."[189] Comedy was used to stress the parts of the series that were familiar to NBC viewers and broadly appealing, with fantasy buried in oblique references to the elements that made the series quirky and unique.

When channels are not invested in fantasy, their promotional discourses about the genre may even vary by series. For example, premium cable channel Starz hosted two major fantasy series in the 2010s: *Outlander* (2014–Present) and *American Gods* (2017–2021). Starz's remit at the time was to center so-called quality programming with pre-existing fans who they could draw on to serve as an "auxiliary marketing team";[190] their investment was in these built-in audiences rather than any particular genre. *Outlander* is marketed largely as a historical drama and a romance, the genres of the series assumed to have the most appeal to the fan base of the source material.[191] Marketing materials for the series occasionally mention "science fiction" and "fantasy" interchangeably without any specificity or emphasis, and the genre labels are often replaced with the vaguer (in terms of genre) "time travel."[192] *American Gods*, on the other hand, was based on the novel by the popular fantasy author Neil Gaiman; the built-in fanbase for this series was assumed to be SFF fandom, and "fantasy" was used much more specifically and prominently in marketing materials.[193] Because Starz's investment was in speaking the

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[186] Andrew J. Bottomley, "Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television: Marketing and Promoting *Friday Night Lights*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (2015): 485, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2015.1031624.

[187] Elizabeth Wagmeister, "Broadcast Networks Re-Commit to Comedy in Hopes of Finding Next Big Hit," *Variety*, June 8, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/tv/news/broadcast-fall-schedules-comedy-2016-2017-1201790721/.

[188] TV Promos, "The Good Place (NBC) 'This Place Rules' Promo HD," YouTube, July 3, 2016, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vq5sw6ao2os.

[189] "TV WEEK: The Good Place series premiere billboards...," *Daily Billboard Blog*, September 19, 2016, https://www.dailybillboardblog.com/2016/09/tv-week-good-place-series-premiere.html.

[190] Jason Lynch, "Starz Is Capitalizing on Cachet of New Owner Lionsgate," *Adweek*, August 1, 2016, https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/starz-capitalizing-cachet-new-owner-lionsgate-172749/.

[191] See Laura Prudom, "Starz's 'Outlander' Woos Women with Strong Female Protagonist," *Variety*, August 7, 2014, https://variety.com/2014/tv/news/starz-outlander-woos-women-with-strong-female-protagonist-1201277091/.

[192] Outlander, "12 Reasons It Would Be Outlandish To Miss 'Outlander,'" Buzzfeed, July 21, 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/starzoutlander/reasons-it-would-be-outlandish-to-miss-outlander/.; Outlander, "Outlander– About," Facebook, accessed July 18, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/pg/OutlanderTVSeries.starz/about/.

[193] "About the Book," OMG American Gods, accessed June 28, 2019, http://omgamericangods.com/#about/about-the-book.

assumed languages of the pre-existing audiences for their source material, they did not invoke the genre of fantasy consistently across their series, which contributed to contestation surrounding what the genre looked like on their channel.

Conglomerates can add additional sites of contestation, as the parent company may define a series differently than its channel does. At the 2016 upfronts, in which NBCUniversal presented the work of all its channels together, *The Magicians* and USA's SF series *Colony* (2016–2018) were grouped together under the heading of "Dreamers."[194] NBCUniversal does not have the same investment that Syfy does in using terms like fantasy and science fiction, or in distinguishing between these genres. Instead, its emphasis at an event like the upfronts is on creating links between the series across its many channels that might appeal to the same advertisers. The usage and positioning of genre varies even within the same corporate umbrella, creating further sites of contestation.

Conclusion: The Game of Channel Brand Musical Chairs

These case studies of HBO and Syfy represent two different approaches channels can take to genre. HBO's brand is based on notions of quality, auteur, and subversion. A genre like fantasy is useful only so far as it can be "reinvented" by HBO. For Syfy, investing in fantasy is a crucial way to invest in the channel's future. Rather than trying to redefine the fantasy genre itself, Syfy is trying to redefine its relationship to fantasy and demonstrate the ways it inherits notions of fantasy that are generated by literature, viewers, and other channels like HBO. The channels' respective brands determine not only how they interact with fantasy as a genre, but also how they interact with other genre stakeholders and the concept of genre more broadly.

Channel brands are how channels prove their value within a media conglomerate and ensure their survival. In a cord-cutting era, conglomerates are looking more closely at channels and questioning their individual value. Even HBO, whose brand would seem to be secure, felt this strain in the late 2010s after John Stankey, CEO of AT&T's media businesses, publicly announced that he "doesn't believe it makes sense to keep WarnerMedia's TV outlets in separate silos."[195] AT&T started to consolidate the centers of power for HBO and Turner, appointing one executive (Robert Greenblatt) to oversee them both.[196] Stankey commented

[194] Jason Lynch, "NBCUniversal Asserts Its Dominance Over Digital Video Players," *Adweek*, May 16, 2016, https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/nbcuniversal-asserts-its-dominance-over-digital-video-players-biggest-upfront-has-ever-existed-171493/.
[195] Michael Schneider, "HBO and Turner Together: The Strategy Behind WarnerMedia's Anticipated Bob Greenblatt Hire," *Variety*, February 28, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/hbo-tnt-tbs-warnermedia-bob-greenblatt-richard-plepler-john-stankey-1203152672/.
[196] Schneider, "HBO and Turner."

publicly on the "need to have some consistency across the brands. TNT is doing these shows like 'The Alienist.' Why is that not on HBO?"[197] While Bloys was quick to insist that AT&T has "no plans to dilute the HBO brand,"[198] later shake ups like Plepler departing the channel after twenty-seven years, allegedly because "WarnerMedia continued to consider changes that could include combining HBO and Turner," cast doubts on HBO's continued autonomy.[199] Staging some of the negotiations over the channel's future in trade press enabled executives like Bloys to assert HBO's independent brand and value publicly, and make its fight for continued autonomy a public spectacle.

In the fight to maintain their independence from sibling channels, the brands of channels like HBO and Syfy are some of their strongest bargaining chips. Channel brands have become vital: not for capturing audiences, but for ensuring their autonomy within media conglomerates. As Bloys puts it, in the current crowded television environment:

> there's this sense [among channels] that it's musical chairs, and at a certain point, the music's going to stop, and you had better have a brand. […] When the music stops, what that means – I don't know, exactly. But I feel like that's what everyone is racing against.[200]

As a certain *GoT* character might say, when you play the game of channel brand musical chairs, you win or you die. Genre is just one tool in this game, used in a variety of ways by a variety of channels to determine and assert their own brands before the music stops. Fantasy becomes more contested among the genre stakeholders of channels as its meaning, use, and prominence is subject to the needs of distinct brands desperately attempting to prove their independent worth and maintain their existence. For channels fighting for attention and survival in an era of peak TV, making HBO-ified fantasy is largely not about the genre: it is about proving that they can compete with HBO. Even for channels like Syfy, fantasy is useful only in so far as the genre is valued by audiences of the right size and "quality," and in so far as the ability to draw in that audience is valued by their parent company. In the 2009 rebrand, the channel's association with SFF was something to distance themselves from; eight years later, it was something to reclaim and create a media event around. As the barrage of "next *Game of Thrones*" hits small screens and a rash of new OTT streaming services are launched by legacy media conglomerates and technology companies, the purpose of channel brands, and therefore

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[197] Schneider, "HBO and Turner."
[198] Daniel Holloway, "HBO Programming Chief Says AT&T Has 'No Plans to Dilute' Brand," *Variety*, July 25, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/hbo-att-has-no-plans-to-dilute-brand-1202884025/.
[199] Daniel Holloway and Joe Otterson, "Richard Plepler to Step Down as HBO Chairman, CEO," *Variety*, February 28, 2019, http://www.variety.com/2019/tv/news/richard-plepler-hbo-1203152376/.
[200] Ryan, "HBO."

what channels will want and need fantasy to be, will undergo yet another radical shift and create new sites of contestation that reflect new developments in the television industry.

The flexibility and pliability that contestation affords genre allows it to be of greater use to channels in this game of musical chairs. Contestation enables channels to tactically target multiple audiences in different contexts, to strategically select subgenres to produce, and to shift their approaches to a series or channel brand over time to reflect changing attitudes and industrial practices. This contestation allows channels to position themselves as distinct from their competition (as HBO does with *GoT*) or as "uniquely" part of communities (as Syfy does to reach SFF audiences). Parent companies and channels can use contestation to communicate with one another and with audiences in a variety of ways and contexts. Genre contestation is encouraged and perpetuated by channels because strictly and immovably defined genres would be of little use to them. Channels use genres, not despite contestation, but because of it.

Chapter Four

Streaming Context: Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Genres on the Interface

> "Context – where you find an object – is more important than the actual object. In policing it's whether the broken glass is on the inside or the outside. In archaeology it's whether that datable coin is found in the wall foundations or its demolition infill. You can live without the coin, but you need the dating information."
>
> —Ben Aaronovitch, *Lies Sleeping*

In 2019, more than a quarter of new scripted commissions of then incoming over-the-top [OTT] services like Disney+, Apple TV+, and Peacock were science fiction and fantasy [SFF] series.[1]Across various online TV services, many major US OTTs at the beginning of the so-called Streaming Wars put SFF at the forefront of their online launches in the hopes of replicating the success that Netflix and Amazon Prime Video [APV] have had with these genres.[2] Disney+, for example, chose an SFF series, *The Mandalorian* (2019–Present) as the original scripted series to helm the service's initial US release. Fantasy in particular has become a centerpiece: Netflix touted *The Witcher* (2019–Present) as its most watched first season at the time, and Amazon Studios is anticipated to spend one billion US dollars over five seasons of *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022–Present), which would make it the most expensive television series ever produced.[3] Fantasy has been given a central role in the boom in online TV services in the 2010s, which has in turn made these services a major stakeholder in fantasy as a televisual genre.

Online TV services have become pivotal to a modern conception of television. A 2020 Nielsen survey found that more than 90% of US viewers with OTT-capable homes have at least one subscription video-on-demand [SVOD] service, and 60% had more than one.[4] A fifth of TV viewers' time is spent streaming, with the majority of that time spent on Netflix (~33%), YouTube (21%), Hulu (12%), and Amazon Prime Video (8%).[5] In a letter to shareholders, the CEO and CFO of Roku posit that "While streaming became mainstream in the [2010s] […]

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[1] Scott Roxborough, "Disney+ Originals, Pricing Strategy Puts Pressure on New Streamers, Study Finds," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 17, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/disney-originals-pricing-puts-pressure-new-streamers-study-1240316.
[2] Roxborough.
[3] "Final Q4 19 Shareholders Letter," Netflix Investors, January 21, 2020, https://s22.q4cdn.com/959853165/files/doc_financials/2019/q4/FINAL-Q4-19-Shareholder-Letter.pdf, 3.; Tatiana Siegel, "Inside Amazon's $250M 'Lord of the Rings' Deal: 'It's Very Much a Creature of the Times,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 5, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/how-lord-rings-tv-series-landed-at-amazon-not-netflix-1099213.
[4] Kelsey Sutton, "Streaming Services Are Here to Grow: More People Would Keep Watching or Add on Another," *Adweek*, February 11, 2020, https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/streaming-services-are-here-to-grow-more-people-would-keep-watching-or-add-on-another/.
[5] Sutton.

We have now entered the streaming decade when we believe consumers around the world will choose streaming as their primary way of viewing TV."[6] While linear viewing still accounts for the majority of TV viewing, online TV services have become a major force and are projected to increase their share of viewing time.

This chapter draws on paratextual analysis and digital humanities to analyze the ways in which OTTs contribute to and make use of the contestation surrounding fantasy television. Through case studies of Netflix and Amazon, the chapter examines how these online TV services use genre and contestation, how their use of genre is impacted by the type of service they provide, and how genre reveals their business priorities. Explicit genre labelling on their user interfaces offers a uniquely overt type of genre discourse that is revealing of the purposes online TV services find for genre in general and fantasy in particular. Fantasy is visibly contested on these interfaces, especially in light of online affordances such as personalization and metadata. In addition to contestation on the interface, the chapter further explores sites of contestation between programming and interfaces within the same service, as in the case of Amazon Studios and Amazon Prime Video (the video platform) offering discursively differing approaches to genre based on their respective stakeholder roles under the broader Amazon umbrella. More broadly, the chapter uses the lenses of genre and fantasy to analyze the extent to which these online services operate differently from traditional linear TV. Unlike the other stakeholders explored in this thesis—academics, channels, and writers—online TV is relatively new, and its place within the television ecosystem is hotly debated and ever shifting, both within the industry and academic scholarship. Online TV's status as television is itself contested, and understanding that contestation is crucial for understanding how and why these stakeholders contribute to genre contestation. Most of this thesis's exploration of the contestation surrounding fantasy television focuses on the fantasy half of the equation; online TV provides a rich opportunity for exploring the television half as well.

Online TV services have wrought profound changes on the US TV industry. Amanda Lotz observes that "Many norms of viewing and industrial practices that have long been believed inherent to the medium of television are, rather, protocols particular to broadcasting and cable as distribution technologies."[7] New distribution systems like internet-distribution "possess different affordances that can introduce wide-ranging change to the production and

[6] Anthony Wood and Steve Louden, "Roku Q4 and Full Year 2019 Shareholder Letter," Investor Relations: Roku, February 13, 2020, https://ir.roku.com/static-files/e7f56c0d-313e-4b32-83c0-3233f0b85017/, 3.
[7] Amanda D. Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television* (Ann Arbor, MI: Maize Books, 2017), 4.

consumption of media."[8] Numerous long-standing industrial practices rapidly evolved in the 2010s, often pushed by the different practices adopted by OTTs like Netflix: number of episodes, number of seasons, series budgets, syndication practices, the role of advertising, talent deals, labor negotiations, and release schedules (with a shift towards single drop seasons and an increase in linear TV's summer scripted programming).[9] These changes have signaled such a significant shift that scholars like Mareike Jenner have argued that the 2010s signal a new period in TV history, shifting from TVIII to TVIV.[10] While scholars like Lotz argue that online TV "may simply co-exist with the broadcast/cable paradigm,"[11] these periodization discussions speak to the extent of the disruption caused by online TV. As Jenner notes, periodizations "highlight that speaking of television at different times means speaking of different *kinds* of television" [emphasis in original].[12] Periodizations acknowledge that the ways stakeholders view and understand television change over time:[13] television itself is a highly contested term. Online TV has challenged industrial practices and established ways of thinking about television and, as a result, has carved out unique strategies for interacting with and using SFF.

OTTs have positioned themselves as uniquely suitable for genres that have struggled to find audiences on linear television. Netflix VP of original documentaries and comedy Lisa Nishimura recalls analyzing viewership numbers for supposedly niche content: "We started to ask, 'Is it really niche, or have the distribution channels for those categories been historically disaggregated, making it difficult to actually get scale and momentum and word-of-mouth and all those things that help to grow audiences over the course of time?'"[14] In their early years of producing original content, Netflix and Amazon Studios executives claimed that their aim was

[8] Lotz, 1.
[9] Daniel Holloway, "TV's New Normal: How Shorter Runs, Fewer Episodes Are Revitalizing Primetime," *Variety*, May 17, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/tv/features/primetime-shorter-seasons-fewer-episode-nbc-1201776172/.; Michael Schneider, "'It's an Explosion': Inside the Rising Costs of Making a Scripted TV Series," *Variety*, October 23, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/tv/features/cost-of-tv-scripted-series-rises-1203378894/.; Ken Ziffren, "How Talent Deals Are Evolving as Studios Become Streamers," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 6, 2020, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ken-ziffren-how-talent-deals-are-evolving-as-studios-become-streamers-guest-column-1274871.; Dade Hayes, Nellie Andreeva, and Dominic Patten, "Disruptor Of The Decade: How Streaming Changed Everything And Will Do It Again In The 2020s," *Deadline*, December 31, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/12/streaming-hollywood-disruptor-decade-netflix-amazon-disney-2020-outlook-1202817648/.
[10] Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 27.
[11] Amanda D. Lotz, "The Paradigmatic Evolution of U.S. Television and the Emergence of Internet-Distributed Television," *Icono* 14, no. 2 (2016): 131, https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v14i2.993.
[12] Jenner, 11.
[13] Lotz, "Paradigmatic," 131.
[14] Josef Adalian, "Inside the Binge Factory," *Vulture*, June 11, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/how-netflix-swallowed-tv-industry.html.

to produce TV series that could not easily be produced by and for linear:[15] taking advantage of different production economics to position themselves as offering something unique. Fantasy is by no means unique to online TV services: the genre has become popular on linear in the 2010s, and OTTs are both responding to the genre's popularity on linear and helping to drive it. However, SFF series "tend to draw the lion's share of their audiences from digital/streaming" even if they are linear series.[16] This, combined with some of the affordances of online platforms such as Netflix's targeted use of taste communities, suggests that niche genres that historically struggled to find a home on linear TV channels are finding success with the new distribution practices of OTTs (at least, according to those OTTs).

SFF may even benefit on a textual level from online viewing practices. Scholars like James M. Elrod argue that marathon-viewing and rewatching capabilities exploited by online TV services have proven particularly beneficial for SFF narratives that "often require extensive exposition to suture viewers into their diegesis."[17] This argument is echoed by Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos, who claims that the genres are uniquely suited to the service because SFF "storytelling tends to be very complex" and Netflix's single drop seasons and encouragement of marathon-viewing enables creators to "create a dense and complicated world."[18] Shifts in viewing practices popularized by Netflix and now enabled by many OTTs have arguably made it easier for viewers to engage with and writers to create complex SFF storyworlds and narratives. Though production and reception are not the focus of this chapter, they illustrate the variety of ways fantasy television has been impacted by the evolution of online television.

As scholarship and industrial discourses on online TV have developed, various frameworks and terms have been suggested,[19] which tend to quickly become dated due to the rapid evolution of these services. This chapter draws on Catherine Johnson's framework of online television, which emphasizes online TV as "services that facilitate the viewing of

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[15] Neil Landau, *TV Outside the Box: Trailblazing in the Digital Television Revolution* (New York: Focal Press, 2016), 15.; Adam Sternbergh, "How Amazon Became the Moneyball Network," *Vulture*, May 6, 2015, https://www.vulture.com/2015/05/amazon-tv-moneyball-network.html.

[16] Nellie Andreeva, "'The Expanse' Picked Up By Amazon For Season 4 After Syfy Cancellation," *Deadline*, May 25, 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/05/the-expanse-amazon-picks-up-space-drama-series-season-4-syfy-cancellation-1202398511/.

[17] James M. Elrod, "Navigating the Nebula: Audience affect, interactivity, and genre in the age of streaming TV," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 16, no. 2 (November 2019): 174.

[18] Lacey Rose, "Netflix's Ted Sarandos Reveals His 'Phase 2' for Hollywood," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 22, 2013, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/netflixs-ted-sarandos-reveals-his-526323.

[19] See Stuart Cunningham and Jon Silver, *Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).; Michael Strangelove, *Post-TV: Piracy, Cord-Cutting, and the Future of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).; MJ Robinson, *Television on Demand: Curatorial Culture and the Transformation of TV* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).; Timothy M. Todreas, *Value Creation and Branding in Television's Digital Age* (Westport CT: Quorum Books, 1999).

editorially selected audiovisual content through internet-enabled devices."[20] This focus on "editorially selected" content eliminates audiovisual online platforms like YouTube that are populated by user-generated content, placing the emphasis on the ways that online TV services select and organize content.

Netflix and Amazon offer fruitful case studies for this chapter because of the respective types of online TV services they represent. Johnson outlines two frameworks for online TV that delineate the similarities and differences between these services that make them so productive for contrasting analysis. Her first framework is categories of online TV services based on business origins, differentiating TV natives from online natives.[21] TV natives are legacy media companies that extend their existing broadcast, cable, satellite, and/or digital television services into the online space.[22] In contrast, both Netflix and Amazon are online natives, businesses that "have originated an online TV service specifically for the internet ecosystem."[23] As Johnson describes it:

> In developing online TV services, TV natives are having to develop the competencies of online natives, particularly in understanding the technological demands of the internet ecosystem. At the same time, online natives have to develop the competencies of TV natives, specifically in content production, acquisition and delivery.[24]

As chapter three has already examined the approaches taken by legacy media companies towards fantasy, this chapter shifts focus to how companies new to television approach fantasy. In doing so, it analyzes how businesses that originated online have developed unique strategies for genre and unique sites of genre contestation in comparison with TV natives.

Netflix and Amazon are then usefully differentiated from one another by Johnson's second framework based on the core businesses of online TV services, with Netflix identified as a content business and Amazon a technology business. According to Johnson, content businesses are focused "primarily on the production, acquisition and delivery of audiovisual content to viewers" while technology businesses "are responsible for the provision of the technological infrastructures and devices needed to access online TV services."[25] Crucially, "for technology businesses the provision of TV services supports a wider portfolio of business operations focused on controlling the technological infrastructures and devices necessary to

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[20] Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (London: Routledge, 2019), 1.
[21] Johnson identifies a third type, content natives, which is comprised of organizations that turn their existing content specialties like sports and theatre into an online TV service and are therefore new to both TV and the online space. However, there are no content natives for fantasy TV. Johnson, 56.
[22] Johnson, 55.
[23] Johnson, 56.
[24] Johnson, 56.
[25] Johnson, 64.

access online TV."[26] Amazon, for example, has such a plethora of business operations outwith television and film that David Hesmondhalgh does not even consider it to be part of the cultural industry, but rather a "well-funded cultural industry subsidiary."[27] As an online native and content business, Netflix is in some ways the odd one out amongst US subscription video-on-demand services: TV natives like Disney and technology businesses like Amazon and Apple have multiple revenue streams to draw on, from theme parks to retail to hardware. As Kelsey Sutton puts it, these companies are "gobbling up good projects and raising the streaming stakes—and they're doing it without the same level of risk as a stand-alone service."[28] A 2016 Ampere survey estimates that Amazon spent about 2-3% of their revenue on content, in comparison with Netflix's 60%.[29] While Netflix's main investment and entire business relies on television and film, Amazon is both supported by and invested in many different industries. As this chapter explores, Netflix and Amazon capture two different ways that online natives navigate genre because their different business models, focuses, and stakes have resulted in the development of unique competencies and ways of navigating the US TV industry.

While the framework of content businesses and technology businesses is helpful in identifying the role of TV content within their overall businesses, Netflix and Amazon cannot be easily categorized into a single businesses type. The question of whether they are media companies or technology companies has been extensively debated by scholars and trade press alike. Netflix has long stressed the intertwining of media and technology as crucial to their success, with Sarandos emphasizing that "That is what's different about the Netflix story from everyone else. People underestimate the 1,000 engineers in Silicon Valley who make Netflix work every single time you push play."[30] However, Netflix uses this contestation over their business type strategically, positioning themselves differently in different markets. In India, Netflix portrays itself as an internet-delivered service rather than a broadcaster in order to avoid obscenity restrictions placed on Indian television stations.[31] In the US, Netflix has increasingly sought to position themselves as a media company in response to increasing government

[26] Johnson, 66.
[27] David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2019), 21.
[28] Kelsey Sutton, "Most of Netflix's Newest Rivals Aren't Really Trying to Take On Netflix," *Adweek*, September 11, 2019, https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/most-of-netflixs-newest-rivals-arent-really-trying-to-take-on-netflix/.
[29] Leo Barraclough, "Amazon Prime Video Goes Global: Available in More Than 200 Territories," *Variety*, December 14, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/digital/global/amazon-prime-video-now-available-in-more-than-200-countries-1201941818/.
[30] Adalian, "Binge Factory."
[31] Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 139.

scrutiny and public controversy over tech companies' use of user data.[32] But even in the US, they present themselves inconsistently: while they were the first online native to join the Motion Picture Association, they were the last major SVOD to join the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, only signing on in 2021.[33] This delay allowed them to circumvent labor disputes between the AMPTP and unions by negotiating their own deals.[34] Whether Netflix thinks it is a media company or a tech company depends on who is asking: strategically making use of contestation surrounding their presence in the television industry.

Similarly, while Amazon is often viewed as a tech company, it is complicated by the plethora of businesses under its umbrella. Amazon Web Services, which provides cloud computing platforms to other companies, accounts for a full tenth of Amazon's revenue, giving tech pride of place within the company: in fact, Netflix uses AWS for backend infrastructure, storage, and streaming.[35] However, Franklin Foer argues that "At its spiritual center […] Amazon is a retailer, not a tech company."[36] Amazon began as an online bookseller and is best known in the US as an online retailer. However, even "retailer" does not fully encompass Amazon. As Eriq Gardner observes, Amazon "owns a content producer (Amazon Studios), a distribution mechanism (Fire TV) and a streaming platform (Prime Video), which itself integrates streamed channels such as HBO, Showtime and Britbox alongside" Amazon Originals.[37] Unlike Netflix, Amazon has its main financial investment outside of media, encompassing so many industries that it is impossible to accurately designate Amazon as just one type of company.

As Ramon Lobato puts it, when researching an online TV service "The trick is not to take an either/or approach […] but rather to see it as a media object that *performatively enacts* its association with these media at different times and for different purposes" [emphasis in

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[32] Rebecca Keegan, "The Netflix Lobbying Machine: Inside the Effort to Sway Policy Worldwide," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 9, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/netflix-lobbying-machine-inside-effort-sway-policy-worldwide-1229622.
[33] Anousha Sakoui, "Netflix Joins Hollywood Studio Producers' Alliance," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-07-30/netflix-joins-hollywood-studio-producers-alliance.
[34] Nellie Andreeva, "TV Studios In Strike-Preparation Mode Ahead Of WGA Contract Negotiations With Overall Deals At Stake & Streamers As Wild Card," *Deadline*, November 27, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/11/tv-studios-strike-preparation-mode-wga-contract-negotiations-netflix-streamers-overall-deals-1202795768/.
[35] Alex Hern, "Amazon Web Services: the secret to the online retailer's future success," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/feb/02/amazon-web-services-the-secret-to-the-online-retailers-future-success.
[36] Franklin Foer, "Jeff Bezos's Master Plan," *The Atlantic* (November 2019): 57.
[37] Eriq Gardner, "The Ticking Time Bomb That Could Blow Up Hollywood's Streaming Era," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 22, 2019, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ticking-time-bomb-could-blow-up-hollywood-s-streaming-era-1256088.

original].[38] Johnson describes the online TV industry as "situated at the intersection of online and TV corporate cultures, business practices, skillsets and ways of working."[39] This industry can be understood "as a series of battlegrounds through which power is enacted and negotiated between different parties with varying competencies, dependencies and areas of control."[40] This chapter does not focus on whether these companies are tech companies or media companies; rather, it focuses on how they straddle and are comprised of multiple, at times conflicting, industries that they performatively enact in line with their various competencies, dependencies, and areas of control. Those performances have a crucial impact on how these stakeholders approach genre.

Their approach to genre is also influenced by their subscription models. Unlike traditional ad-supported linear TV, SVODs do not need large audiences to watch certain videos but are instead focused on drawing in and keeping monthly or yearly subscribers. In this way, they are similar to premium cable channels: they need subscribers to value the subscription as a whole rather than to watch specific series. Therefore, SVODs draw on different metrics for success than ad-supported TV. Many of these metrics are left vague in public discourses: Netflix talks about measuring how "consumers vote with their evenings"[41] and Amazon about whether a series "adds value" to Prime.[42] Their differing priorities are even reflected in the terms SVODs use to talk about people watching their content. Rather than viewers, audiences, or eyeballs, they are members, subscribers, and users (with members being the primary term used by both Netflix and Amazon). They are not framed as people viewing series, but as people tied to the service itself. Genre becomes a potential tool for SVODs to engage those members, and a route for exploring the differences between online natives and linear TV.

Scholarship has taken various approaches to this tension between online and linear TV. Lotz observes that in the 2000s, "television and the internet were conceived of as entirely different media. The internet was part of what was called *new media* and was perceived as the perpetrator in the 'death of television' narrative."[43] However, as Johnson points out, "at the same time as recognising the ways in which the internet era transforms television it is also important to note the continuities amidst all of this change. […] many of the changes to

[38] Lobato, 43.
[39] Johnson, 56.
[40] Johnson, 69.
[41] New York Times Events, "Netflix CEO Reed Hastings Talks Streaming Wars, Apple TV+, Disney + and more | DealBook,'" YouTube, November 6, 2019, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7V6FFeZdFz4.
[42] Jason Lynch, "How Amazon built a TV studio that's finally challenging Netflix," *Quartz*, August 12, 2014, https://qz.com/246925/how-amazon-built-a-tv-studio-thats-finally-challenging-netflix/.
[43] Amanda D. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 114.

television over its history have been additive rather than substitutive."[44] Lotz observes that strategies like audience targeting and channel branding have carried over to some online TV services, and Johnson has observed that when releasing single episodes of current seasons of linear TV, distributors are using a linear schedule of distribution.[45] While online TV has different affordances and businesses strategies, it has not always departed from linear TV as much as scholars anticipated.

Take, for example, the supposed dichotomy between push and pull technologies: television has traditionally been a push technology, with programming "pushed to the viewer at a time determined and controlled by the media provider."[46] Scholars initially theorized that online TV would become a pull technology, where viewers can take control of their viewing and "pull" content they choose to view.[47] However, as Johnson points out, viewers make these choices "in an environment in which the choices available are highly structured by algorithms (and interfaces) over which they have little or no control. As such, online TV services have far more in common with the push media of traditional broadcasting […] than might be immediately apparent."[48] Interfaces in particular offer instructively literal spaces for evaluating the degree of push and pull on a given service, with genre in particular serving as a vital mechanism for scholars to interrogate assumptions about the degree of difference between linear and OTT TV.

Scholars like Lotz have argued that OTT SVODs are "probably not" television and should instead be considered video.[49] This suggested categorization is in part because "the technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and especially viewing practices that once drew stark distinction between movies and television have grown blurry."[50] Some scholars have argued that web series are a different medium entirely,[51] and stakeholders like the Saturn Awards have introduced separate award categories for "streaming" series. This chapter gives credence to a cultural and discursive rather than theoretical understanding of television in much the same way that it has for fantasy and genre. The services themselves refer

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[44] Johnson, 16.
[45] Lotz, *Portals*; Johnson, 86.
[46] MJ Robinson, *Television on Demand: Curatorial Culture and the Transformation of TV* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 17.
[47] Timothy M. Todreas, *Value Creation and Branding in Television's Digital Age* (Westport CT: Quorum Books, 1999), 169.
[48] Johnson, 152.
[49] Amanda D. Lotz, "Q12: Is Netflix television and what is the future of television?" *Amanda D. Lotz* (blog), July 13, 2020, http://www.amandalotz.com/netflix-30-qa/2020/7/13/q12-is-netflix-television-and-what-is-the-future-of-television.
[50] Lotz, "Q12."
[51] Christina Kallas, *Inside the Writers' Room: Conversations with American TV Writers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 171.

to audiovisual content divided into episodes as TV; many other stakeholders also refer to these series as TV and to these services as producing and distributing TV. TV is often explicitly linked to genre on interfaces, with Netflix and Amazon offering many specific rows of content based on the combination of genre and medium into labels like Fantasy TV. In a scholarly environment of fierce debate over the place of online TV, genre can provide a crucial pathway for navigating and exposing the competencies, dependencies, and areas of control at play in online TV.

Reading Interfaces and Exposing Metadata: Methodology

To analyze how Netflix and Amazon make use of fantasy and genre contestation, this chapter draws in part on paraindustrial research of the discourses of their executives. However, the main focus is on paratextual analysis of the user interfaces of these services.[52] These interfaces offer, as Lotz notes, a crucial site of difference from linear channels because these SVODs are characterized not just by their content libraries, "but also by the features of their interface and the capabilities they offer their viewers."[53] Johnson argues that "online TV providers control the frames, such as metadata and interfaces, that determine how content is described, organised, tagged and labelled. These frames shape how findable that content is and the meanings that viewers attribute to it."[54] Analyzing how these interfaces organize and articulate genre is crucial, not just for understanding how content is framed and made accessible to users, but for understanding how genre itself is understood and used by online TV services. As Johnson puts it, interfaces function as "a visual (and sometimes aural) language for representing online TV as a cultural form and a technology to its users."[55] Online TV services control the genre information associated with the content they make available, and the ways in which users can access and navigate this information. Interfaces expose the priorities of online TV services, and those priorities shape the way users experience and interact with content.

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[52] Hesmondhalgh and Lotz identify three different kinds of interfaces: service interfaces (e.g., the Netflix homepage), device interfaces (e.g., on a smart TV), and marketplace interfaces (e.g., Amazon Prime Channels). This chapter focuses on service interfaces in order to analyze how Netflix and Amazon Prime Video understand and use genre. However, given the prevalence of online TV viewing on smart TVs, work on third-party aggregators like Roku and Amazon Fire TV will be fruitful avenues for future research to consider the ways in which these aggregators disrupt the genre tagging process. David Hesmondhalgh and Amanda D. Lotz, "Video Screen Interfaces as New Sites of Media Circulation Power," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 386.
[53] Lotz, *Portals*, 9.
[54] Johnson, 38.
[55] Johnson, 112.

Fenwick McKelvey and Robert Hunt identify two key elements of how interfaces allow users to discover content: surrounds and vectors.[56] Surrounds refers to the organization of content on and between screens of an interface, and vectors to "the interactive pathways we take through data, guided by software."[57] This chapter largely focuses on the surrounds, analyzing how these interface organize and communicate the organization of genres. However, vectors also play a crucial role in revealing the priorities of services and how they conceive of their users. The choice of which pathways an interface allows users to take, which it does not, and which it allows but makes difficult to access reveals how a service wants or even forces a user to behave while using the interface. Analyzing interfaces reveals not only how these services think about genre and frame it for users, but also how it allows users to engage with genre.

This chapter also analyzes the metadata and algorithmic processes that Netflix and Amazon use to inform their interfaces. As Johnson puts it, data and algorithms are "the invisible frames that sit behind the visible surface of online TV interfaces and play an equally important part in shaping the experience of online TV"[58] by "responding to user interactions in order to shape which content is prioritised and how it is organised."[59] She identifies three key types of internal data used and generated by a service: user profile data, linkages, and metadata.[60] User profile data is information provided by users while setting up and using an account, linkages are the "connections made between content and between content and users," and metadata "consists of data produced by the service itself in order to classify its contents […] as well as data attributed to content through users' engagement."[61] These three types of internal data can play a central role in genre, allowing services to categorize content by genre, to form genre linkages between series, and to link user profiles to certain types of genre recommendations.

However, all this data can be difficult to access and is often only implicitly visible on the interface, and thus harder to research than the surface appearance of the interface. Hesmondhalgh and Lotz note that "This is partly because the details of how algorithmic recommendation systems and search engines operate are subject to commercial confidentiality, and partly because even software engineers and their managers are themselves often familiar with only one part of complex systems."[62] While accessing this information is crucial to

[56] Fenwick McKelvey and Robert Hunt, "Discoverability: Toward a Definition of Content Discovery Through Platforms," *Social Media + Society* (January–March 2019): 2, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118819188.
[57] McKelvey and Hunt, 2.
[58] Johnson, 134.
[59] Johnson, 109.
[60] Johnson, 135.
[61] Johnson, 135.
[62] Hesmondhalgh and Lotz: 402.

understanding how online TV services view and use genres, it can be difficult to gain clear, open access to this data because even the people who create these systems do not always have that access. This proves particularly challenging for media scholars without a background in a field like computer science. In order to analyze how fantasy is used by Netflix and Amazon, I had to familiarize myself with their search and categorization systems well enough to learn how to force their interfaces into situations in which they would normally rely on internal data to generate results. In effect, I used the system against itself to reveal internal data. This methodological difficulty illustrates the impact of the black box surrounding these processes: Netflix and Amazon do not want users to query or critically engage with their genre processes. They would like us to take their discourses at face value.

The majority of the research on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video [APV] was conducted using the desktop version of their interfaces, as direct manipulation of URLs allows users to navigate to specific pages and employ a greater variety of searches. Vectors are more limited on devices such as television sets and mobile devices, creating methodological hurdles and a more controlled user experience. Currently, the desktop interfaces are the only way to access certain types of information and pages, such as individual Netflix altgenre pages. However, many OTT viewers in the US watch on TVs and smartphones, and therefore have experience with a different interface with different capabilities and sometimes different genre information. Researchers who employ similar methods need to gain access to multiple devices to compare the OTT experience across devices, particularly if they are aiming to properly account for contestation.

On Netflix, the primary method I used to compile data on genre categorization was tracking series across more than 230 different "altgenres," Netflix's internal term for their infamously hyperspecific categories like Suspenseful Conspiracy TV Sci-Fi & Fantasy, BAFTA-Award Winning TV Shows Set in London, and Critically-acclaimed Bingeworthy Historical TV Dramas. As Emily Lawrence describes them, altgenres are "composite, non-canonical genres constructed from Netflix's controlled vocabulary, with membership determined via a vast store of proprietary metadata about individual works."[63] At last known count, there were almost 77,000 altgenres, but new ones are frequently added to the service.[64] (For example, while I was writing this chapter, Black Lives Matter and the kids mode

[63] Emily Lawrence, "Everything is a Recommendation: Netflix, Altgenres and the Construction of Taste," *Knowledge Organization* 42, no. 5 (2015): 358–359.
[64] Alexis C. Madrigal, "How Netflix Reverse-Engineered Hollywood," *The Atlantic*, January 2, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/01/how-netflix-reverse-engineered-hollywood/282679/.

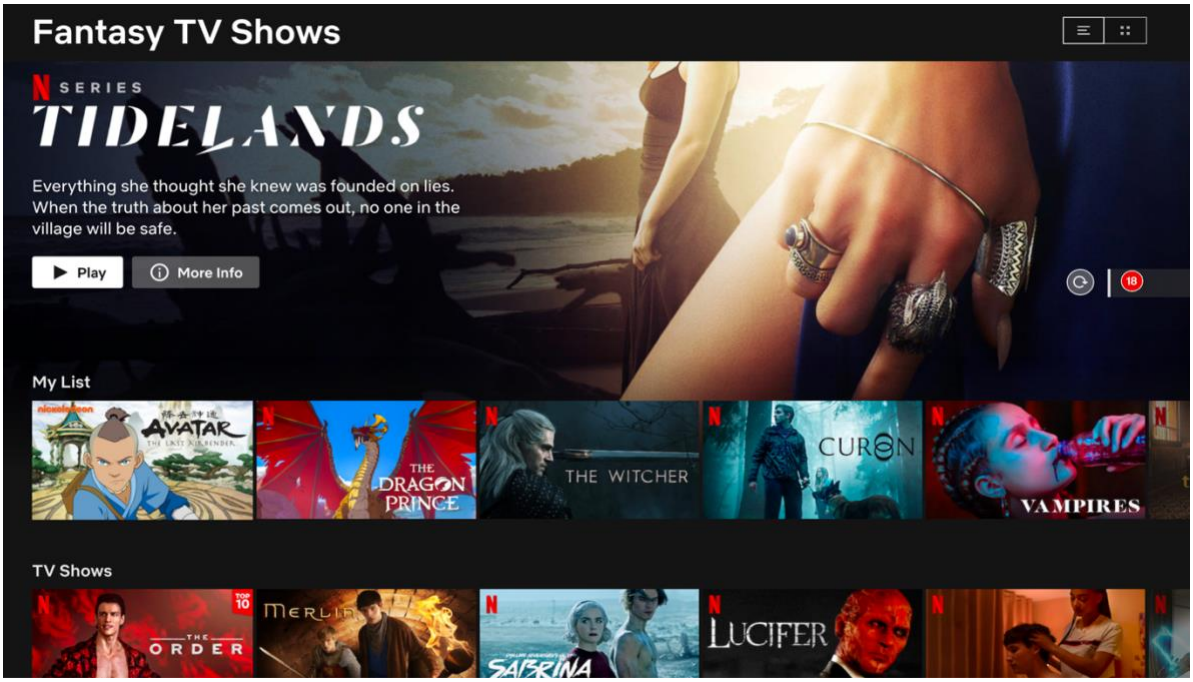

Figure 10. My Fantasy TV Shows altgenre page on June 22, 2020

equivalent Representation Matters were added in response to the global BLM protests in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd.) Not all altgenres are based on genres: Women Behind the Camera, Food For Hungry Brains, and Watch in One Weekend are not, at least at the time of writing, considered genres. However, the centrality of genre to Netflix's conception of these microcategories is highlighted by the use of "genre" in the name itself and in the base URL for all altgenre pages, i.e., https://www.netflix.com/browse/genre/. Because Netflix does not publish the genre definitions or criteria they use to sort their series, tracking series across altgenres allowed for a deductive approach to understanding how Netflix uses these categories.

A more detailed accounting of the processes used can be found in Appendix A, but the complexity of compiling a full list of relevant altgenres highlights crucial elements of the ways in which Netflix functions as a genre stakeholder. Netflix does not make a full list of altgenres available; altgenres are intended to be displayed to their users, not found and interrogated by them. Some categories are obvious enough that users are more likely to search for them, as with the Fantasy TV Shows altgenre (see Figure 10). However, euphemistic terms like Imaginative (discussed later), and categories that do not draw on the typical Netflix altgenre terminology, such as Epic Worlds, Saturn Award Nominees, and NX: Super-Powered Sci-Fi, Fantasy & More, are significantly less intuitive. I had to discover these altgenres by happenstance while browsing. This type of genre research requires familiarity and a substantial time investment with Netflix on behalf of the researcher in order to generate a comprehensive list of altgenres, and even then will likely never be complete. Contestation is baked into this research by nature of Netflix's black box approach to genre, with researchers only ever having

access to small pieces of the overall interface that are rooted in their own experiences of that interface.

Personalization compounds this black box, presenting a substantial methodological challenge and site of contestation. This chapter explores the many ways in which Netflix is personalized and presents different content, altgenres, and promotional surrounds to different users. While I made substantial comparative use of other users' Netflix profiles, personalization shapes every profile and altgenres I could access. There is no such thing as a user-neutral Netflix profile for a researcher to access, nor would it be representative of Netflix in practice. Even beyond content personalization, there are other ways in which Netflix becomes individuated that can be more subtle, and therefore harder to track and analyze. Netflix runs approximately 400 A/B tests a year, testing new interface features on experimental groups and a control group.[65] Each Netflix member is therefore using only one variant of the Netflix experience, as "each member is usually part of several A/B tests at any given time."[66] While it is possible to opt out of A/B testing, most users are unaware that this testing goes on and that they are using only one version of Netflix. In addition to the contestation based on personalization of content, there is additional contestation of the interface itself, and no clear way for a user to be aware of the specifics of that contestation.

There are also changes across countries, which can be difficult for a single researcher to encounter without either coordinating with users in other countries or using a virtual private network [VPN] to convince Netflix that the researcher is in another country. While the use of VPNs is not illegal in countries like the US and the UK, it is illegal or heavily restricted in countries like China, Turkey, and Belarus.[67] Benjamin Burroughs and Adam Rugg describe the use of VPNs as "unsanctioned first party streaming" that undermines the "crude binary of legal/illegal" streaming practices.[68] Research conducted with VPNs draws on unsanctioned viewing practices to circumvent the traditional geographical restrictions on catalogue analysis. While researching this chapter, I was based in the UK and used a VPN to view altgenres in other countries, and then conferred with users based in those countries to confirm the display

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[65] "Netflix Inc Q2 2019 Earnings Call," Netflix Investors, July 17, 2019, https://s22.q4cdn.com/959853165/files/doc_financials/quarterly_reports/2019/q2/Netflix-Inc.-Q2-2019-Earnings-Call-Jul-17-2019-(1).pdf.

[66] Steve Urban, Rangarajan Sreenivasan, and Vineet Kannan, "It's All A/Bout Testing: The Netflix Experimentation Platform," *Netflix TechBlog*, April 29, 2016, https://netflixtechblog.com/its-all-a-bout-testing-the-netflix-experimentation-platform-4e1ca458c15.

[67] Richard Sutherland, "Is streaming with a VPN legal?" TechRadar, July 2, 2020, https://www.techradar.com/uk/vpn/is-streaming-with-a-vpn-legal.

[68] Benjamin Burroughs and Adam Rugg, "Extending the Broadcast: Streaming Culture and the Problems of Digital Geographies," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 58, no. 3 (2014): 367, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.935854.

the VPN was giving me. Not only does content vary across countries, but so do the genre categories and categorization themselves (as will be explored later), making this a crucial, albeit methodologically challenging, site of contestation to engage with. By design, Netflix is rife with sites of genre contestation *and* hostile toward research into that contestation.

Amazon Prime Video [APV] has a substantially different interface from Netflix and therefore required a different set of research methods. While Netflix's TV and desktop interfaces have similar layouts, parts of APV's desktop interface are based more on Amazon's marketplace than the APV TV interface. Seasons of series are listed individually and framed as products, rather than series. My analysis of APV focuses on the genre labels displayed on individual video title detail pages, as well as the genre tags hidden in the metadata that are only visible to users during a filtered search. These genre labels and metadata were not always the same, as will be explored. A fuller accounting of the methods can be found in Appendix B, but it is crucial to note that, while researching genre on Netflix's interface is made difficult by how central genre is to Netflix's interface and business strategy, APV's interface is made difficult by how much of an afterthought genre is. The stakeholders create a site of contestation over the relative importance of genre to their interfaces, and this contestation necessitates distinct methods and unique challenges for researching the two services.

Different countries' versions of Amazon are easier to access than on Netflix. While Netflix has one website that displays differently depending on which country it is accessed in, Amazon currently has eighteen different websites that service 200+ territories. Of those, thirteen host Prime Video: Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain, the US, and the UK. Each website has a different URL and is accessible from other countries without a VPN, though it is still best paired with a VPN to ensure that different access permissions across borders do not influence the interface's appearance. Each of these websites creates a new site of contestation for APV's use of genre.

In addition to the methodological challenges specific to these case studies, online TV interfaces can prove methodologically challenging because of their ephemerality. Johnson notes that "Interfaces are ephemeral in two senses: they are transient and they are peripheral. […] [content] is frequently updating, changing according to the day/time of access, who is accessing the service and where they are located."[69] Ephemerality makes online TV a slippery genre stakeholder: these interfaces have the ability to impact understandings of genre without leaving a clear trail. From a research perspective, it can prove frustrating to casually notice an element of the interface that later proves valuable, but is resistant to being replicated in order

[69] Johnson, 109.

to properly document and analyze it. This ephemerality creates complications for rigor, as well as contestation across even brief periods of time. The interfaces I see today are not the interfaces I see tomorrow; the genres I see today are not the genres I see tomorrow.

Ephemerality also has the potential to quickly date research. Many details of the interface analyzed for this chapter may prove to be entirely different by this time next year: almost every sentence requires an "at the time of writing" caveat. (In fact, while I was writing the first draft in July 2020, APV added a profiles feature allowing different users on the same account to have separate profiles, which will be discussed.) This chapter is not aiming to make any long-term claims about how these companies will continue to operate. Rather, it aims to capture what Lotz calls "the richness of insight most evident in the throes of transition."[70] Almost a decade into the production of original content by Netflix and Amazon Studios, it is vital to take stock of the different approaches these companies have taken to fantasy TV. As online TV increases its share of TV viewership, work done in these transitional times can help track how online TV's use of fantasy and genre evolves, how the interfaces change their methods for articulating and contributing to contested genres, and how the companies themselves evolve. These records will aid future research of contestation across time by making a record of today.

Toss a Genre to Your Subscriber, O' Valley of Plenty: Personalizing Netflix

From a programming perspective, Netflix is not invested in any specific genres, despite their success with comedy and SFF.[71] Johnson notes that "Many VOD services ape the broadcast model of offering a wide range of content aggregated from a number of genres."[72] Sarandos confirms this, calling Netflix's strategy "a portfolio approach"[73] and emphasizing that "I don't want our brand to influence our programs, and I don't want the programs to influence our brand. Netflix is about personalization."[74] Netflix is discursively focused on strategically targeting content and genres at specific users, rather than in only programming specific genres.

Netflix makes decisions about what content to greenlight based on which "verticals" that content falls into. Content verticals are "super-specific genres of film and television, such

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[70] Lotz, *Portals*, 1.
[71] Scott Roxborough, "Netflix and Amazon Set to Nearly Double Originals Catalog, Study Says," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 25, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/netflix-amazon-double-originals-catalog-1146802.
[72] Johnson, 16.
[73] Georg Szalai, "Netflix Content Chief Discusses Global Ambitions, Plans to Double Spending on Originals," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 13, 2013, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/netflix-chief-downplays-nielsen-plans-751931.
[74] Curtin, Holt, and Sanson, 144.

as young-adult comedies, period romances, or sci-fi adventures."[75] They correlate to what Netflix terms "taste communities" that the service assigns their subscribers to based on the content they watch and "thumbs up": these taste communities, Netflix claims, "go 'several layers deeper' than genres."[76] At present, there are about 2,000 taste communities, with most subscribers placed into multiple communities.[77] Netflix uses these taste communities to determine how much to spend on licensing or producing a new series depending on which and how many verticals they anticipate the series falling into.[78] Lotz refers to this as a "conglomerated niche," whereby Netflix develops programming for a large audience made up of multiple niches.[79] Based on the taste communities a subscriber is in, Netflix will highlight series from relevant verticals, particularly in the billboard at the top of the homepage or altgenre page.[80] Because series cross multiple verticals, "The same end show is recommended to different taste communities that come at it from a different way based on tags or user behaviours."[81] Subscribers are brought to the same series by different routes based on the genres they are thought to enjoy.

Rather than being defined by a certain style or genre of content, Netflix emphasizes that personalization itself is their brand. Founder Reed Hastings describes Netflix's goal as having "such good personalization that you turn Netflix on" and "there's three or four choices and they're all, like, 'oh my god, I've gotta watch that show.'"[82] Netflix's belief in personalization is such that some in the company[83] have even argued that they do not need to rely on marketing for series to be successful,[84] with marketing chief Kelly Bennett claiming that "Netflix itself

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[75] Adalian, "Binge Factory."
[76] Jason Lynch, "Netflix Thrives By Programming to 'Taste Communities,' Not Demographics," *Adweek*, July 29, 2018, https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/netflix-thrives-by-programming-to-taste-communities-not-demographics/.
[77] Adalian, "Binge Factory."
[78] Dawn C. Chmielewski and Nellie Andreeva, "Netflix Cindy Holland Tells Her Nebraska Story To The Nation's TV Critics," *Deadline*, July 29, 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/07/netflix-cindy-holland-tells-her-nebraska-story-to-the-nations-tv-critics-1202436028/.
[79] Lotz, *Portals*, 26.
[80] Adalian, "Binge Factory."
[81] Josh McConnell, "The end of genres? How Netflix is refining its recommendations," *Financial Post*, September 6, 2017, https://financialpost.com/technology/personal-tech/the-end-of-genres-how-netflix-is-refining-its-recommendations.
[82] Recode, "Full interview: Reed Hastings, founder and CEO of Netflix | Code 2017," YouTube, May 31, 2017, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCn4hdTI2jc.
[83] The reliance on personalization over traditional marketing is not uncontroversial within Netflix: while many on the Silicon Valley side of Netflix feel the recommendation systems supplant the need for marketing individual series, those on the Hollywood side view it as an important way to convince creatives that their series will not get lost in a crowded catalogue. Ramachandran and Flint.
[84] Shalini Ramachandran and Joe Flint, "At Netflix, Who Wins When It's Hollywood vs. the Algorithm?" *The Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/at-netflix-who-wins-when-its-hollywood-vs-the-algorithm-1541826015.

becomes the primary promotion engine for our titles." [85] Sarandos maintains that personalization allows Netflix to save money on marketing while still generating high viewership, even for niche content.[86] Netflix uses personalization to brand themselves as a service that is distinct from linear TV offerings, even while utilizing the logics of a more traditional push technology.

Personalization is also crucial for Netflix because, as Johnson observes, it encourages subscribers to regularly use and remain loyal to the service.[87] Personalization motivates subscribers to remain subscribed, because unsubscribing would not just mean losing access to the content on the service, but to the recommendations informed by potentially years of viewing data.[88] By centering personalization, Netflix is positioning itself as a service that goes beyond access to content. Rich Greenfield observes that this is crucial to counteract password sharing, piracy, and churn: rather than trying to get viewers invested in a handful of series, Netflix is trying to "create addicts, where people literally feel like they cannot live without your service."[89] Instead of focusing on certain genres of programming, Netflix has centered personalization as their brand and as a method of creating devoted, loyal subscribers. Genre is important not as an aspect of programming, but as a mechanism for enabling personalization.

Netflix's investment in genre is more apparent on the product level than on the content level. "Product" at Netflix refers to the technology the company develops and uses both behind-the-scenes and as part of its interface.[90] As Chief Product Officer Greg Peters puts it, product is "an instrument which we feed all that content through."[91] Genre has proven to be a crucial organizing strategy for Netflix's product. On Netflix's help website, the first factor listed as contributing to subscribers' recommendations is "genres of TV shows and movies," highlighting genre as a primary component of their recommendation system.[92] Genre also plays

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[85] Josef Adalian, "How Netflix Is Trying to Make Sure Its Shows Don't Get Lost," *Vulture*, June 11, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/netflix-is-trying-to-make-sure-its-shows-dont-get-lost.html.
[86] Lauren Johnson, "Netflix Is Now a 'Global TV Network' After Launching in 130 New Countries," *Adweek*, January 6, 2016, https://www.adweek.com/digital/netflix-now-global-tv-network-after-launching-130-new-countries-168862/.
[87] Johnson, 149.
[88] This investment in the viewing histories that inform personalization is such that, when Netflix started introducing its controversial anti-password sharing measures, it added a new feature that allowed subscribers to transfer their profiles to a new account, enabling them to bring those histories with them. "Paying to Share Netflix Outside Your Household," Netflix, March 22, 2022, https://about.netflix.com/en/news/paying-to-share-netflix-outside-your-household.
[89] Kelsey Sutton, "Streamers Lose Billions to Password Sharing, But 'There's No Easy Solution' to the Problem," *Adweek*, November 20, 2019, https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/streamers-lose-billions-to-password-sharing-but-theres-no-easy-solution-to-the-problem/.
[90] Lyle Troxell, "S2: Netflix Product," March 29, 2019, in *WeAreNetflix*, produced by Netflix, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/s2-netflix-product/id1360511576?i=1000433707972.
[91] Troxell.
[92] "How to rate TV shows and movies," Netflix Help Center, accessed July 1, 2020, https://help.netflix.com/en/node/9898.

a central role in the grid system on Netflix content pages, known internally as the "list of list of movies," or LoLoMo.[93] The LoLoMo is organized with both vertical and horizontal scrolling lists. This two-dimensional layout allows members to scroll vertically past various groups of content to find rows (often altgenres) of interest, and to scroll horizontally to explore a chosen row in more depth.[94] Genre is explicitly fundamental to even the basic layout of Netflix's recommendation systems and interface.

The construction of these altgenres is based around what readers' advisory groups term "appeal elements." Appeal elements encompass aspects such as "pacing, characterization, story line, frame (physical setting and atmosphere), tone and mood, and style and language."[95] As Joyce Saricks describes it, these appeal elements enhance "the bare bones provided by subject descriptors or a straightforward plot summary" by "reveal[ing] more of the book's essence."[96] While Saricks is discussing books, the same applies to Netflix, where appeal elements work in concert with genre to provide a specific list of words to concisely convey the potential appeal of a particular series. Appeal elements are listed on a series's profile under "This show is," on row art during a mouse-over (see Figure 11), and on the billboard images on smartphones, where appeal elements and genres replace the trailers used on desktop and TV interfaces (see Figure 12).

The appeal elements and genres are not always distinguished from one another: *Warrior Nun* (2020–2022), for example, is described as Suspenseful, Exciting, Fantasy TV, Teen, and Action, without drawing a clear distinction between which labels are appeal elements and

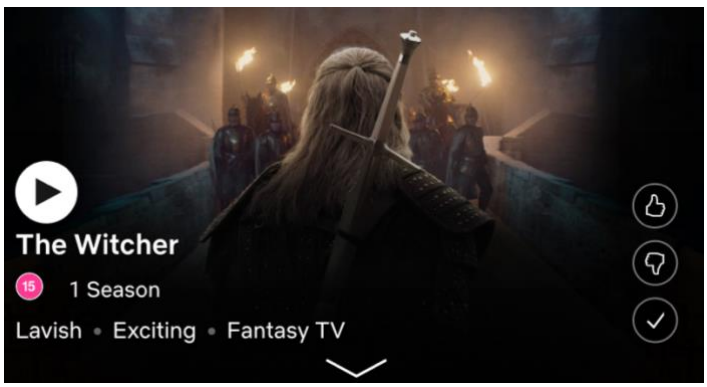

Figure 11. Mouse-over of *The Witcher* row art on the desktop interface on June 24, 2020

[93] Lyle Troxell, "S1: Making the Netflix iOS App," March 16, 2018, in *WeAreNetflix*, produced by Netflix, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/s1-making-the-netflix-ios-app/id1360511576?i=1000406575229.
[94] Chris Alvino and Justin Basilico, "Learning a Personalized Homepage," *Netflix TechBlog*, April 9, 2015, https://netflixtechblog.com/learning-a-personalized-homepage-aa8ec670359a.
[95] Joyce G. Saricks, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2009), 11.
[96] Joyce G. Saricks, *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2005), 41–42.

Figure 12. *Warrior Nun* billboard image on iOS mobile interface homepage on July 2, 2020

which are genres. Netflix combines appeal elements and genres to build the specific altgenres: *Warrior Nun* appears in the Suspenseful Fantasy TV, Exciting Fantasy TV, Teen Fantasy TV, and Action Fantasy altgenres. Some altgenres stack together multiple appeal elements, such as Scary Suspenseful Supernatural TV Horror, though in order to ensure that altgenres fit on smaller screens, they are limited to fifty characters: the range of genres constrained by the physical size of the devices the discourse takes place on.[97] (This limit may also explain why science fiction is always shortened to Sci-Fi on the Netflix interface, while it is spelled out in full on the APV interface.) These altgenres appear on a member's homepage and altgenre LoLoMos based on their taste communities and viewing history.

Genre is not only used to organize and personalize the content on Netflix, but also to communicate that personalization to users. When Netflix removed their predicted rating system, VP of product innovation Todd Yellin argued that "Predicting something is 3.2 stars is kind of fun if you have an engineering sensibility, but it would be more useful to talk about dysfunctional families and viral plagues. We wanted to put in more language. We wanted to highlight our personalization."[98] Carlos A. Gomez-Uribe and Neil Hunt emphasize the importance for Netflix of ensuring that members "will find something compelling to view, and

[97] Madrigal.
[98] Madrigal.

will understand why it might be of interest."[99] It is not enough for Netflix to generate a page of fantasy TV recommendations for me: Netflix needs to communicate *why* these series have been recommended for me and why I might want to watch them. Clearly labelling these series as fantasy TV is one simple (and for me, effective) way to do so. As Rob Reid puts it, "In a world of infinite choice, context—not content—is king."[100] Genres, appeal elements, and altgenres are a way of providing context, and of reminding members of Netflix's personalization. Peters argues that this has become more important as Netflix produces more original content. Netflix has "to get really good at explaining to our users, 'this show you've never heard of before, we think you're going to really, really love it, but why?'"[101] He stresses that "developing an increasing capacity and sophistication around how we make that connection in a real meaningful way" has become a more central part of the business.[102]

Personalization awareness is crucial for Netflix, with Xavier Amatriain and Justin Basilico emphasizing that

> We want members to be aware of how we are adapting to their tastes. This not only promotes trust in the system, but encourages members to give feedback that will result in better recommendations. A different way of promoting trust with the personalization component is to provide explanations as to why we decide to recommend a given movie or show. We are not recommending it because it suits our business needs, but because it matches the information we have from you: your explicit taste preferences and ratings, your viewing history […][103]

Personalization is emphasized in promotional discourses and on the interface to draw user attention to personalization as the service Netflix provides. As Jenner points out, rows like "Because You Watched…" serve as a reminder that Netflix is paying attention to what the user has watched and may want to watch next.[104] Genre is currently one of the major focuses of personalization awareness, but as Chris Alvino and Basilico note, Netflix is "constantly experimenting" to find "new ways to create useful groupings of videos."[105] While I was conducting the research for this chapter, for instance, I was part of the A/B testing for a new "Top 10 TV Shows in [Country of Access] Today" row, which was later added to the

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[99] Carlos A. Gomez-Uribe and Neil Hunt, "The Netflix Recommender System: Algorithms, Business Value, and Innovation," *ACM Transactions on Management Information Systems* 6, no. 4 (December 2015): 2, https://doi.org/10.1145/2843948.
[100] Chris Anderson, *The Longer Long Tail: How Endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand* (London: Business Books, 2009),109.
[101] Troxell, "S2."
[102] Troxell, "S2."
[103] Xavier Amatriain and Justin Basilico, "Netflix Recommendations: Beyond the 5 stars (Part 1)," *Netflix TechBlog*, April 6, 2012, https://netflixtechblog.com/netflix-recommendations-beyond-the-5-stars-part-1-55838468f429.
[104] Jenner, 129.
[105] Alvino and Basilico.

"canonical" Netflix interface. Instead of genre, this kind of row focuses on current popularity, personalized to the subscriber's location. If Netflix finds other groupings more useful, genre may lose its central role to the service. Netflix's investment is not in genre itself, but in the altgenres they have authored to organize users, personalize content, and raise personalization awareness. The shifting importance of genre is visible even now on the desktop interface when the mouse hovers over row art. The genres and appeal elements only appear until a member begins watching a series. The mouse-over then displays which episode they are on and, if they have begun watching the episode, how far into the episode they are (see Figure 13). Because the member has already decided to watch the episode, genre and appeal elements are no longer the selling point to convince the member to watch: their viewing history is. Genre is a driving force in content discovery, not continued viewing. While genre is central to Netflix, its centrality is not assured, constant, or without contestation.

Netflix's personalization can be controversial. Of particular concern are personalization filters or filters bubbles, in which the personalization of Netflix narrows users into only being exposed to the content that they are interested in.[106] This sense of the bubble is emphasized by Netflix's interface vectors. The search bar is not available until the small search icon is clicked on. The clickability of the altgenres on the homepage is also hidden: altgenre names are not obviously clickable and users can only see what altgenres lead to other pages if they mouse-over the name and see "Explore All >" appear. By hiding these routes out of the homepage, the interface heightens the sense that users are restricted to the personalized recommendations on

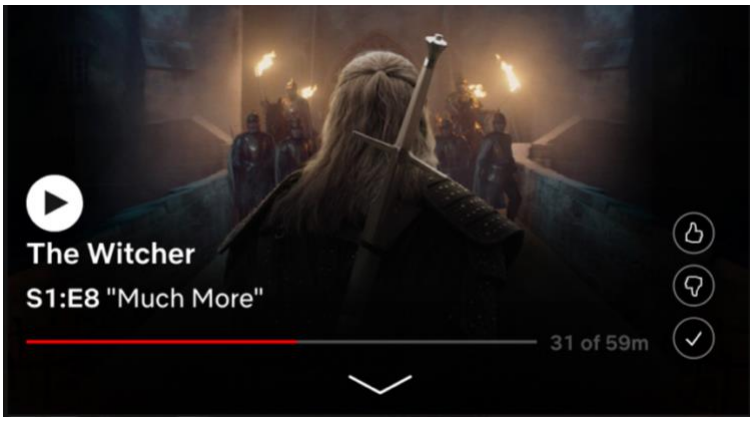

Figure 13. Mouse-over *The Witcher* row art on the desktop interface mid-watch

[106] See Neta Alexander, "Catered to Your Future Self: Netflix's 'Predictive Personalization' and the Mathematization of Taste," in *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, eds. Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

the homepage.[107] These personalization bubbles contribute to genre contestation as different members are shown content in user-specific categories without the interface offering clear routes outside that personalization. The genre contestation surrounding fantasy on Netflix's interface is constructed in two main ways: personalization and categorization.

Because You Watched A Snake Eating Its Own Tail: Personalization

Contestation by personalization manifests in numerous ways, but is arguably most apparent on the LoLoMo, particularly the homepage. About 80% of Netflix content is discovered through the recommendation system, and two of every three hours streamed is discovered on the homepage.[108] The vast majority of member encounters with content on Netflix are through the personalized presentation of series and altgenres on the homepage. The altgenres in which different users encounter the same series can differ depending on their taste community. Yellin demonstrates an example with *Stranger Things* (2016–Present):

> how do we describe the tone of *Stranger Things*? Tense. Ominous. Scary. How do we describe the storyline? Supernatural. Psychic powers. Missing person. Family in crisis. Conspiracy. It's also a buddy story.
>
> […] there are many doors into any story […] their doorway in and how we feature it will be different for different members.[109]

If you are in a horror taste community, you may be introduced to *Stranger Things* through a horror TV altgenre. If you are in a teen series taste community, through a teen TV altgenre. If you are in a historical TV taste community, through a historical TV altgenre. Netflix draws on the genre mixing of its series to ensure that they include multiple verticals, which are then used to target different taste communities with the altgenres deemed most relevant for them. These altgenres can impact a member's experience of the series: as Lawrence argues, altgenres "set out our expectations of the works that they include by making certain features salient prior to viewing and obscuring others."[110] Thus, a member of a historical TV taste community is primed to focus on the 1980s elements of the series,[111] while a member of a horror TV taste

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[107] Debates about people being "trapped" in categories and prevented from "serendipitous discovery" emerge in many types of categorization, even absent of personalization. Among readers' advisory groups for library collections, some argue that sorting books by physically placing them on shelves according to genre limits readers to familiar genres, while others argue that it makes large collections user-friendly and navigable. This tension is not unique to Netflix, or even to online TV or digital collections. Megan M. McArdle, *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Blends* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2014), 15.

[108] Gomez-Uribe and Neil Hunt, 5.; Gomez-Uribe and Neil Hunt, 2.

[109] Nicole LaPorte, "Netflix Offers A Rare Look Inside Its Strategy For Global Domination," *Fast Company*, October 23, 2017, https://www.fastcompany.com/40484686/netflix-offers-a-rare-look-inside-its-strategy-for-global-domination.

[110] Lawrence, 360.

[111] I apologize for putting the words "historical" and "1980s" in the same sentence.

community is primed to focus on the horror elements. Netflix frames a member's sense of what genre a series is through the altgenre they encounter it in, which is based on what genres they are already assumed to like. Personalization bubbles reenforce aspects of the viewing experience, which in turn reenforce the bubbles.

The series listed in these altgenre rows are also reflective of the member's viewing history. Amatriain and Basilico note that "Each row represents 3 layers of personalization: the choice of genre itself, the subset of titles selected within that genre, and the ranking of those titles."[112] The series in each altgenre are organized using a personalized video ranker algorithm that ranks each series according to how much they are projected to match the member's profile.[113] Different members encountering the same altgenre row may be shown completely different videos. Contrast, for example, the first look of the Imaginative Fantasy TV altgenre on my homepage LoLoMo with the first look that appears to my partner:

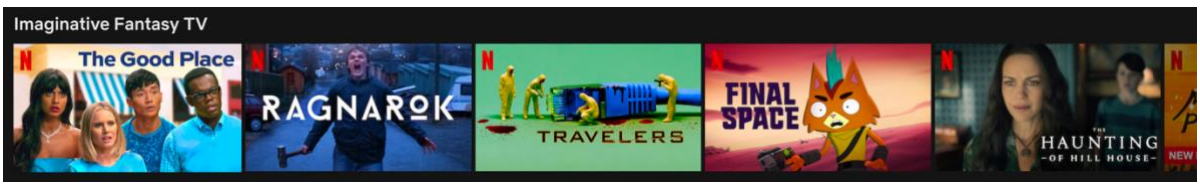

Figure 14. Imaginative Fantasy TV altgenre row on my homepage on June 25, 2020

Figure 15. Imaginative Fantasy TV altgenre row on my partner's homepage on April 9, 2020

While definitively accounting for the differences between our altgenres is impossible without access to proprietary information, differences in viewing history may provide some ideas. I have rewatched *The Good Place* (2016–2020) multiple times, while my partner recently watched all of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994). He also watches shonen and seinen anime, which Netflix may have translated into an interest in East Asian television more broadly. Clicking through these rows will ultimately reveal many similar titles (five clicks through my row eventually reveals all the series in my partner's first look); however, this initial order can have a crucial impact on how these altgenres are framed. My understandings of what Netflix means by "Imaginative Fantasy TV" will be filtered through series like *The Good Place*, while my partner's will be filtered through *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966–1969). By personalizing the order in which series are displayed, Netflix creates contestation around the subgenres of its own invention by filling the first look with series deemed most appealing to

[112] Amatriain and Basilico.
[113] Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 3.

the member. Rather than each altgenre being stable, distinct, and clearly defined, they are in essence reflections of whichever member is viewing them. This reflective quality is by design: Netflix's personalization bubbles feed into themselves.

While this personalized video ranking can emphasize some elements of the category over others, it can also emphasize entire other genres based on the taste communities a member belongs to. As Alexis Madrigal explains:

> if Netflix knows you love Action Adventure movies with high romantic ratings (on their 1-5 scale), it might show you that kind of movie, without ever saying, "Romantic Action Adventure Movies."
>
> "We're gonna tag how much romance is in a movie. We're not gonna tell you how much romance is in it, but we're gonna recommend it," Yellin said. "You're gonna get an action row and it may have more or less romance in it based on what we know about you."[114]

The at times hidden influence of other genres[115] on an altgenre's personalized video ranking allows Netflix to navigate broad genres like fantasy by emphasizing the series that are assumed to most appeal to the member viewing it. A member's other taste communities and genre interests mix with each altgenre, contesting their definitions. For example, because I am likely in at least one SFF taste community,[116] non-SFF altgenres on my homepage tend to emphasize SFF content. Take, for example, my current Exciting Crime TV Action & Adventure altgenre, which puts five superhero series in the first look:

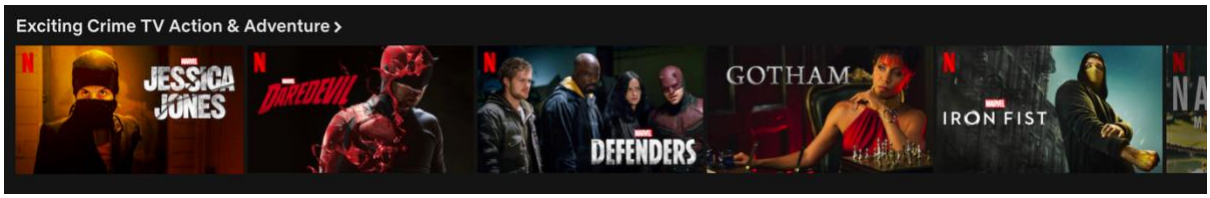

Figure 16. Exciting Crime TV Action & Adventure altgenre row on my homepage on June 25, 2020

Based on my viewing history, Netflix frames genres like action, adventure, and crime as inextricably tied to SFF, particularly fantasy. By prioritizing SFF content in non-SFF altgenres to appeal to a member's taste communities,[117] Netflix's strategic use of genre mixing creates

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[114] Madrigal.

[115] The invisibility of romance is particularly interesting given the cultural devaluation of the genre, which is often pejoratively linked to female audiences. The presence of a hidden romance rating suggests that there are a significant number of members who may be highly invested in the genre, but not willing to engage with content that is explicitly marked as that genre. While this thesis does not focus on romance, this tension offers another potential rich site of contestation of devalued genres being hidden in metadata for some users.

[116] This assumption is based on the consistent presence of three to five different SFF altgenres on my homepage, and the frequent emails and push notifications I receive from Netflix when they add a new fantasy TV show to their catalogue.

[117] Another type of prioritization visible in this row is Netflix Originals. There is no evidence in Netflix's discourses to suggest that their algorithms emphasize original series on the interface; in contrast, Netflix is vocal about *not* prioritizing any particular content. However, in light of their discursive investment in personalization as brand, it would be detrimental to admit this kind of prioritization if it does in fact occur.

contestation surrounding the meaning of their own altgenres. For members not in SFF taste communities, meanwhile, these algorithms will prioritize more user-relevant genres in SFF altgenres. In contrast to a stakeholder like HBO who publicly emphasizes some genres over fantasy in response to the cultural devaluation of the genre, Netflix privately emphasizes some genres over others in response to each member's taste communities. This contestation is framed by Netflix as a personal mirror rather than a societal one in order to pitch programmes to multiple taste communities and emphasize their personalization service.

Genre contestation by personalization is not simply about which series show up in which altgenres, but also *how* these series show up. In order to generate row art (series' thumbnail images), Netflix uses a collection of tools and algorithms known as Aesthetic Visual Analysis to pull various still images from the series themselves.[118] This analysis gives Netflix a greater variety of images for their row art (and therefore a greater variety of sites of contestation) than services like Amazon Prime Video that largely rely on promotional stills. Netflix uses this variety to show members different row art depending on which taste communities they belong to. Nicole LaPorte describes the variety of row art for *Stranger Things*:

> fans of action movies and thrillers prefer a poster image with Eleven […], her face fixed in mind-bending concentration. Comedy lovers prefer an image showing two of the show's teens looking up in the sky, their mouths agape in disbelief. For documentary aficionados, it's local police chief Jim Hopper […] who most resonates. And for drama and sci-fi fans, it's a simple black poster with the show's familiar logo and a silhouette of Eleven.[119]

Regardless of which altgenre the member encounters a series in, a different genre may be emphasized by the row art itself. The row art may even be more consequential than the altgenres. As Johnson points out, modes of engagement like genre labels are de-prioritized on the interface to a certain extent because they appear as small text "dwarfed by the images of programmes that dominate the screen."[120] Internal research by Netflix suggests that "artwork was not only the biggest influencer to a member's decision to watch content, but it also constituted over 82% of their focus while browsing Netflix."[121] This artwork emphasizes different ideas of what genre a series is to different viewers, which may in turn influence how

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[118] Lauren Madeline et al., "AVA: The Art and Science of Image Discovery at Netflix," *Netflix TechBlog*, February 7, 2018, https://netflixtechblog.com/ava-the-art-and-science-of-image-discovery-at-netflix-a442f163af6.
[119] LaPorte.
[120] Johnson, 114.
[121] Nick Nelson, "The Power Of A Picture," *Netflix Media Center* (blog), May 3, 2016, https://media.netflix.com/en/company-blog/the-power-of-a-picture.

the altgenres that this row art appears in are framed.[122] The genre impressions members are given by row art are even more ephemeral than those of altgenres and appeal elements, which can at least be found on the interface by navigating to the proper page and do not change as rapidly. Row art represents a vital albeit underacknowledged source of genre discourse that contributes to contestation without leaving a trace.

The level of personalization applied to row art is carried over in other areas of the interface, such as Netflix cutting multiple trailers of their originals for members of different taste communities.[123] Netflix claims that "recommendations lead to meaningful increases in overall engagement with the product (e.g., streaming hours) and lower subscription cancellations rates."[124] Therefore, the company has a substantial investment in continuing to find new ways to present these highly personalized, and therefore highly contested, ideas about what genres series are and what the altgenres themselves are. The contestation caused by personalization is good for business. Genres are useful to Netflix, not despite their lack of consensus and their tendency to co-occur and mix, but because of them, and the way they enable personalization.

In some ways, this personalization mimics the way that linear channels target different genres to different viewers. However, the personal profiles, extensive algorithms, specific altgenres, and tailored row art allow for more explicit targeting and contestation. Linear channels can create promotional materials that suggest different genre and appeal elements to different audiences, and present these materials in different spaces depending on where they think those audiences may encounter them. Netflix can state explicitly and specifically that *Stranger Things* is an Exciting Historical TV Show, Teen TV Horror, or Binge-worthy Conspiracy TV Sci-Fi & Fantasy, and target these different genre labels at specific users.

An Altgenre By Any Other Name: Categorization

The second major type of contestation on the Netflix interface is based on altgenre categorization and rooted in the lack of clarity Netflix offers about these altgenres. Part of this confusion stems from Netflix's use of their own altgenre vernacular rather than established generic terms shared by other stakeholders. As Daniel Smith-Rowsey notes, popular genres

[122] Row art is subject to significant change over time and by device; on mobile, for example, row art is in portrait orientation rather than landscape, and draws on a different set of images, thereby creating more sites of contestation.
[123] Janko Roettgers, "How Netflix Wants to Take on Its Competition in 2019 and Beyond," *Variety*, March 21, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/digital/news/netflix-look-behind-curtain-1203169528/.
[124] Gomez-Uribe and Hunt, 7.

like melodrama and chick flicks are not used by Netflix,[125] nor are many established subgenres. Notable fantasy subgenres like sword and sorcery,[126] high fantasy, urban fantasy, and grimdark are absent from the interface.[127] As Lawrence stresses, "This is not a function of what Netflix has in its collection, but rather of which sorts of categories it considers to be sufficient or sufficiently broad generators of viewing appeal."[128] It may be, for example, that sword and sorcery is thought only to appeal to hardcore fantasy fans, amongst whom the sword and sorcery subgenre is often derided: "sword and sorcery" might be a label that fails to generate sufficient appeal for both a broad and a niche audience. Rather than navigating the broad genre of fantasy with established subgenres, Netflix uses appeal elements and altgenres, emphasizing their own brand of personalization and categorization over established genre conventions.

Netflix's altgenres and altgenre vernacular is based on the work of their taggers. Taggers are employed by Netflix to watch content and, in consultation with a confidential training document,[129] choose from "more than 1,000 tags to describe the texts they've watched, including its genre, setting, time period, sexual suggestiveness, gore, romance level, mood, plot conclusiveness and even the protagonists's moral integrity."[130] While some of these tags are rendered on the interface so that subscribers can view them, others (such as romance level) are only used internally.[131] Even tags that *are* rendered on the interface can be obscured by unclear definitions and inconsistencies, despite Netflix's claim that taggers "describe [film and TV] using objective tags."[132] For example, the Saturn Award Nominees altgenre only includes a handful of the nominees and winners that are available on Netflix.[133] Netflix's taggers appear to be using a definition of Saturn Award Nominees that is more specific and restrictive than the seemingly obvious and objective definition of "nominated for a Saturn Award." Crucially, it is unclear from the interface alone what exactly the additional components of that definition

[125] Speaking to the constantly evolving nature of these services, several other genres that Smith-Rowsey mentions as absent from Netflix in 2016, such as gangster, road movies, and J-horror, were added by 2020. Daniel Smith-Rowsey, "Imaginative Indices and Deceptive Domains: How Netflix's Categories and Genres Redefine the Long Tail," in *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, eds. Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 166.
[126] While a keyword search for sword and sorcery returns results, the altgenre IDs correspond to Sword & Sandal altgenres centered around historical action. The initial listings for Swords & Sorcery are therefore presumably an input error on the product-side of Netflix.
[127] The colloquial use of "genre" to refer to SFF does not return SFF titles or altgenres when entered in a Netflix search, suggesting that Netflix's search algorithms do not have this contextual genre information.
[128] Lawrence, 362.
[129] Madrigal.
[130] Jenkins.
[131] Ben Fritz, "Cadre of film buffs helps Netflix viewers sort through the clutter," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 2012, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-xpm-2012-sep-03-la-fi-0903-ct-netflix-taggers-20120903-story.html.
[132] Erik Oster, "You Could Get Paid to Watch Netflix," *Adweek*, July 7, 2014, https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/you-could-get-paid-watch-netflix-158772/.
[133] Series like *The Good Place*, *Sense8* (2015–2018), *Russian Doll*, and all *Star Trek*s are excluded.

might be, or whether it is simply an input error. Even altgenres categories that would appear to have straightforward definitions are unclear because of product-side decision-making that is hidden from members, and therefore challenging to interrogate and understand.

While some altgenres exclude more content than might be assumed from their name, others are more inclusive than might be expected. *Beyond Stranger Things* (2017), for example, is a roundtable behind-the-scenes discussion of the making of *Stranger Things* that has been included in SFF altgenres such as Ominous US TV Sci-Fi & Fantasy and Dark Fantasy TV Shows. While *BST* is neither ominous, dark, science fictional, nor fantastical, it is included in several (though crucially not all)[134] of the same altgenres as *Stranger Things* itself. While some of the motivation is presumably to target relevant behind-the-scenes content to the same taste communities as the series itself, it is unclear why *BST* is not simply in all the same altgenres as *Stranger Things*. The specific definitions and logics that form these decisions are inaccessible to members, but they create contestation over the boundaries of altgenres categories by placing texts in categories based on the audiences Netflix is targeting them to, rather than the texts themselves.

Adding to the contestation over categorization are gaps in contextual genre knowledge on the part of Netflix's taggers. Contextual genre membership is based on how genres operate culturally, with some texts included in or excluded from certain genres regardless of their textual properties.[135] One of the classic examples from fantasy is Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy, which does not contain any clearly fantastical or impossible elements, but is discursively framed as fantasy by multiple stakeholders.[136] These discourses, rather than the text itself, link the text to the fantasy genre; stakeholders unaware of these discourses may not know to draw this connection between text and genre. Contextual knowledge allows a tagger to include the Beyoncé documentary *Homecoming: A film by Beyoncé* (2019) in the Black Superheroes altgenre based on a contextual understanding of Beyoncé's cultural status, rather than a textual link between *Homecoming* and series like *Luke Cage* (2016–2018) and *Raising Dion* (2019–2022) that are about Black superhero characters. Contextual membership in genres can be obscured or highlighted depending on what taggers know about a series. As Lawrence observes, "depending on how a particular tagger is situated, they may not be able to

[134] For example, *Stranger Things* is both Supernatural Sci-Fi TV and Sci-Fi & Supernatural, but *BST* only the former.
[135] Lawrence, 362.
[136] While Netflix does not currently have the *Gormenghast* adaptation on its streaming website, a search for *Gormenghast* reveals twenty-four related titles, twenty of which are SFF and fourteen specifically fantasy. This suggests that the streaming site might draw on information from Netflix's DVD website, where *Gormenghast* is listed as fantasy. Contextual genre knowledge of *Gormenghast* is present on the streaming interface, albeit several layers removed.

discover the film's membership in this genre merely by looking."[137] *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2017–2019), for example, is set in an exaggerated storyworld with implausible but not impossible events that stem from its absurdist tone. Despite the lack of clear SFF textual elements, the book series, film, and TV series are treated as SFF by multiple stakeholders.[138] However, the TV series is not listed in any SFF altgenres, with the implausibility and absurdity of the series instead captured by the more generically vague Imaginative TV Shows altgenres. Because of the lack of textual links between the series and SFF, the tagger would have needed contextual knowledge to categorize it as one or more of those genres.

On the other hand, *Russian Doll* (2019–Present), a series that centers around a woman stuck in a time loop continuously reliving her birthday, only appears in a single SFF altgenre: NX: Super-Powered Sci-Fi, Fantasy & More. Despite the centrality of SFF to the premise, and despite content with a similar time loop conceit such as *Groundhogs Day* (1993) being tagged in multiple SFF altgenre categories, *Russian Doll*'s relationship to SFF is obscured. This exclusion may reflect the allegorical, rather than literal, function that the time loops serve within the narrative, but the black box surrounding the tagging bible and processes prevents full understanding. It is unclear whether Netflix gives its taggers definitions of fantasy and SF that deliberately exclude something like allegorical fantasy, or whether a tagger's contextual knowledge influenced how they perceived the time loops. Regardless of its source, these gaps in contextual understanding of genre membership can result in a disconnect between textual elements, contextual knowledge, and the tagging process. These contradictions and complexities in categorization reflect the various people who contribute to the tagging process, with their individual perspectives and outside stakeholder roles informing the genre discourses they ghostwrite. However, these discourses are framed on the interface as objective, creating contestation between discourses that are singly attributed to Netflix.

Compounding this disconnect between people and tags, and the resulting genre contestation between stakeholders and between texts, is the current lack of "formal mechanisms […] to allow users to contest Netflix classifications, a fact that surely emerges (at least partly) from its pretense to neutrality."[139] Without mechanisms like user-created altgenres, user-submitted tags, or classification suggestions, members are prevented from engaging in conversation with genre designations. Members are not able to notify Netflix about potential discrepancies, or even query them about how specific altgenres are defined and constructed.

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[137] Lawrence, 362.
[138] The *ASoUE* film is listed as Family Sci-Fi & Fantasy, so Netflix itself is one of the stakeholders associating parts of the franchise with SFF.
[139] Lawrence, 362.

Genre is not a dialogue for Netflix. In part, the lack of dialogue is because they need genres to be internally defined for their personalization and categorization systems. However, it is also crucially tied to their brand: they need to present genre as a neutral categorization system in order to paint it with an algorithmic veneer. Netflix does not want to frame itself as an author of genre discourse, but rather as an engineer producing recommendations through rigorous calculations based on objective genre truths. These recommendations are central to their key product: the interface, not the series. While Netflix makes extensive use of genre contestation, it does not benefit their brand to admit to that contestation. But with members unable to participate in genre conversations and without any clear definitions provided for altgenres, the lack of clarity around specific altgenres creates contestation.

This lack of clarity is heightened by euphemistic altgenres terms such as Imaginative and Supernatural. The use of Imaginative as a genre rather than solely a judgement value is unique to Netflix. In theory, this uniqueness could lessen contestation surrounding the term due to the lack of other stakeholders or discourses offering alternate usage. However, the lack of definition provided by Netflix immediately raises questions about the meaning of the vague term, which is then compounded by irregularities in series categorization. While the Imaginative altgenres are strongly correlated with fantasy,[140] its distinctions are unclear—why are *Arcane: League of Legends* (2021–Present) and *Lockwood & Co.* (2023) Imaginative, but not *Outlander* (2014–Present) and *Cursed* (2020)? This lack of clarity is only increased when Imaginative is used as an appeal element that augments an SFF altgenre, with some series listed as Imaginative Fantasy TV but not any other Fantasy TV or Imaginative altgenres, and vice versa.[141] These series are only framed as fantasy to members who are shown one specific altgenre. For series like *ASoUE*, the Imaginative tag can obscure or replace a series's relationship with SFF by alluding to it without explicitly claiming it. Not only is the term itself unclear, but Netflix deploys it in (at least externally) inconsistent ways while simultaneously using it to replace more explicit SFF altgenres.

This unclear, euphemistic dynamic plays out with Supernatural as well, albeit without the claim to uniqueness. Fantasy scholarship has long struggled to clearly define the distinction between supernatural and fantasy, with John Clute conceding that "Any story whose premises contradict the rules of the mundane world can be defined as supernatural fiction, but a

[140] Almost 90% of the series in the Imaginative TV Shows altgenre are tagged as SFF or Magical (a kids mode altgenre descriptor for fantasy), and about half of the series are specifically tagged as Fantasy or Magical.
[141] Series like *The Good Place*, *Galavant*, and *Doctor Who* (2005–Present) are listed as Imaginative Fantasy TV, but are not in any other Fantasy TV or Imaginative altgenres. In contrast, *The Dragon Prince* (2018–Present) is listed as Fantasy TV but not Imaginative Fantasy TV, even though it is tagged as Imaginative and listed in the Imaginative TV Sci-Fi & Fantasy altgenre.

definition so broad would logically incorporate all categories of Fantasy, all nonmundane Horror, […] and arguably all Science Fiction."[142] Throughout this thesis, supernatural is a commonly invoked term by multiple stakeholders, already highly contested before its use by Netflix, who then inherits this contestation in their use of the term. Similarly to Imaginative TV Shows, Supernatural TV Shows is heavily populated with SFF,[143] but only some Fantasy TV Shows are also listed as Supernatural Fantasy TV.[144] While the use of Supernatural nods toward the elements of the fantastic in these series, it is unclear what exactly the term means to Netflix, or how they distinguish between supernatural and fantasy. It is similarly unclear how different Supernatural altgenres are defined, as some series are listed as Supernatural Soaps despite not being listed in any other Supernatural altgenres.[145] This lack of clarity is particularly striking for series like *The Good Place* and *Galavant* (2015–2016): the only two SFF altgenres they are included in are Imaginative Fantasy TV and Supernatural Soaps. *The Good Place* is even excluded from the Saturn Award Nominees altgenre, despite being nominated for Best Fantasy Television Series three times in a row. Netflix does not consistently frame these series as fantasy or even as SFF more broadly, and only does so in highly contested altgenres that do not fit easily alongside related altgenres. The contestation introduced by euphemistic terms is further compounded by the inconsistent categorization within altgenres using these terms.

This type of contestation suggests that Netflix does not treat altgenres as subgenres wherein appeal elements create more specific subcategories of genres, but as discrete entities. For example, *Stranger Things* is listed as Dark Fantasy TV even though it is not labelled as Dark or on any other Dark TV or Fantasy TV altgenres. Netflix does not frame Dark Fantasy TV as the overlap of these altgenres and appeal elements, or the Dark subset of Fantasy TV, but as something distinct. This usage is to some extent reflective of how dark fantasy is understood as a literary subgenre. While there is no consensus around its definition, with the genre sometimes associated with Gothic fantasy, [146] grimdark, [147] and/or paranormal

[142] John Clute, "Supernatural Fiction," in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, eds. John Clute and John Grant (London: Orbit, 1997), 909.
[143] 57% of Supernatural TV Shows are listed as Fantasy or Magical.
[144] For instance, while *The Witcher* and *The Magicians* (2015–2020) are listed as Supernatural Fantasy TV, Fantasy TV Shows like *Outlander*, *Warrior Nun*, *Cursed*, and *Curon* (2020) are not.
[145] Shows like *The Good Place*, *Galavant*, *Outlander*, and *Warrior Nun* are listed as Supernatural Soaps despite not being listed in any other Supernatural altgenres.
[146] Gary K. Wolfe, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 25.
[147] Lucy A. Snyder, "Dark Fantasy," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders, Volume 1*, ed. Gary Westfahl (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 177.

romance,[148] it has often been treated as supernatural horror or even simply as a euphemism for horror more generally.[149] The Netflix altgenre does not seem to draw as clear a line, with Dark Fantasy TV containing content absent from Supernatural TV Horror and vice versa, but the majority of its series are listed as TV Horror and not Fantasy TV Shows.[150] Altgenres like Dark Fantasy TV include the term fantasy and may therefore associate their series with fantasy, but they have an altgenre-specific definition that does not treat all its constituent series as belonging to the genre. These kinds of standalone altgenres create contestation surrounding what specific genres like fantasy mean to Netflix, but they also generally create contestation around the logic by which genres are assumed to operate. Rather than an additive subgenre logic wherein altgenres are more specific categories that fit within a larger genre, Netflix deploys altgenres as hyperspecific discrete categories designed to be targeted at specific taste communities. As a result, even seemingly identical altgenres are contested: for example, Romantic Fantasy TV and Fantasy TV for Hopeless Romantics include different series.[151] Altgenres are designed as a tagging system, not intended to be read as externally coherent genre arguments.

Some altgenres are even regionally specific, creating contestation across borders. Yellin argues that altgenres "have to be localised in ways that make sense."[152] Sometimes this means excluding appeal elements in certain regions or languages; for example, Netflix does not use Campy in Latin America because it does not translate in Spanish.[153] However, there is not always a clear motivation for why certain altgenres do or do not exist in certain countries. Historical Fantasy TV, for example, has an altgenre page in some territories but not others, even when series tagged as Historical Fantasy TV (like *Outlander* and *Luna Nero* (2020)) are available in those territories.[154] In different countries, Netflix offers different framing for what genres its specific series are, and more broadly for what types of fantasy TV exist. Despite Netflix's framing of altgenres as objective, algorithmically-determined categories, the

[148] Roz Kaveney, "Dark Fantasy and Paranormal Romance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, ed. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 214.
[149] Snyder, 177.
[150] More than half of the series on the Dark Fantasy TV page are also listed as TV Horror, while less than 20% are Fantasy TV Shows.
[151] *Outlander* is both, *Luna Nero* is only Romantic Fantasy TV and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017) is only Fantasy TV for Hopeless Romantics.
[152] Libby Plummer, "This is how Netflix's top-secret recommendation system works," *Wired*, August 22, 2017, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/how-do-netflixs-algorithms-work-machine-learning-helps-to-predict-what-viewers-will-like.
[153] Fritz.
[154] While the Historical Fantasy TV altgenre currently exists in the UK, South Africa, and Mongolia, it does not exist in the US, Costa Rica, or India. Across a sample of forty-two countries, Historical Fantasy TV did not exist in approximately one-fifth of them.

inconsistency and variation creates contestation between their internal criteria and the external reading of altgenres.

This rife variation renders the more consistent elements of Netflix's genre discourses all the more meaningful. Netflix draws consistent distinctions between fantasy and SF, even though the exact definitions they base those distinctions on are not made publicly available. While Netflix does have many TV Sci-Fi & Fantasy altgenres that include both genres,[155] they have more altgenres dedicated to only Sci-Fi or Fantasy than ones that combine the two. And while there are rare exceptions like the otherwise Sci-Fi-identified *Stranger Things*' presence on the Dark Fantasy TV page, many individual series are consistently listed as only one of the two genres.[156] These distinctions suggest that Netflix has at least some separate taste communities for viewers of fantasy and SF. Members cannot find out definitively which taste communities they have been put in;[157] however, by scrutinizing a LoLoMo over time, it is possible to observe repeated patterns. For example, I am consistently shown multiple Fantasy TV altgenres and some SFF TV altgenres on my homepage. It is rarer that I get a Sci-Fi TV-specific altgenre, and if I do, it is normally towards the bottom of the page. The series that show up in my billboard tend to be Fantasy, and are usually explicitly identified as such when viewed on mobile. Film altgenres of any kind rarely appear. These cumulative observations suggest that I have been put in a Fantasy-specific TV taste community. This in turn suggests that Netflix has found it beneficial to draw distinctions between fantasy and SF as part of their product so that they can target the separated altgenres at some users and the joint altgenres at others, depending on their viewing histories. The consistency enables further contestation, Netflix's investment in fantasy as a distinct genre a mirror reflection of the member in the question.

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[155] Sci-Fi & Fantasy are also listed as a single entry on the genre dropdown menu on the TV tab. However, notably, the genres are listed separately on the dropdown menu for Netflix Kids. Though an exact analysis of why Netflix Kids draws a stronger distinction between these genres is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that at the time of writing, male characters appear in over half of the row art and character profiles on the Sci-Fi altgenre page, while female characters are in less than a quarter. Row art on the Fantasy page, by contrast, is almost half female characters, with a little over a third male characters. Further research might explore whether there is a gendered division at play in the kids content.

[156] *Stranger Things*, *Doctor Who*, and *TNG* are in Sci-Fi altgenres, while *The Witcher*, *The Dragon Prince*, *Outlander*, and *The Magicians* are in Fantasy altgenres.

[157] Taste communities are not included in a data request for personal information and, when contacted directly, Netflix customer service agents were unaware of the existence of taste communities and could not access that data. Apologies to Enrico and Eden for the confusing question and thank you for all your help.

Netflix in Summary: Ephemeral Contestation on the LoLoMo

In addition to the contestation Netflix creates with categorization and personalization, the ephemerality of content heightens contestation as content rotates into and out of the service's catalogue. Given the lack of clarity surrounding altgenre definitions, the series placed in each altgenre crucially inform how the categories are framed, rendering them subject to contestation as series leave and arrive. This ephemerality also presents a methodological challenge as it is difficult to access information about how series are categorized once they leave the service. While researchers may be able to get a vague sense of how Netflix might have categorized content with searches for "titles like X" or by consulting the DVD site, they cannot access a comprehensive list of which altgenres a series was in. Content being rotated out of the catalogue can disrupt understandings of genre, and presents significant, albeit interesting, challenges to research.

While Netflix centers genre as part of their brand, they do not necessarily engage with existing ideas about genre. Despite Jenner's claim that "generic categories are based on an already existing consensus about genre, which Netflix does not challenge,"[158] Netflix centers and authors their own ideas about genre. This is reflected in the lack of subgenre logic applied to altgenres, the absence of contextual members from altgenres, and the absence of established genres and subgenres from their interface. Jenner also claims that "Genre points to an underlying similarity between broadcast schedules and Netflix recommendations: the assumption that viewers look for the repetition of generic formulas, aesthetic style or tone."[159] However, this reductively assumes that the core principle of genre for online TV services is repetition, an assumption that is particularly difficult to maintain in the face of broad genres like fantasy. Fantasy's breadth is emphasized on a service like Netflix, not simply by the variety of series sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in Fantasy TV Shows, but by the wide range of non-SFF altgenres that they populate. Internal discussions that Netflix has about content verticals and altgenres assert that, rather than repetition, the service is attempting to identify commonalities between texts and draw different shared audiences into the same series, sometimes through wildly different doors.

Genre contestation highlights the ways that Netflix positions itself not as the producer of any specific type of content, but as a curator for each member. Genre feeds into and shores up their brand of personalization, conveying Netflix's value to consumers. Netflix claims that "Members connect with these [genre] rows so well that we measure an increase in member

[158] Jenner, 132.
[159] Jenner, 135.

retention by placing the most tailored rows higher on the page instead of lower."[160] Centering their interface around genres, and their brand around being able to identify and target altgenres to interested members, is crucial to their success: genre, in many ways, is their product.

Making Prime Fantastic (to Sell Toilet Paper): Contesting Genre on Amazon

While Netflix needs to establish themselves as having a specific online TV service, Amazon Prime Video is just one piece of the overall Prime service. It does not exist simply to provide and profit from TV content, but to help sustain Amazon as a whole. As former Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos acknowledges, series by Amazon Studios "feed the Prime flywheel."[161] The flywheel is a business concept in which "an established commercial enterprise can keep its proverbial wheel spinning (or momentum increasing) with small additions to that core business."[162] APV has been credited with helping Amazon's Prime membership program take off: while Prime launched in 2005, the addition of Prime Video in 2011 helped cement the success of the program.[163] Bezos has described Amazon Studios as the "fourth pillar" of Amazon, standing beside retail, Prime, and Amazon Web Services.[164]

Because APV is just a piece of the flywheel, Amazon's approach to TV and their metrics for success are drastically different than other online TV services. Karen Petruska stresses that "Amazon's television content must be considered within the broader context of Amazon's larger goals and consumer product divisions."[165] APV does not need to be financially self-sufficient or even to make money, so long as it encourages people to subscribe to Prime. Bezos boasts that "we can charge less for the premium content than we would otherwise have to charge, if we didn't have the flywheel spinning to help sell more shoes."[166] Amazon Studios' head Jennifer Salke explains that their programming decisions have to fulfill at least one of three criteria: "is it enhancing the value of Prime subscription, is it driving Prime

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[160] Amatriain and Basilico.
[161] Jeffrey B. Bezos, "2015 Letter to Shareholders," *Day One: The Amazon Blog*, accessed May 5, 2020, https://s2.q4cdn.com/299287126/files/doc_financials/annual/2015-Letter-to-Shareholders.PDF.
[162] Karen Petruska, "Amazon Prime Video: Where Information is Entertainment," in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 355.
[163] Jason Del Rey, "How Amazon Created the Prime Membership Program," *Vox*, May 3, 2019, https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/5/3/18511544/amazon-prime-oral-history-jeff-bezos-one-day-shipping.
[164] Nathan McAlone, "Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos said something about Prime Video that should scare Netflix," *Business Insider*, June 2, 2016, https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-ceo-jeff-bezos-said-something-about-prime-video-that-should-scare-netflix-2016-6?r=US&IR=T.
[165] Petruska, 356.
[166] McAlone.

Figure 17. The flywheel at work: Amazon-owned IMDb linking to APV on the *Pushing Daisies* series page on July 16, 2020

subscription and is it engaging a new audience with Prime in general."[167] When asked how APV defines a successful series, Amazon's vague response is that a series must be "making Prime fantastic."[168] APV's focus is not on making series or even making APV itself successful, but on bolstering Prime and Amazon.

Amazon's primary motivation with APV is to funnel customers into retail, and then into Prime membership. Outside studies suggest that Prime members buy more from Amazon and that Prime members who use APV are more likely to renew their membership.[169] APV viewership is important to Amazon only insofar as it encourages members to renew their subscriptions and buy more products. Sometimes this link between APV and increased purchases is direct: HGTV and Food Network apps for Amazon Fire TV let members view and order products from Amazon while watching home and lifestyle programs.[170] The link with retail is even apparent in APV content categories, with rows like World Book Day Selection

[167] Michael Schneider, "Amazon Studios Execs on TV's Streaming Wars: 'We're in a Different Business,'" *Variety*, January 14, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/amazon-studios-prime-video-jennifer-salke-streaming-wars-1203467152/.
[168] Lynch, "How Amazon."
[169] Petruska, 360.
[170] Christopher Heine, "HGTV and Food Network's New Amazon TV Apps Let You Shop With Your Remote," *Adweek*, July 7, 2016, https://www.adweek.com/digital/hgtv-and-food-networks-new-amazon-tv-apps-let-you-shop-your-remote-172413/.

that call to mind Amazon's retail book sections. Bezos has claimed that "Amazon is the first company to use a Golden Globe to sell toilet paper."[171] While Amazon is not the only online TV service to use SVOD to encourage other purchases—Apple has attempted to use Apple TV+ to encourage the purchase of their hardware—Amazon has so far proven to be the most successful. By adding services to Prime from APV[172] to Prime Wardrobe to discounts at Whole Foods, Amazon's goal is, as Bezos puts it, "to make sure that if you are not a Prime member, you are being irresponsible."[173] Their investment is not in any of these individual services but in how all these services together raise the value of a Prime subscription by appealing to a variety of member needs.

Just as APV is only one piece of Amazon, SVOD is only one piece of APV. While the service is perhaps most associated with the subscription content designated as "included with Prime," Amazon's video catalogue is expanded with an alphabet soup of advertising video-on-demand [AVOD], TVOD, and even SVOD-within-SVOD. AVOD is housed on Freevee, a free, ad-supported video service that is mostly comprised of licensed film and TV, but also commissions some original content.[174] TVOD is the video on APV that requires an additional rental or purchase fee to view. In addition to advertising and transactional video-on-demand, Amazon also has SVOD services under the Prime umbrella in the form of Amazon Channels: add-on subscriptions for Prime members which allow subscribers access to additional mini-catalogues.[175] These SVOD, TVOD, AVOD, and non-Prime SVOD blend together on the interface to form the APV offering.

The prominence of non-exclusive digital content on APV means that the service is less dependent on SVOD: expiring licensing deals do not mean that series have to completely leave APV. This in turn means that their non-SVOD offerings provide opportunities for contestation between OTTs because content can exist simultaneously on multiple services (and on a

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[171] Natalie Jarvey, "Amazon's Jeff Bezos on Hollywood Strategy: 'When People Join Prime, ... They Buy More Shoes,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 15, 2015, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/amazon-prime-day-ceo-jeff-808535.

[172] Amazon introduced Prime Video-only memberships in some countries in 2016, but these subscriptions are only slightly cheaper than a regular Prime membership (in the US, $8.99 per month compared to $12.99) while allowing access to only one of the services available with a full membership.

[173] Eugene Kim, "Bezos to shareholders: It's 'irresponsible' not to be part of Amazon Prime," *Business Insider*, May 17, 2016, https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-ceo-jeff-bezos-says-its-irresponsible-not-to-be-part-of-prime-2016-5?r=US&IR=T.

[174] While Freevee is separate from APV, its content team shares headquarters with Amazon Studios and works closely with their executives. Elaine Low, "IMDb TV Moves Content Team to Amazon Studios Under New Co-Heads," *Variety*, February 20, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/imdb-tv-content-team-amazon-studios-pirozzi-anderson-1203509844/.

[175] Channels range from linear channels like Showtime and Starz to other SVODs like Shudder and Britbox to special interest content like Sports Now (live sports), The Great Courses (educational content), and YogaAnytime (exercise).

methodological note, allows researchers to see the genre tags Amazon associates with content even if it is not currently available on Prime). *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, for example, is currently streaming on Netflix, but is available on APV as both TVOD and non-Prime SVOD. While *Avatar* is listed in numerous Fantasy TV altgenres on Netflix, it is only categorized as Kids and Anime on Amazon: its status as fantasy contested across services. While non-exclusive agreements for streaming rights also permit this type of contestation, APV's extensive add-on catalogue increases the likelihood that a TV series will be hosted on multiple services with potentially different ideas of what genre the series is. Genre becomes contested across platforms as it is subject to the varying business practices and interfaces of OTTs.

The blending of Prime SVOD with other content on APV has led to the interface being heavily criticized, with even Salke admitting to disliking it.[176] Daniel Chamberlain notes that interfaces "are generally critiqued on their usability or simplicity or, in other words, how cleanly they organize the metadata that describes all of the programming options."[177] APV defaults to displaying their full range of content regardless of what type of video on demand offering it is. Options to filter out non-Prime SVOD content are left subtly to the side (usually a small "Free to Me" checkbox) and are not available as a saved setting: allowed but discouraged by the interface. Instead, "free" content can sit in rows next to identically named "rent or buy" content (see Figure 18), or even in the same row. In addition, category names on the LoLoMo like Movies by Warner Bros., Recently Added TV by Start Date, and Our Selection of Movie Franchises reflect industry interests rather than viewer interests, and can

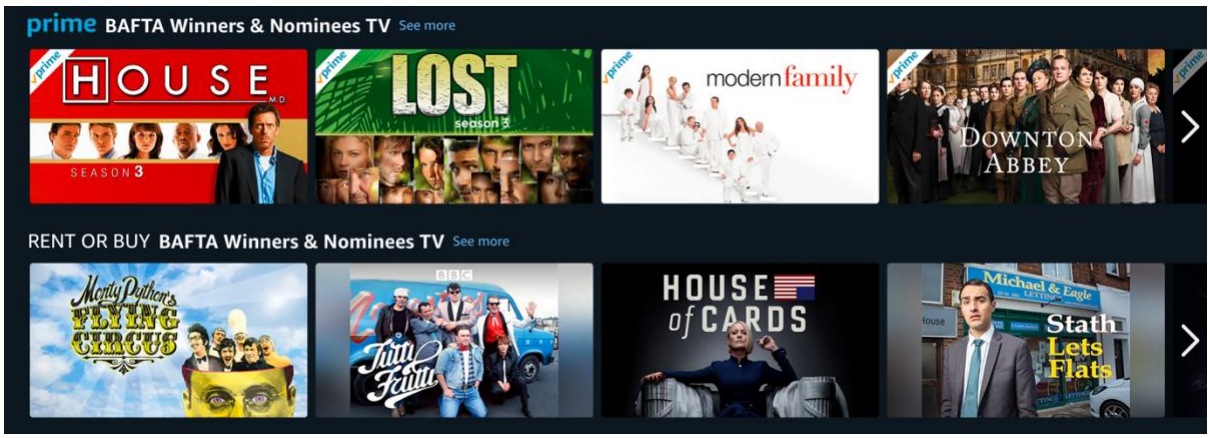

Figure 18. Prime and TVOD BAFTA Winners & Nominees TV rows on Amazon Prime Video homepage on May 27, 2020

[176] Daniel Holloway, "Amazon's Jennifer Salke Talks Exec Diversity, Teases Jill Soloway's Post-'Transparent' Project," *Variety*, July 28, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/amazons-jennifer-salke-talks-exec-diversity-teases-jill-soloways-post-transparent-project-1202889253/.
[177] Daniel Chamberlain, "Scripted Spaces: Television Interfaces and the Non-Places of Asynchronous Entertainment," in *Television As Digital Media*, eds. James Bennett and Niki Strange (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 235.

make the catalogue difficult to browse. When Bezos was asked about complaints about the interface, he replied, "If you want to see our very best experience, get a Fire TV."[178] In direct contrast to Netflix, who consider their interface and its backend to be their product, Amazon treats its literal products as the focus of its OTT service, with viewers who want a user-friendly interface directed to spend money to feed the flywheel.

In direct contrast to Netflix, who center their entire brand around personalization, Amazon's LoLoMo is generic. Despite a series of 2016 Amazon Fire TV commercials that claimed that "Its TV brain knows your TV heart,"[179] Amazon has limited their own ability to collect the user data they would need to produce this kind of personalization. For example, while Netflix introduced individual profiles for different users sharing an account in 2013,[180] Amazon only introduced profiles in July 2020. Thus, the few personalized rows that appear on the Amazon LoLoMo, primarily the "Because You Watched X" rows, were historically based on data that could not be targeted to a single user.[181] In addition, because Amazon accounts and Prime memberships are website-specific, likely due to variation in subscription fees based on differences in available services and operating costs, Amazon members who move countries have to open new accounts and cannot transfer viewing data. Even the phrasing of ostensibly personalized rows, like TV Shows We Think You'll Like, portrays Amazon's recommendations with a dubious tone, discursively casting doubt on their own ability to generate meaningful recommendations. Amazon has limited access to an extensive and specific viewing history with which to form the recommendations it claims to generate for members, which portrays a very different relationship to their services from Netflix.

This deprioritizing of personalization is reflected on the Amazon interface and is particularly stark in contrast to Netflix's LoLoMo from a genre perspective. On Netflix, I usually get several Fantasy and SFF altgenres on my homepage, and the majority of rows are TV-specific.[182] On Amazon, I tend to get more film categories than TV categories,[183] and rows of content that I have never viewed on APV like live sports show up before even Science Fiction TV (which, at the time of writing, shows up as the 116th row). I have yet to be shown a

[178] Jarvey.
[179] Amazon Fire TV, "Amazon Fire TV: Hello Make Up Binging. So Long, #Showhole," YouTube, April 19, 2016, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2xKt0IXexE.
[180] Tom Vanderbilt, "The Science Behind the Netflix Algorithms That Decide What You'll Watch Next," *Wired*, August 7, 2013, https://www.wired.com/2013/08/qq-netflix-algorithm/.
[181] My LoLoMo currently contains rows like Because You Watched "Star Trek: Picard" and Because You Watched "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel," unaware that my partner watched the former and I watched the latter. Even now that profiles have been added, all accumulated viewing history prior to July 2020 is based on a jumble of different viewers under one banner, potentially accumulated over the course of several years.
[182] On the day of writing, none of the altgenres on my LoLoMo were film-only and 79% were TV-only.
[183] On the day of writing, 42% of my rows were film-only in comparison to 34% TV-only.

fantasy TV row on my LoLoMo, despite extensive viewing of TV shows designated by APV as Fantasy. The lack of personalization, and the sheer number of rows on the LoLoMo (at the time of writing, ~135 in comparison to Netflix's ~40) frames APV as an additional catalogue of Prime products rather than as a service. While the personalization of Netflix sometimes makes it operate more as a push technology, Amazon's lack of personalization and catalogue approach renders it a pull technology. It is easier to search for specific content than scroll through dozens of rows of potentially irrelevant content that may require paying extra fees to view. Genre is not rendered on the interface as a meaningful or convenient way to engage with the extensive catalogue. And because Amazon presents the same genre information to all members accessing their interface, it does not create genre contestation with personalization like Netflix does. Instead, there are two main types of genre contestation on Amazon: contestation between categorization on different parts of the interface, and contestation between the APV interface and Amazon Studios' programming strategy.

Filtering Products: Contestation on the APV Interface

Contestation on the interface manifests in a variety of ways. First, there is the contestation between the genres listed on a series's details page and its metadata. The first season of *American Gods* (2017–2021) on Amazon US, for example, has "Science Fiction, Drama" listed on the detail page and Fantasy, but not Science Fiction, tagged in the metadata.[184] While the text of the detail page explicitly includes *American Gods* in the SF genre, the metadata excludes it, and instead places it in Fantasy. Similarly, on Amazon UK, *Outlander* does not have Fantasy on its detail page, but the series is one of the first results to come up when searching for fantasy TV. And while *A Discovery of Witches* (2018–2022) does not have any genre information on its detail page, it is tagged Fantasy in the metadata. Whether APV frames these series as fantasy varies depending on where and how genre labels are articulated. While it is not surprising that more genre information can be included in metadata than fits visually onto a detail page, it is notable that and unclear why not all genre information on these detail pages makes it into the metadata.

There is further contestation on the interface between seasons. On APV, each season of a series is listed as a separate product in the catalogue and, on the desktop interface, accorded a different URL. This separation may result from the importance of TVOD to the service, as it allows seasons to be rented or bought individually, and allows series with a mixture of Prime and non-Prime seasons to have the necessary interfaces for transactions (see the contrast

[184] Searching for "American Gods" with the filters of "science fiction" and "TV" does not bring up the series.

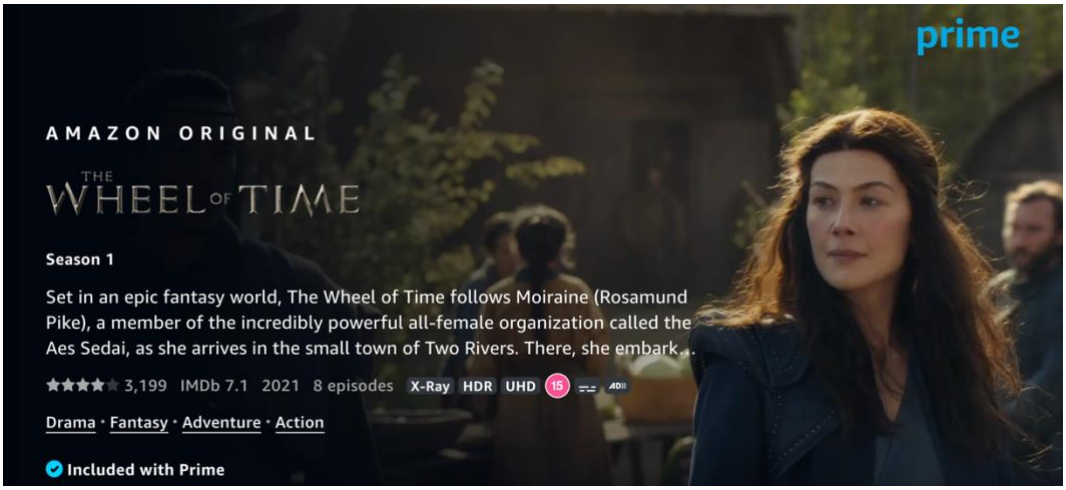

Figure 19. Video details page for *The Wheel of Time* season one on the Amazon US desktop interface on May 12, 2023

between the SVOD interface for *The Wheel of Time* (2021–Present) in Figure 19 and the TVOD interface for *Lucifer* (2016–2021) in Figure 20). The framing of each season as a distinct product is emphasized by the occasionally varying genre information between seasons. *Grimm* (2011–2017), for example, is listed on Amazon US with the following genre labels:

> Season One: Science Fiction, Suspense, Horror, Drama
> Season Two: Suspense, Horror, Drama
> Season Three: Science Fiction, Suspense, Horror, Drama
> Season Four: Suspense, Horror, Drama
> Season Five: Action, Adventure, Drama, Fantasy, Horror, Science Fiction, Suspense
> Season Six: No genres

According to these detail pages, seasons one, three, and five are Science Fiction, seasons one through five are Horror, and only season five is Fantasy. Whether or not APV frames *Grimm* as fantasy varies by season. The difference between season genre labels does not have a clear textual motivation: season five is not the only season to include action, adventure, or fantasy,

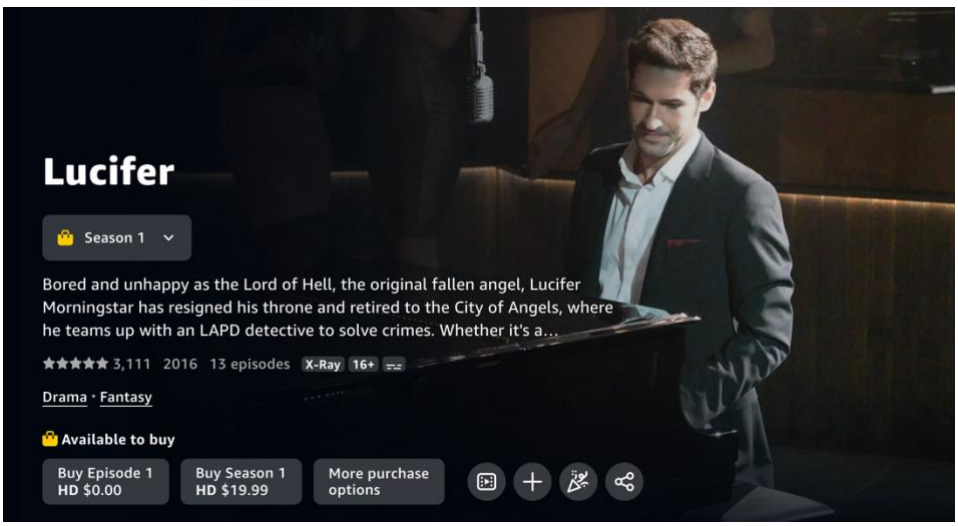

Figure 20. Video details page for *Lucifer* season one on the Amazon US desktop interface on May 12, 2023

and season six is not devoid of all these things. The metadata only adds to the contestation surrounding the genre identity of *Grimm* on APV. Seasons four, five and six are tagged as Fantasy, no seasons are tagged as Science Fiction, and all are tagged as Horror. Because each season is listed as a separate product, the interface has the capacity for season-level genre contestation.

This lack of consistency is highlighted by an entry like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) season six, which is the only season of *Buffy* on Amazon US to be labelled on its detail page as Animation, despite the lack of animated episodes in the season (or indeed, the series). And while season six of *Buffy* includes a musical episode, Musical does not appear on the detail page or in the metadata of season six; again, the difference between seasons does not appear to respond to variation within the texts themselves across seasons. Because the Animation page of APV lists a variety of non-animated series like *The Wire*, *Law and Order: SVU*, and *Jersey Shore*, one assumes this tag is the result of a faulty or flawed automated process, but regardless of the source of the label, it creates contestation surrounding the genre identity of that particular season, as well as the series as a whole.

The differences between seasons suggests that Amazon generates information for each details page without reference to the other "products" in the series. 4K Ultra High Definition [UHD] versions of seasons, for example, are given separate pages and at times different genre information: on Amazon US, *Carnival Row* (2019–2023) is Fantasy while *Carnival Row 4K UHD* is not.[185] The service frames the same seasons, and therefore the same texts, with different genres depending on their video resolution.

Genre labels also vary across devices, highlighting what Hesmondhalgh and Lotz refer to as pluriformity, "in which a mix of devices and distribution technologies leads to viewing

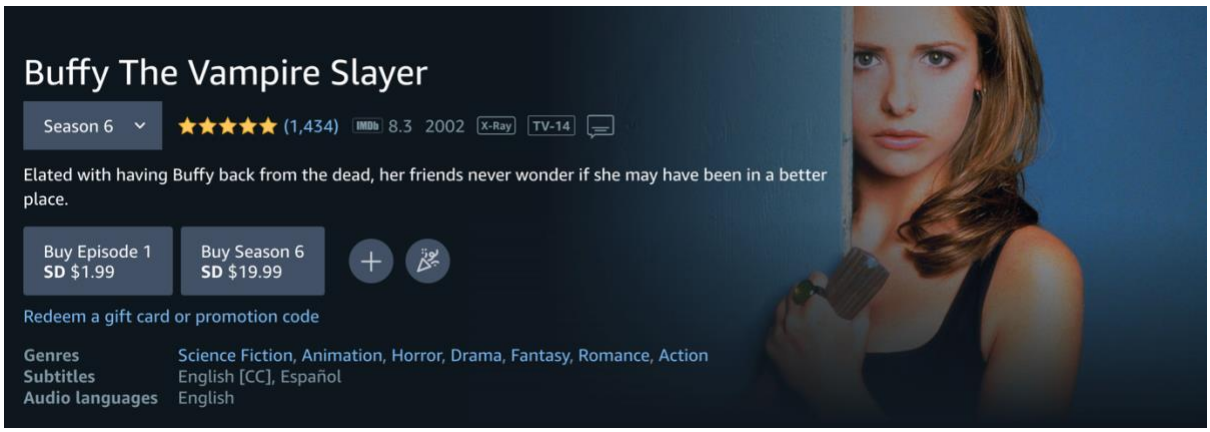

Figure 21. Video details page for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* season six on the Amazon US desktop interface on April 2, 2023

[185] On Amazon US, *Carnival Row* is "Drama, Fantasy, Suspense," but *Carnival Row 4K UHD* is not listed with any genres and is only tagged as Drama in its metadata.

experiences governed by a range of devices, Web browsers, and sometimes apps."[186] Series slip in and out of genre categories depending on the device they are viewed on, creating contestation between devices of access. This contestation only increases across Amazon websites. Of the twelve countries in which *Grimm* is listed, for instance, the series is only consistently labelled as Fantasy in seven.[187] This variation does not appear to be motivated by cultural differences between genre definitions: while the UK and the US have different fantasy traditions, they do not have such different definitions of the genres that would explain *Grimm* and *Buffy* being labelled as SF on Amazon US but not given any SFF labels on Amazon UK. The combination of device and country adds even more contestation. When accessed via the iOS and Google Play phone apps, the listed genres match the desktop browser in the country of access. The genres on the browser, meanwhile, depend on which country's website is being viewed, regardless of which country the device is in. While the motivations for the differences between genre labels across borders is unclear, with Amazon itself providing no explanation or acknowledgement of the variety (in contrast with Netflix), it illustrates that Amazon generates new genre labels for each of their country websites and even devices.

Amazon even shifts the prioritizing of genre itself as a search filter depending on the country. On the desktop browser of all APVs except the US, the sidebar offers genres as one of the first filter categories, visible on a first look at the page. In the US, however, Ways to Watch, Amazon Channels, and New Releases filters are listed before genre, so a member who wants to use the genre filter has to scroll down to encounter and use it. This shift suggests that Amazon believes US members are more likely to use filters like Channels than they are to use genres: the relevance to the APV interface of genre itself varies across borders.

Not every series is subject to this level of variation. On Amazon US, all fifteen seasons of *Supernatural* (2005–2020) have the same four genres listed—Drama, Horror, Science Fiction, Suspense (though the order varies)—and all are tagged as Fantasy in the metadata. *Carnival Row* is Fantasy in every country except for the UK, where it is Science Fiction (but only on the detail page. In metadata, it is Fantasy instead of Science Fiction). However, many series do display this variety, and the inconsistency of genre information is exaggerated by the way Amazon treats the distinctions between fantasy and SF.

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[186] Hesmondhalgh and Lotz, 388.

[187] Some of the observed variation in genre labels relies on Amazon's website translations to English, which were then double-checked against bilingual dictionaries, as I only speak English and German. Research that centers a translingual or multilingual approach to genre has to engage more extensively with differences across national and linguistic genre traditions, and the specific terms used for a genre. The *Grimm* example merely illustrates that a user accessing Amazon in multiple countries will be shown different genre labels, and thus any research taking note of Amazon's genre labels has to be specific about which country it has retrieved those labels from.

APV's interfaces paradoxically frame fantasy and SF as simultaneously interchangeable and exclusive. While the terms are often used in place of one another, if Amazon is intentionally aiming to treat SF and fantasy as interchangeable, series would presumably all be tagged as both genres, or the genres would be listed together as with Action & Adventure. Instead, the tags show up both exclusively and interchangeably, with series frequently tagged as one genre on the detail page and the other in the metadata. This suggests that Amazon does not have a clear policy on or investment in whether the genres are different, but that it does recognize them as two genres. Chamberlain notes that "screening metadata is […] the process of filtering out information deemed unhelpful, undesirable, or, in some cases, unprofitable."[188] Amazon does not appear to draw distinctions within SFF on the detail page or in the metadata because, for them, these genre distinctions are not helpful, desirable, or profitable. They do not feed the flywheel, so they are not invested in. The lack of consistent distinctions simultaneously blurs the genres together and separates them, adding to the contestation surrounding their identities and relationship to one another.

The contestation over the genre identity of SFF content on APV only increases when considering the broader Amazon ecosystem. Although APV does display some information from Amazon-owned IMDb such as cast lists[189] and season ratings, it does not use IMDb's genre labels. IMDb, for example, labels *Buffy* as "Action, Drama, Fantasy," but only one Amazon website labels *Buffy* as Fantasy, two do not label it as SFF at all, and no Amazon website uses the same three genre terms that IMDb does. As a more extreme example, while *Once Upon a Time* (2011–2018) is "Adventure, Fantasy, Romance" on IMDb, no Amazon website lists the series as Adventure or Romance, and only two list it as Fantasy. The non-use of IMDb's genre tags is particularly notable for two reasons. First, it is strikingly inefficient that Amazon does not make use of their existing database of genre information, instead designing multiple new systems to generate new information. Second, since IMDb's genre tags are user-submitted, [190] they would presumably speak to potential viewers with genre information they themselves use and understand. The non-use of IMDb's labels would make sense if it appeared that Amazon wanted to ensure, as Netflix does, strict control over genre labels so as to strategically position their series, but the lack of consistency on APV suggests

[188] Chamberlain, 237–238.
[189] Cast information appears in the X-Ray feature, allowing members to see which actors are in each scene and access a limited version of their IMDb filmography.
[190] Genres are user-submitted based on definition guidelines provided by IMDb, though IMDb specifically labels some genres, including fantasy and science fiction, as subjective and therefore as "influenced by viewer opinions, interpretations, points of view, emotions, and judgement" rather than "hard coded to the set rules of our guidelines." "Genres," IMDb Help Center, accessed July 17, 2020, https://help.imdb.com/article/contribution/titles/genres/GZDRMS6R742JRGAG#.

that Amazon does not prioritize genre. Not only does the non-use of IMDb create contestation across Amazon's flywheel, but it highlights the lack of importance Amazon grants to genre.

Overall, there is no visible generic logic to the APV interface. Amazon frames a series differently depending heavily on how and where a member accesses it in the Amazon ecosystem. The question of what Amazon considers to be fantasy varies wildly and is left too unclear to even speculate about. The lack of promotional discourses surrounding APV's use of genre only amplifies the seeming lack of logic. Netflix talks extensively about their tagging process and use of altgenres, so both members and researchers may be more inclined to ascribe meaning and intentionality to their inconsistencies. Amazon's comparative silence makes it easy to ascribe a lack of investment in or attention to genre. It is possible that there is a logic to the variety on display, and that there are motivations behind the variety in metadata and profile information. However, the black box of Amazon's genre tagging process means that there is no promotional narrative to inform or frame an understanding of how APV is using genre, and so it is easier to assume apathy. This assumption is helped along by the numerous inconsistencies between seasons and between detail pages and metadata, as well as erroneous listings like *Buffy* season six as Animation.

These kinds of discrepancies suggest that APV's genre tagging may be the result of automated processes, highlighting that Amazon's genre labels are born of algorithmic culture. Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas define algorithmic culture as "the use of computational processes to sort, classify, and hierarchize people, places, objects, and ideas, and also the habits of thought, conduct, and expression that arise in relationship to those processes."[191] While Netflix also uses computational processes and algorithms to create its tens of thousands of altgenres, Netflix has put more emphasis on the human face of its genre designations by acknowledging the role of taggers and engineers. Amazon does not provide any such promotional materials or emphasis. The frequency of discrepancies between metadata and labels, between seasons, between websites, and across devices, as well as illogical categories like the Animation page, suggest a lack of human oversight to this process and emphasizes the computational nature of Amazon's genre tagging.

Prime Programming: Contestation between Amazon Studios and APV

While there is no promotional narrative to frame Amazon's approach to genre on the interface, the same cannot be said for Amazon's approach to programming, creating a site of contestation

[191] Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas, "Recommended for you: The Netflix Prize and the production of algorithmic culture," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 1 (2016): 119, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814538646.

between the APV interface and Amazon Studios, the company's production arm. Amazon Studios has not always had an investment in genres: their original strategy in the early 2010s, as framed in promotional discourses, was to have unique, niche content that would inspire passionate viewership from smaller, more devoted audiences.[192] However, this strategy and programming proved commercially and culturally unsuccessful, failing to secure Emmys or major hits[193] and attracting public criticism from creators who worked for them, with David Kelly notoriously disparaging Amazon Studios as "a bit of a gong show."[194] In 2017, Amazon Studios began to pivot their development strategy, and centered this pivot on SFF.

There were two crucial components to this shift: the creation of a "Genre team" and a change of programming mandate. The Genre department was created in January 2017. An addition to the existing US scripted TV development departments of Drama, Comedy, and Alternative (encompassing YA and "specialty series"),[195] the Genre team "focused on the development and production of big scope, big event genre series — hourlong science fiction, action, fantasy and horror series."[196] The creation of the team was followed up by a Bezos-issued mandate in September 2017 to find the next *Game of Thrones*: a big budget fantasy series with global appeal.[197] The interest in SFF itself was not necessarily new—one of the previous target audiences of Amazon Studios was the Comic-Con audience[198]—but it had never been an explicit focus of the service or well-represented amongst Amazon's original series. Amazon claimed that the shift was "informed by the wealth of data available to Amazon," and emphasized the importance of event SFF series to generate Prime subscriptions;[199] however, given the earlier analysis of APV's approach to genre information and limitations on collecting viewing history, it is not entirely clear what that wealth of data refers to. Amazon Studios prominently put their money where their mouth was, acquiring the rights to series

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[192] Landau, 21.
[193] Lesley Goldberg, "Amazon Addresses Roy Price Suspension in Company-Wide Memo," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 13, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/amazon-addresses-roy-price-suspension-company-wide-memo-1048778.
[194] Ben Fritz and Joe Flint, "Where Amazon Is Failing to Dominate: Hollywood," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/where-amazon-is-failing-to-dominate-hollywood-1507282205.
[195] Nellie Andreeva, "Amazon Studios Names Albert Cheng Co-Head of Television, Restructures Scripted Development Team," *Deadline*, April 9, 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/04/amazon-studios-albert-cheng-co-head-of-television-scripted-development-team-restructuring-1202361277/.
[196] Nellie Andreeva, "Amazon Studios Launches Event Series Division, Taps Sharon Tal Yguado To Run It," *Deadline*, January 26, 2017, https://deadline.com/2017/01/sharon-tal-yguado-amazon-studios-event-series-division-1201894544/.
[197] Cynthia Littleton and Daniel Holloway, "Jeff Bezos Mandates Programming Shift at Amazon Studios," *Variety*, September 8, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/amazon-studios-jeff-bezos-roy-price-zelda-1202552532/.
[198] Charlotte Howell, *Divine Programming: Negotiating Christianity in American Dramatic Television Production, 1996–2016* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 188.
[199] Littleton and Holloway.

based on fantasy fandom favorites like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Good Omens*, and *The Wheel of Time*. They also reversed previous greenlighting decisions in order to "[clean] house of its niche programming" to "make room" for these series.[200] Salke insisted that "We're not going for something small and niche […] You can still have something that feels specific. But it needs to invite people in."[201] The focus was now on "addictive, can't-miss, global television shows" that Amazon Studios felt would "be the most effective" at "getting people to come to Prime and stay with Prime."[202]

This depiction of fantasy as having broad global appeal is a major shift from how fantasy was viewed only ten years previously. In 2007, *GoT* only just managed to be greenlit because it "transcend[ed] the genre" and made executives "excited by the drama, not by the genre."[203] By 2017, Amazon was claiming the genre as "addictive, can't-miss, global television." Fantasy had gone from a genre with niche appeal that needed to be cautiously and strategically targeted to audiences, to a genre with broad, global appeal that could supplant niche content and positively define a service. James Farrell, head of Asia Pacific content, gloated that "There is no one specific genre or single tastemaker for [companies like Netflix and HBO]. The next 'Lord of the Rings' will be on Amazon."[204] This genre branding has not necessarily proven successful: Daniel D'Addario argues that Amazon still struggles with a branding problem, bifurcated between SFF tentpole series and the "soft comfort-TV appeals of "Modern Love," fashion shows, and Mrs. Maisel."[205] However, regardless of the reception of Amazon's mandate, the company's 2017 pivot into SFF illustrated the industry's decade-long turn from fantasy as a niche outlier to fantasy as a potential tastemaker for an OTT service. Similarly to Syfy's 2017 rebrand, the pivot made a promotional event out of the service's newly positive perception of fantasy, adding to contestation surrounding the genre and its cultural value with public discourses claiming fantasy as value-added to their brand.

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[200] Tatiana Siegel and Lesley Goldberg, "How Jennifer Salke Could Spend Amazon's $4.5 Billion a Year," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 14, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/how-jennifer-salke-could-spend-amazons-45-billion-a-year-1084518.
[201] Brooks Barnes and John Koblin, "Amazon Studios' New Boss Is Reshaping Its Strategy. Step One: Lure New Talent.," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/11/business/media/amazon-studios-jennifer-salke.html.
[202] Katie Kilkenny, "Jennifer Salke Details Amazon's Global TV 'Sweet Spot': 'I'm Here to Compete,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 20, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/jennifer-salke-details-amazons-global-tv-sweet-spot-1153871.
[203] Stuart Levine, "Plepler, Lombardo talk HBO programming," *Variety*, November 8, 2010, https://variety.com/2010/tv/news/plepler-lombardo-talk-hbo-programming-1118026455/.
[204] Patrick Frater, "Amazon Goes Big and Increasingly Local in Asia," *Variety*, November 28, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/digital/asia/amazon-goes-big-and-local-in-asia-1202625286/.
[205] Daniel D'Addario, "Amazon's Streaming Future: Big Names and Broad Brand," *Variety*, July 27, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/tv/columns/amazon-tca-1203282229/.

Amazon Studios' view of genre as defining Amazon's appeal to subscribers stands in direct conflict with the de-prioritizing of genre on the APV interface. This contrast reflects a tension between Amazon as a media company and Amazon as a tech company. It suggests either that the programming and interface sides of Amazon do not communicate about the respective importance of genre to their departments, or that the value of fantasy gets lost on the journey from development to interface. The popularity and importance of fantasy is conceptualized as residing in the text. In Amazon's view, fantasy TV series will be popular, but subscribers will not care about series being explicitly labelled as fantasy. It is the textual characteristics of genres, not the labels, that are of value to and exploited by the company. According to Amazon, those textual characteristics are how they sell more shoes.

Amazon in Summary: Genre Apathy on the Interface

The lack of focus on genre on the APV interface suggests that Amazon does not view genre as a major tool for members to navigate and access content catalogues, reflecting an assumption on their part that viewers do not care about, or at least do not primarily select content based on, genre labels. Instead, genre is rendered as one of many characteristics of a product that can be used in a filtered search, in the same way that "Light Bulb Socket Type" is a characteristic used to filter an Indoor Lighting search. On some devices, the lack of priority given to genre is emphasized by the interface vectors: on the current mobile apps of APV, genre is only visible when a member selects a series, scrolls down past the billboard image, and clicks on a "more details" tab. The genre information is hidden out of immediate view, emphasizing its apparent unimportance to the interface. This information is seemingly included not because Amazon is invested in it, but because including genre on an online TV interface is common practice: a discursive reflex rather than active participation. The answer to the question "does Amazon think *Grimm* is fantasy?" is likely that Amazon does not expect Prime members to care, so they will not either.

In some regards, this apathy is reminiscent of linear TV approaches to fantasy. The interchangeable use of fantasy and SF is common, even amongst Syfy executives. However, the extent of their apathy is newly enabled by the online environment and algorithmic culture. UPN, for instance, never created any promotional materials for *Buffy* that so much as implied that its sixth season is animated. This misleading framing would not have been successful or appropriate, nor would it have been likely to be suggested by humans in a marketing department. An algorithmic process that is solely focused on filling out a field on webpage, however, can and will suggest this kind of framing, especially if its genre labelling process

lacks human oversight. On an interface where genre is visibly de-prioritized and users are encouraged to search for specific content that they are already interested in watching, Amazon is unlikely to experience or notice any negative consequences of such an error. APV's interface both creates and permits a unique degree of apathy toward genre.

This apathy seems to partly derive from their investment in individual series rather than APV as a service. Series are rendered as products in a catalogue, which members are expected to come to APV already knowing about and wanting to watch. During the 2019 Super Bowl, Amazon Studios was the only online TV service to highlight a single series in their commercial.[206] Global Head of Marketing Andy Donkin explained that Amazon Studios wanted to "highlight a tentpole program that the service hopes will have global appeal, instead of touting the offering's overall merits."[207] While services like Hulu, Quibi, and Netflix emphasize their overall brand and service, Amazon focuses on raising awareness for individual series.[208] The inconsistent genre use on the interface is a side effect of APV being reduced to extra products in Amazon's catalogue, rather than as a valuable, distinct service in its own right. What is fantasy? Who cares. Buy more toilet paper.

Conclusion: Panning for Genre in a Mountain of Crap

When discussing online TV services as a genre stakeholder, it is crucial not to overstate the influence of a single source like Netflix or Amazon Prime Video. As Mattias Frey observes, "Young media users are more prone to using several recommendation sources, both online and offline."[209] Online viewers, particularly younger viewers, are likely to use multiple SVODs and draw on multiple resources like IMDb, so they are exposed to many online spaces that can frame specific series and a genre like fantasy in a variety of ways. This variety invites a plethora of sites of contestation surrounding the genre identities of TV series, and the identities of genres themselves.

As this chapter has explored, there are substantial opportunities for contestation even within a single source. While contestation on Netflix is presented as a deliberate strategy to target content to viewers in different taste communities and place series into altgenres, contestation on Amazon seems more accidental. This contrast in approaches is encapsulated by the different distinctions these services draw between fantasy and science fiction. While

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[206] Kelsey Sutton, "Streaming Services Mostly Focus on Brand Building in Super Bowl Ads," *Adweek*, February 3, 2020, https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/streaming-services-mostly-focus-on-brand-building-in-super-bowl-ads/.
[207] Sutton.
[208] Sutton.
[209] Mattias Frey, "The Internet Suggests: Film, Recommender Systems, and Cultural Mediation," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 1 (Fall 2019): 168, https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2019.0068.

Netflix draws on comparatively consistent distinctions, with specific altgenres muddying the waters, Amazon use these terms interchangeably and exclusively without much consideration for whether or how they might be different.

The role of genre on Netflix and Amazon reflects the different purposes that these companies see for their TV services. Contestation within Netflix reflects their emphasis on personalization and the organization of their interface as key components of Netflix's appeal to subscribers. Contestation within Amazon reflects their lack of a centralized approach to genre, and overall treatment of content as an added product in the Amazon Prime ecosystem. Genre is Netflix's way of establishing themselves as providing a distinct, standalone service that goes beyond the content they have on offer, whereas genre on Amazon is relegated to a position of importance only in specific promotional contexts. As online TV services try to differentiate themselves in the "streaming wars," genres (both genres broadly and specific genres like fantasy) illuminate broader ideas about how the services view themselves and how they think viewers want to engage with online content and content libraries.

However, genre's continued importance or lack of importance to these services is by no means assured or permanent. Yellin notes that:

> big data is a mountain of crap. […] in that mountain of crap, there's this gold, but you have to burrow through the grotesqueness [...] Which takes a lot of work, a lot of sweat, because you're going to be flooded with all this data about users […] where's the gold in there? What's going to be really useful?[210]

Genre is some of the data that has risen to the surface for Netflix as useful data, but if something else proves to be more useful, Netflix may well abandon genre as its central organizing feature. Meanwhile, Amazon repeatedly claims to be planning or executing updates to its APV algorithm and interface.[211] As more SVODs enter the field, Amazon may gravitate towards strategies that have proven effective on other services. As a path through online TV's content libraries, genre's future remains unclear and uncertain, leaving the potential for more contestation to come.

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[210] Future of StoryTelling, "Stories You'll Love: Matchmaking Through Personalization," YouTube, February 11, 2015, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-rOdXj0RYI.

[211] Janko Roettgers, "How Amazon Recommends Movies on Prime Video," *Variety*, June 5, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/digital/news/amazon-prime-video-algorithms-1203233844/.; Holloway, "Amazon's Jennifer Salke."

Chapter Five

"It's not fantasy—it's fantasy": Performing Genre Identity in the Writers' Paraindustry

> WAYNE THE TALKING SWORD
> They're using us, goblin. I'm only here for the exposition, while you are nothing more than a pointless allegory.
>
> — Simon Allen & Ed Hime, *The Watch*, "Nowhere in the Multiverse"

> " […] there's always a real grounded, emotional, human storyline that allows you to talk about dragon jizz and dragon porn, and the real stuff that you want to be talking about."
>
> — Alex Raiman[1]

While I was a writers' intern on a television series described by its writers as "procedural" and "fantasy," an episode's nervous writer sheepishly admitted to me before a network notes call, "They brought me on because I'm a procedural guy. I don't do this fantasy stuff." Sat beside him was a writer who had spent the past few minutes gleefully showing off the Daleks she had just gotten painted on her nails, a writer who would later claim that working on this series had turned her love of fantasy and science fiction into a love of *writing* fantasy and science fiction. Though the writers shared the same room and job, they approached the series primarily through the lens of different genres, which were informed by and in turn informed their identities and work. Far from a theoretical concept, contestation was a living, vital part of the experience of that room, and many others like it.

Although everyone who works on a series shapes its genre identities, this thesis focuses on writers because genres are most often determined in pre-production stages by writers, albeit influenced by other stakeholders like studios and channels. For instance, the creators of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* developed their pitch to Nickelodeon based on the channel's mandate for a series reminiscent of *The Lord of the Rings* and Harry Potter: the genre of the pitch was changed to fantasy in direct response to channel interests and market forces.[2] This genre shift can even occur on an episode-level: for example, the musical episode of *Buffy the Vampire*

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[1] Clara Sherley-Appel and Dani Lowry, "Episode 508 - Garden Variety Homicide (with Alex Raiman and Jay Gard)," February 27, 2020, in *Physical Kids Weekly: A Magicians Podcast*, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/physical-kids-weekly-a-magicians-podcast/id1193279151?i=1000466818039.

[2] Ben Blacker, "Legend of Korra / Avatar: The Last Airbender," August 19, 2014, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000317868414.

Slayer (1997–2003) was written in response to the vocal talent of the cast. While production and post-production laborers contribute to much of the decision-making that popular discourse attributes to "the writing," their choices (at least for the series as a whole) tend to respond to the genre decisions made by writers during pre-production, rather than supplanting them. In focusing on writers, this chapter is not arguing that writers are solely responsible for determining the genres of a series, but rather that they tend to be the media practitioners who are most explicitly involved in making initial decisions about genre.

In addition to their explicit role in shaping genre decisions, writers are often *perceived* by other stakeholders, particularly audiences, as a vital source of the text's true meaning. Particularly in the case of showrunner-auteur figures, Leora Hadas notes that they are "celebrated as a creative authority who leads the show with their unique, authentic vision."[3] In fandom spaces, statements by high-profile creative personnel are sometimes referred to as Word of God, and can be perceived as settling disputes over interpretation.[4] While rhetoric about the death of the author complicates the perception of their authority, writers' discourses carry disproportionate influence in cultural discussions surrounding genre.

This chapter draws on a screenwriting studies approach that focuses on how television writers discursively construct their own work and creative labor. Rather than focusing on theoretical auteur figures or a handful of showrunners, it examines the discourses of individual writers across all levels of a writing staff. By analyzing these discourses through the lens of professional identity theories and impressions management, the chapter explores the vibrant paraindustry of media workers' self-analysis as strategic public performances rather than as transparent disclosures that can be taken at face value.

This analysis of the paraindustry as a performance is particularly crucial when engaging with writers, as Daniel Bernardi and Julian Hoxter note that "screenwriting as craft and practice is without a doubt the most overtheorized craft in the paraindustrial market."[5] Scholarly work engaging with these discourses cannot assume that writers' claims are accurate reflections of their actual creative process. Barbara Tomlinson highlights this as a core difficulty with discursive representations of intellectual work, as "it consists of on-going cognitive and

[3] Leora Hadas, *Authorship as Promotional Discourse in the Screen Industries: Selling Genius* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 4.
[4] J. S. A. Lowe, "We'll Always Have Purgatory: Fan Spaces in Social Media," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017): 178, https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.5.2.175_1.
[5] Daniel Bernardi and Julian Hoxter, *Off the Page: Screenwriting in the Era of Media Convergence* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 14.

emotional processes that are intangible and unrecorded. In the case of interviews, the thinker is also the one who provides the representation, a further difficulty."[6] She goes on to argue that

> The 'unrecoverable' nature of writing processes—their resistance to recollection and representation—is not a problem of untrustworthiness or naiveté on the part of the authors (though they may, of course, indulge in rhetorical display). Rather, it is part of the difficulty of knowing and representing one's own cognitive processes retrospectively. […] writers' descriptions of their own composing are *constructions*, not *recollections*.[7]

Compared to the relatively solitary literary writing that Tomlinson's work focuses on, some of the intellectual work of television writing is socially performed and therefore can become tangible and witnessed: in a writers' room, in notes calls, on set, in edit bays. This work is at times even shown publicly in recorded behind-the-scenes materials. However, these spaces, particularly writers' rooms, tend to be closely guarded, and most information about a room that is released publicly is done in a carefully planned promotional context. Without direct and full access to behind-the-scenes spaces (and in other cases, to the intellectual work conducted in a writer's mind), their constructions in discourses are difficult to verify for accuracy.

These questions of accuracy and authenticity are not the focus of this chapter. The performance itself is worthy of study as it reveals what Hadas refers to as "the discursive construction of creativity: what ideas are communicated to audiences regarding the creative process, the creative person, and creativity as a concept."[8] Writers' discursive constructions of their practice offer rich insights into this discursive construction of creativity, regardless of its reality. Tomlinson argues that

> when properly interpreted, the things authors say about composing processes can tell us a great deal—about them and about us, about the cultures of commerce and creativity in our society, about the assumptions, understandings, and aspirations that make writing a shared social practice as well as an individual art.[9]

While analyzing constructions of these creative processes does not reveal a complete and verifiable truth of how these processes actually occur, it does reveal major cultural, commercial, and industrial beliefs that writers hold about how their work is valued and how it should be framed.

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[6] Barbara Tomlinson, *Authors on Writing: Metaphors and Intellectual Labor* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 37.
[7] Tomlinson, 37.
[8] Leora Hadas-Dattner, "Selling Genius: Promotional Authorship in the Contemporary United States Media Industries" (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2015), 12.
[9] Tomlinson, 5.

Some of these beliefs can be found in the points of overlap between writers' discourses. Mark Deuze and Nicky Lewis highlight that these discourses "are a primary source for understanding what it is like to work in the creative industries. This does not necessarily mean that people's lived experience of cultural work matches what actually happens";[10] however, there can be "striking similarities in these self-expressions."[11] These similarities may indicate that reconstructions are based on a shared reality, but more crucially they suggest that writers learn from each other's discourses about how to talk about their practice. As Karen Burke LeFevre argues, "the paradigms or cognitive maps that are the basis for invention are viewed not as innate but as acquired by interaction with others and internalized."[12] Writers learn from one another how to discursively construct their creativity and labor, internalize those constructions, and perpetuate them. In effect, writers become what Ludwik Fleck terms a thought collective: "a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction."[13] This thought collective "provides the special 'carrier' for the historical development of any field of thought, as well as for the given stock of knowledge and level of culture," which Fleck calls the thought style.[14] In essence, each field-specific collective develops communal knowledge and ways of thinking about their field. This thought style becomes influential, with Tomlinson claiming that "this discourse becomes a social fact and a powerful social force because it influences how people learn to write."[15] Writing, according to her, "is a social institution created over time."[16] That social institution shapes how writers think of their work, both generally and specifically in terms of aspects such as genre.

Crucially, this social institution does not operate unilaterally. Writers are part of multiple thought collectives (or communities of practice) both within and outwith their professional work; the thought styles they learn from being in those communities, and their differing personal and professional goals, shape their discourses. As John Caldwell argues,

> para-industry's meta-texts can be understood as inter-professional and interdepartmental arguments within media firms, not just negotiations between the firm and viewer–users. In this environment, *media industries are not monoliths with unified*

[10] Mark Deuze and Nicky Lewis, "Professional Identity and Media Work," in *Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, Continuity and Change in the Cultural and Creative Industries,* eds. Mark Banks et al. (London: Routledge, 2013), 165.
[11] Deuze and Lewis, 165.
[12] Karen Burke LeFevre, *Invention as a Social Act* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 61.
[13] Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, trans. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 39.
[14] Fleck, 39.
[15] Tomlinson, 46.
[16] Tomlinson, 9.

> *messages that can be decoded, but conflict management and arbitration houses that we need to decode.* [emphasis in original][17]

Writers' discourses are not only aimed at audiences in promotional spaces, but at other stakeholders within the industry and even other communities of practice among television writers. By discursively reconstructing their process, they are advocating for themselves, their work, and the genres and media they produce. The constructions they perform can come into conflict with one another as they bend and shape their identities as writers and the identities of their series to articulate their values.

To decode these forces that shape the social institution of television writing and the discourses of individual writers within it, this chapter draws on professional identity theory and impressions management. Unpacking the professional identities of creative workers is particularly vital to understanding their motivations for using genre in particular ways. Deuze and Lewis note that

> the individual media professional can be expected to be outlining his or her sense of professional identity in terms of the stories they want to tell (content), their relationship with audiences and publics (connectivity), their particular perception of what kind of work they aspire to (creativity), and the role that success in whatever shape or form plays in all of this (commerce).[18]

These four forces of content, connectivity, creativity, and commerce shape and incentivize certain readings and framings of writers' practices and the identities they assign to the texts they work on. At times, these forces even conflict with one another, further fracturing and contesting the identities of the writers who wield them.[19] Deuze and Lewis, and Henri Tajfel and John Turner argue that individuals align themselves with identities that grant them positive self-esteem.[20] Whether or not a label such as a genre grants the writer self-esteem becomes a crucial force for contestation, with the varying cultural value of certain labels incentivizing different types of professional identification. Liesbet van Zoonen notes that creative workers "construct an organizational identity that reflects both the individual styles and preferences of the communicator and the structural imperatives of the media organization, and which is more

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[17] John Caldwell, "Para-Industry, Shadow Academy," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 4 (2014): 733, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.888922.
[18] Deuze and Lewis, 168.
[19] Steven Maras suggests that film screenwriters use four different frames in their discourses: a practitioner frame, a story and structure frame, a business frame, and an anti-screenwriting frame. These frames can shift over time and come into conflict with one another, effectively becoming four different thought styles used within the same community of practice that can disagree with one another. Steven Maras, *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 11.
[20] Deuze and Lewis, 169.

than the sum of its parts."[21] These identities are constructed in conversation (or at times odds) with their surrounding work environment, but will be influenced by individual motivations. As John Rieder argues:

> Objects and communities of practice do not line up simply and neatly, however, because people come in and out of such communities, operate within them at various levels of familiarity with their categories, and may at the same time be members of different communities with conflicting classification practices.[22]

Identities become contested because individuals enter communities of practice like television writing with multiple other identities, which influence how they interpret each community and their classificatory systems, and how and why they align themselves with particular identities. Understanding the ways that writers negotiate these varying identities is crucial for understanding how writers identify themselves with genre, and why they are incentivized to invoke genre in particular ways in their discourses.

Impressions management proves a useful framework for unpacking these forces and discourses, particularly in the context of verbal interviews. Erving Goffman's seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, examines public and private behaviors through a dramaturgical lens, framing the way individuals present themselves to others as a performance.[23] In doing so, he draws a crucial distinction between a front stage and backstage performance. The front is "intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual" in order to "define the situation for those who observe the performance."[24] This front stage performance can be misleading, as "when one's activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed." [25] Paraindustrial disclosures are front stage performances that carefully curate a specific image of their performers. A more honest reality might be found backstage, "where the suppressed facts make an appearance" when a performer is in private.[26] However, a true backstage is not accessible to anyone other than the performer. Part of what makes paraindustrial discourse so insidious is its tendency to be presented with a "backstage style,"[27] which creates the impression that the audience has been admitted into the

[21] Liesbet van Zoonen, "A professional, unreliable, heroic marionette (M/F): Structure, agency and subjectivity in contemporary journalisms," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (1998): 137.
[22] John Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 29.
[23] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 26.
[24] Goffman, 32.
[25] Goffman, 114.
[26] Goffman, 114.
[27] Goffman, 130.

role of confidant and allowed an honest peek behind the curtain. In actuality, they are only being shown a front stage performance delivered in a different style. As Goffman argues:

> Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner […] Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual's role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression.[28]

While motivations for front stage performances vary and may not always be apparent or easily discernible, they are a crucial force in shaping paraindustrial discourses. Researchers are only ever given access to front stage performances, regardless of if those performances are framed as or even intended to be honest and transparent. James Paul Gee refers to these kinds of performances as recognition work, where individuals "try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing."[29] That recognition work creates contestation as individual writers craft front stage performances in the pursuit of various types of recognition, casting genre as one tool in those performances.

The focus on the individual marks this chapter as a sharp departure from the previous two. While channel brands and OTT interfaces are the result of a corporate strategy agreed upon within a company, the stakeholder group of television writers encompasses thousands of individuals with a variety of goals, priorities, and experiences whose discourses aim at a different level of audience engagement than companies. Elizabeth Evans draws a distinction between macro-industrial and micro-personal engagement, with the former encompassing "the institutions and organisations of the media industries […] At this level, audience engagement generates revenue for large organisations with employees and shareholders but also offers them brand status as creators of 'successful' content."[30] The macro-industrial contrasts with the micro-personal, a type of engagement centered on "the daily work and practices of media practitioners" who "leverage audience engagement within their relationships with employers, partners and clients and also for their own sense of professional fulfilment."[31] These types of engagements are not wholly distinct. Individuals serving as mouthpieces for macro-industrial

[28] Goffman, 17–18.
[29] James Paul Gee, "Tools of Inquiry and Discourses," in *The Discourse Reader*, 3rd ed., eds. Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland (London: Routledge, 2014), 150.
[30] Elizabeth Evans, *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture* (London: Routledge, 2019), 127.
[31] Evans, 127.

engagement strategies will be navigating their own micro-personal relationships through their discourses, and the "micro-personal level is necessarily enmeshed in the macro-industrial levels through which they must function."[32] However, discourses engaging primarily on the micro-personal level are tied to the stakeholder as an individual, used to construct a professional identity that is framed as more personal than an institutional brand.[33] Writers' discourses about their craft aim to present arguments about their daily work and practices that in turn make arguments for their value as media practitioners. Genre becomes one of those arguments, with micro-personal engagement providing a particularly rich site of contestation between individuals seeking independent, personal relationships with other stakeholders.

Genre-casting Methodology

The chapter draws the bulk of its research from interviews given by writers in podcasts. These podcasts span a wide range of writers' discourses and venues: interviews with trade press like the Hollywood Reporter and Variety, interviews with popular press like IndieWire, panels and conversational interviews with other television writers, behind-the-scenes features and commentaries, and interviews with fans of a particular genre or series. This variety allows for a crucial analysis of contestation across context, examining how writers talk about genre and craft differently across these spaces. The variety also showcases writers' answers to a broader array of questions, with writers, fans, and journalists asking different questions with regards to craft and genre and therefore providing opportunities for different types of genre discourse. As Tomlinson notes, "Through their presence and the questions that they may ask, interviewers contribute much to the structure of the interview, and through the interaction, they influence the answers. […] they are not simply a neutral source of information."[34] Writers "respond to prompting, prodding, and provocation by interviewers eager to have their own notions and concepts approved by recognized authority figures."[35] By drawing on an array of podcast venues, this chapter examines how those contributions shape discourses and provide opportunities for contestation. Podcast topic is a crucial component of this site of contestation, with writers asked different questions and providing different answers according to the podcast's focus and the interviewers' interests. Trade press interviews, for example, are focused on discussing and promoting a particular series, while fan interviews tend to ask

[32] Evans, 127.
[33] Scholars like Hadas discuss the ways in which professional identities for writers can become brands for well-known showrunners with name recognition, but for the majority of writers, professional reputation will function more as identity than brand.
[34] Tomlinson, 160.
[35] Tomlinson, 97.

specific, in-depth questions about writing and producing a series or genre. Popular writer-run podcasts like Children of Tendu and The Writers Panel explicitly position themselves as trying to democratize access to career advice for prospective screenwriters about craft and process, as well as producers' duties like collaborating with executives, working on set, and reviewing cuts. The podcasts' different areas of focus allow for a variety of conversations about craft, and therefore genre.

The variety also highlights differences in the extent to which writers feel the need to perform their discourses in particular ways, with throwaway comments suggesting that they view some venues as permitting slightly more transparency. Outside of trade press podcasts, some writers offer a meta-reflection on how they talk in interviews, as when Lauren Schmidt Hissrich makes reference to "the thing that I never acknowledged, especially in interviews" in a podcast for the Writers Guild of America.[36] Despite making this disclosure in an interview, she seems to draw a distinction between types of interviews. In this context, "interview" could refer to an explicitly promotional interview given with a member of the press, while an interview with the guild may feel more like a conversation with peers. Though one can only speculate about the source of these distinctions and their impact on the disclosures and self-analysis offered during the interview itself, it suggests that writers approach venues with different mindsets, and that their discourses will be shaped by their interpretation of what those spaces are and what audience they are performing for. These differences in venues and mindsets contribute to contestation and provide a wider, rich pool of sources to examine.

While some distinctions between venues are subtle, others are more concrete. Some of the podcasts analyzed for this chapter are interviews with a single writer or writing team (the latter usually in the case of a co-showrunning team), but some are panel discussions and roundtables, either put together specifically for the podcast or recorded at public events like conventions. Panel discussions allow the opportunity to witness discourses between writers, providing examples of how ideas of genre and craft are collectively shaped amongst stakeholders. In a single-person interview, the interviewer is the only person who can influence the writer's discourse, usually in the form of what questions and follow-up questions are posed. In panel discussions or joint interviews, writers build off one another: interrupting, disagreeing, correcting, adding, and in some cases even asking questions directly of other panelists. Though these panels do not mimic the writers' room environment, they offer a more dynamic glimpse

[36] Christopher Kubasik, "Lauren Schmidt Hissrich," June 6, 2020, in *3rd & Fairfax: The WGAW Podcast*, produced by Writers Guild of America West, podcast, https://3rdandfairfax.libsyn.com/ep-192-lauren-schmidt-hissrich.

into the ways that discourses about writing by television writers are socially, collaboratively constructed.

Finally, podcasts allow for a greater diversity of writers' discourses. As Tomlinson notes, "The institutions that produce authorial interviews do so within the context of the economy of promotion that seeks to sell authors' texts according to qualities that have been verified and validated in social discussion."[37] Writers who work on series deemed to have specific types of cultural legitimacy and/or broad appeal are more likely to be interviewed by press, thereby elevating the voices of a narrow selection of creators. Trade and popular press interviews also tend to focus on writers billed or framed as showrunners, executive producers, creators, and auteurs. Not only does this present a limited perspective on craft from the point of view of seniority and job title, but it also replicates the lack of diversity in those upper roles, with top roles disproportionately populated by white cis able-bodied men.[38] Podcast interviews, particularly those hosted by fans who may have a harder time accessing upper-level writers, span a greater range of career stage, from writers' assistants to story editors to showrunners. In order to fill episodes, interview-centered podcasts in need of a large number of guests over time will feature a greater variety of writers. By widening the pool of who is interviewed, podcasts enable an analysis of a greater diversity of experiences and perspectives than traditional print interviews in trade and popular press.

This chapter analyzes interviews with over 360 television writers from 2005 to 2021, with the majority taking place during the 2010s. This range allows for an understanding of the context that shaped writers' discourses in the 2010s and a brief assessment of how those discourses may or may not be changing. Interviews were primarily accessed on Apple Podcasts and Spotify Podcasts, with some roundtables and panels available on YouTube.[39] Writers encompassed an array of science fiction, fantasy, and horror [SFFH] series in order to assess the genre language actually used by writers to discuss their work. Roundtables and panel discussions also included writers who had not, at least at the point of data collection, worked on any series identified as SFFH. This inclusion offered useful comparison points between the ways different genres were discussed and how writers from different communities of practice framed genre and what terms they used.

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[37] Tomlinson, 117.

[38] David Robb, "WGA West Inclusion & Equity Report Finds 'Significant' Gains By Women & People Of Color," *Deadline*, April 6, 2022, https://deadline.com/2022/04/wga-west-inclusion-report-2022-1234995926/.

[39] Podcasts or panels that were alternately available with a video component proved beneficial because an unexpected methodological hurdle of analyzing audio-only group interviews and panel discussions is trying to identify the speakers, particularly when there is a lack of vocal diversity among interviewees.

Talking Genre: Terminology in Interviews

There is significant contestation among the genre terms used by writers. While fantasy is one of these terms, "genre" is another common one, sometimes used to refer to the more specific cluster of SFFH genres and other times to refer to any series deemed to be strongly shaped by genre conventions, such as action. "Sci-fi" is another popular term, sometimes referring to science fiction specifically and other times more generally to an umbrella term for SFFH. "Science fiction" is used more rarely, usually by writers like Ronald Moore[40] and Javier Grillo-Marxuach[41] who self-identify as fans of the genre outwith the film and television industry, where the full name of the genre is more commonly used. Terms like supernatural and mythology are often employed, though primarily as descriptive adjectives rather than a genre noun. Mythology is itself contested: writers sometimes describe series as mythology-heavy in reference to the large amount of worldbuilding information that SFFH series accumulate, but other writers use the term in a more genre-neutral way to refer to the accumulated narrative history of a long-running series.[42] Other terms focus on subgenres or specific elements of a series: time travel, vampires, fairy tales, superheroes, and comic books. "Comic books" is frequently used as a synonym for superhero-series, even though many comic book adaptations are not based on comic books about superheroes, and superheroes are not limited to comic books. This usage likely reflects the prevalence of superheroes in the most visible comic book adaptations at the moment (such as the Marvel and DC television universes). The final commonly used term is high concept. While the notion of a series being high concept specifically refers to the ability to pitch a premise with brevity,[43] the term is sometimes used as a euphemism for series that are strongly shaped by a genre's conventions. This use of conventions allows a series to be pitched succinctly because a logline can draw on commonly understood shorthand. An SFFH world can form part of that logline, memorably used in trailers with the "In a world…" format.[44] Unlike the other terms used for genre, which can have either positive or negative connotations, high concept tends to be positive, as it is a quality that the

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[40] See Adam Savage, "Ron Moore," September 8, 2017, in *SYFY25: Origin Stories*, produced by SYFY Wire, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/syfy25-origin-stories/id1280023077?i=1000391982444.

[41] See Javier Grillo-Marxuach and Jose Molina, "Episode 1 - Your first step into a much larger world," March 3, 2014, in *Children of Tendu,* podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/children-of-tendu/id833831151?i=1000270922719.

[42] See the debate between Richard Hatem and Jane Espenson in Ben Blacker, "'TV Fantasy Goes Mainstream' (ATX Television Festival 2012)," June 2, 2012, in *The Writers Panel,* produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000372331223.

[43] Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 13.

[44] This logline format has sometimes been invoked in the opening narration of fantasy television series, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s "Into every generation a slayer is born" and *Xena: Warrior Princess*'s "In a time of ancient Gods, Warlords, and Kings, A land in turmoil cried out for a hero."

industry prizes, with series easier to pitch and promote if they can be concisely described and appeal to established audiences. Across writers' genre discourses, a variety of terms are used, with specific definitions and connotations often muddled and unclear, rendering contestation particularly rife and fruitful to explore.

Part of the contestation surrounding these terms stems from the rarity with which writers are asked for explicit definitions in interviews. These definition questions tend to arise in interviews in overtly genre-centered spaces, such as fan podcasts for a genre or series, or on roundtables or panels about a specific genre, where definition questions are posed as warm-ups at the beginning of a longer discussion. Across the more than four hundred interviews analyzed for this chapter, the only instance of a writer being asked directly about the difference between "fantasy" and "genre" was in *Physically Kids Weekly*, a fan podcast for *The Magicians* (2015–2020) hosted by interviewers who identified as fans of fantasy. The question and its answer may not have been deemed of interest to trade journalists and their listeners/readers, but in her joint stakeholder role of podcast host and fantasy fan, interviewer Clara Sherley-Appel asked:

> Sherley-Appel: Elle, you described yourself as a "lifelong genre fan?" And so I kind of wanted to dig into because it's different to say "lifelong genre fan" from saying, like, "lifelong fantasy fan." So I guess I kind of want to understand for you what genre means, and what appeals to you about it. Like, what do you find so unique and special about "genre"? No one can see my air quotes.
> Elle Lipson: I mean, I guess I say "genre" because I love sci-fi and I love fantasy. You know, it's not necessarily specific to one of those things. Anything that has, I guess, elements that are larger than life in a way, but then also are still very rooted in real life in some way too.[45]

This exchange highlights a few key points. First, it is a rare example of an explicit definition of "genre" as an umbrella term for SF and fantasy. Second, Sherley-Appel's comment about the need for air quotes offers an unusual acknowledgement of the polysemous nature of the term genre itself, with a need to distinguish between different definitions of the word. This exchange is relatively unique for its overt discussion of terms and definitions, and that uniqueness is critical to contestation. Most often, these discussions are implicit and subtextual, with different terms exchanged for one another or the same term used in different ways without clarity around their use. The clarity is only enabled here by another stakeholder asking the question because their roles and discourse venue invests them in a specific and explicit answer.

[45] Clara Sherley-Appel and Dani Lowry, "One Day More with Elle Lipson," August 4, 2018, in *Physical Kids Weekly: A Magicians Podcast*, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/physical-kids-weekly-a-magicians-podcast/id1193279151?i=1000417204111.

Interviewers play a crucial role in genre contestation of other stakeholder groups by virtue of the answers they enable in discourses.

The exchange also to points to one of three major ways that television writers approach using genre definitions for fantasy. Some writers like Lipson tend to use an umbrella term or otherwise use terms interchangeably because their interest is not specific to a particular genre nor their investment in a particular term. As Jane Espenson puts it:

> I don't really distinguish fantasy from science fiction when I'm writing them. They're slightly different lenses, but from the emotional point of view of the character in trouble, a monster is a monster, whether it's a unicorn, a space-based threat, or even a real-world serial killer, come to think of it. Writing is about what the characters feel as much as it is about anything, so the genre matters less, I think, than people imagine it does.[46]

For writers like Lipson and Espenson, the distinctions between the genres does not have sufficient impact on their craft to warrant investing extensively in those distinctions, even if they both indicate that the genres might be "slightly different lenses."

Other writers do invoke specific definitions that draw distinctions between genres. When these dividing lines are invoked, writers frequently reference the genre expectations of the audience, sometimes as something to respect,[47] sometimes to subvert,[48] and sometimes as a shorthand that writers can use to concisely incorporate complex plotlines into a short episode.[49] Though they do not use the academic stakeholder phrase "contract theory," they are drawing on the same idea of genre as a contract of sorts with the audience: a pool of assumptions that they can fulfill, defy, or rely on in their craft. The distinctions can also inform writers' approach to particular elements of craft, as Ronald D. Moore illustrates while discussing worldbuilding on a podcast for Syfy Channel:

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[46] Dev Richards, "Great Women in Nerdery: An Exclusive Interview with Jane Espenson," Nerd Bastards, June 26, 2012, https://nerdbastards.com/2012/06/26/great-women-in-nerdery-an-exclusive-interview-with-jane-espenson/.

[47] See Writers Guild Foundation, "Writers on Genre: Science Fiction and Fantasy, Part 1," YouTube, July 19, 2017, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnkXRztwd00.

[48] See Clara Sherley-Appel and Dani Lowry, "Episode 112 - Thirty-Nine Graves (with Henry Alonso Myers)," August 16, 2017, in *Physical Kids Weekly: A Magicians Podcast*, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/physical-kids-weekly-a-magicians-podcast/id1193279151?i=1000391126620.; Brock Swinson, "Ep233 - Steve Blackman, Screenwriter 'Umbrella Academy,' 'Legion,' & 'Fargo,'" July 31, 2020, in *Creative Principles*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/creative-principles/id1292130289?i=1000486707058.; Alex Freedman and Nick Watson, "Showrunning Daybreak ft. Aron Eli Coleite (PT159)," November 18, 2019, in *Paper Team*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/paper-team/id1139535081?i=1000457158448.

[49] For example, Henry Alsono Myers notes that for "Twenty-Three," an episode of *The Magicians* in which characters time travel to an alternate universe, the writers leaned on audience expectations of the trope to avoid having to include extensive complex exposition. Clara Sherley-Appel and Dani Lowry, "Episode 311 - Twenty-Three (with Mike Moore and Henry Alonso Myers)," May 22, 2018, in *Physical Kids Weekly: A Magicians Podcast*, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/physical-kids-weekly-a-magicians-podcast/id1193279151?i=1000407109294.

> for me, science fiction implies an alternate world where certain technological or societal changes have happened, but there's a consistency and a logic to it. It's grounded in real science for the most part, and grounded in real ideas about politics and humanity. Fantasy introduces magic and things that can't exist. Dragons and literal magic and those sorts of elements. […] it's still grounded within its own universe, there's rules within its universe, but the rules are not connected to natural law and sort of our ideas of science. There's kind of a dividing line between the two.[50]

For Moore, the different genres require him to construct a different relationship with real world rules, providing a guideline of what rules he can and cannot break. As a writer who has established a reputation and career for himself based on his knowledge and expertise of these genres, he has a clear and explicit definition prepared for an interview (in contrast to writers' assistant Lipson, whose has less experience being interviewed and therefore provided a less canned response). Writers like Moore who have built a career, professional identity, and even brand on genre expertise are more likely to be asked these kinds of genre definition questions and, as part of establishing their credibility toward that expertise, may be more incentivized to draw distinctions.

For other writers, while they may draw distinctions, their ideas are more nebulous and shifting, and can be a product of communal debate, as illustrated by a panel discussion between writers for *The Twilight Zone* (2019–2020) and Ben Blacker (himself a television writer, but here serving as interviewer):

> Alex Rubens: In *Black Mirror*, they'd be like, well, what if there was an app that did this, and it was taken to its extreme? And *Twilight Zone*'s a little more like, what if someone could suddenly see the future? And it's not gonna be like, but wait, so how did he get the ability to see the future? It's like, he stepped into the Twilight Zone. And it's not supposed to be about exploring a rational connection of how this could lead to this.
> Blacker: […] it's the difference between science fiction and horror, right? One is about big ideas, one is about this more human aspect.
> Rubens: Somebody said early on that like—and I don't know if I necessarily endorse this, but I don't *oppose* it—that *The Twilight Zone* is *not* sci-fi. I mean, I would say that it is sci-fi, but what they mean by that is what you just said.
> Heather Anne Campbell: Do you think it's, like, fantasy? What is it? Fantasy horror?
> Rubens: I feel like the lineage goes straight back to, like, fairy tales, practically.
> [Long pause]
> Campbell: [through confused laughter] Glen, what do you think *The Twilight Zone* is?
> Glen Morgan: I think it's all that stuff.[51]

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[50] Savage, "Ron Moore."
[51] Ben Blacker, "The Twilight Zone (Alex Rubens, Glen Morgan, & Heather Anne Campbell)," March 14, 2019, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000473087788.

Rather than a definition coming from a genre label, this group of writers raises a potential definition and then debate the labels that suitably illustrate that idea. In doing so, they suggest five different labels, all taking slightly different approaches and even disagreeing with ideas that they themselves suggest. Campbell asking two different writers what genre the series is points to the third common approach to genre definitions: those who see genre as a question that others have the answer to. For example, when discussing texts that he views as fantasy versus science fiction, Damon Lindelof caveats his answer with "you could probably produce someone who I could debate that with, and I would lose."[52] Film writer Michael Goldenberg notes, "I'm sure there's a technical answer which I don't know."[53] These writers treat genres as having objective definitions that they are not qualified to weigh in on. While it is not clear who they consider to be the experts who hold these technical answers, this rhetoric suggests that some writers feel that genre is a label applied by other stakeholders that does not significantly impact their craft.

Regardless which of these three different approaches to definitions a writer takes, all writers invoke genre terms in their discourses. These kinds of meta reflections on their philosophies towards definitions and genre distinctions only come up in rare moments, usually when prompted directly by interviewers. In most of their discourses, writers simply use terms without (at least vocally) reflecting on usage. Television writers' discourses occasionally engage with genre in more generalized ways, positing definitions, theories, and histories of genres that are framed as objective or at least as separate from their work. However, genre is most often explicitly linked to the writers themselves: as an aspect of their identity and as an element of the series they work on.

Genre as Writer's Identity

As a component of a writer's identity, genre is invoked in two main ways: as a method of employment and as an aspect of personal identity. Writers seek to associate themselves with specific genres in order to get themselves hired on staffs, establishing specialties that will allow them to satisfy a specific need in a writers' room. These genre specialties become particularly valuable because executive producers hire writers for a series by utilizing a method that some refer to as "casting a room." As Javier Grillo-Marxuach explains:

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[52] Ben Blacker, "Writers Panel Throwback: Damon Lindelof (2012)," February 6, 2020, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000492213733.
[53] Writers Guild Foundation.

> You try to put together a room that can fill all the needs of great scripts, [and] great being in the room. Some shows that are sci-fi shows, you have some sci-fi people, but you maybe have some people who are more relationship driven and stuff like that. I've lost tons of jobs because they didn't want a sci-fi person. They wanted a relationship person. They wanted somebody who was more hard-edged. They wanted somebody who was more procedural.[54]

Because television series are composed of multiple narrative, tonal, and genre elements, executive producers cast a room of writers who can cover the various needs of the stories they intend to tell, with employable skillsets not limited to writing. Some writers are hired to ensure a "great being in the room" experience, encompassing skills such as providing on-the-spot pitches (story ideas) and fixes (solutions for story problems), breaking stories (expanding pitches into outlines), and/or supplying relevant knowledge. This last valued skill area in particular can provide opportunities for writers with knowledge of particular genres.[55] Aron Eli Coleite, for example, recalls being "the nerd in the room" when Tim Kring first began developing the idea for *Heroes* (2006–2010): Kring "looked around his [*Crossing Jordan*] writers' room and was like, 'Hey, geek, come talk to me. I have this crazy idea for this show about people with superpowers.'"[56] During the development process, Coleite was brought in to advise Kring when *Heroes* was treading into territory that was already well-worn in comics, and to pitch fresh ideas or fresh takes on existing tropes.[57] While the main work of television writers is often perceived as the writing itself, writers' employable specialties also include a variety of producing and room skills. Writers are not simply hired based on some generic notion of "being a strong writer" but on the way they satisfy specific unmet needs of a diversely skilled room.

Showrunners discursively stress the importance of having that variety of skills and perspectives in their rooms. In describing the process of casting the room for the time-travel centered *12 Monkeys* (2015–2018), Natalie Chaidez notes that "you need someone who's just

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[54] Javier Grillo-Marxuach and Jose Molina, "Tendu or Do Not: Children on the Ledge - Staffing Season Special," April 27, 2015, in *Children of Tendu*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/children-of-tendu/id833831151?i=1000340865071.

[55] Relevant knowledge can also include genre-adjacent knowledge. Because the executive producers of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* wanted to emphasize the realism of the science component of their science fiction, Naren Shankar was initially hired in the writers' room as a science consultant due to his engineering background. His genre-relevant knowledge allowed him to get his "foot in the door" for the television writing and producing career that followed. Javier Grillo-Marxuach and Jose Molina, "Episode 10 - Meet our mentors - a special Nerdist Writers Panel crossover event!" May 5, 2014, in *Children of Tendu*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/children-of-tendu/id833831151?i=1000310514598.

[56] Kelton Reid, "How Netflix Showrunner Aron Eli Coleite Writes: Part One," November 20, 2019, in *The Writer Files: Writing, Productivity, Creativity, and Neuroscience*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writer-files-writing-productivity-creativity/id984527862?i=1000457307827.

[57] Reid.

going to dig into the time travel stuff and argue it into the ground, but if you have a room full of those people, the room will just grind to a halting stop talking about paradoxes."[58] Writers are hired in part based on how they will work with the other writers on staff and whether they will be providing a skillset that is otherwise missing. A writer who can "dig into the time travel stuff" is incentivized to emphasize these components of their work history and interests if a room does not have that role filled already, but will be incentivized to present themselves differently if they are aware that another writer holds that role. Sera Gamble describes assembling a room as "a bit like Tetris";[59] by establishing niches for themselves and strategically aligning themselves with those niches, writers create a sense of where and how they fit into the room's puzzle. As Jessica Gao notes:

> I always tell younger writers, figure out what you're really good at, what you really *like* doing, the aspect of the job that's really your strength. And hone that skill, and also be honest when you go on an interview and say, like, "This is the kind of writer I am, this is my strength, this is what I'm really really good at."[60]

Part of establishing their professional identities requires writers to figure out for themselves what their strengths are and then determine which of those strengths they wish to be associated with, which will vary between prospective jobs depending on the needs of the specific room. Drawing a strong association between themselves and an element of writing like genre can be a critical part of establishing a specialty for themselves and getting hired, but it can also disqualify them from jobs.

Writers perceive potential career danger from being too closely associated with genres like fantasy. This perception has historical roots, with television writers in the twentieth century who were interested in or wrote on fantasy and science fiction series claiming that they faced difficulties getting hired outside of these genres.[61] As Naren Shankar describes it, for writers who worked on *Star Trek* series in the 1980s and 1990s, it was difficult to get a job after the series ended because there was a dearth of other SF series on television, and the *Star Trek* scripts that writers had to represent their past work were not viewed as applicable to other

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[58] Ben Blacker, "'Writing for TV: From First Draft to Getting Staffed' from Wondercon," March 26, 2016, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000368213877.
[59] Emily VanDerWerff, "The Magicians' Sera Gamble on making great fantasy TV without Game of Thrones money," May 8, 2018, in *I Think You're Interesting*, produced by Vox, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/i-think-youre-interesting/id1210802178?i=1000411041687.
[60] Ben Blacker, "Liz Benjamin (What/If; Man in the High Castle; 13 Reasons Why); Jessica Gao (Rick and Morty; upcoming: She Hulk); Micah Schraft (Mrs. America; Jane the Virgin; Jessica Jones)," April 21, 2020, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000473087786
[61] Grillo-Marxuach and Molina, "Episode 1."

shows.[62] Rather than scripts being general examples of craft, they were perceived as examples of only a specific type of craft: in this case, one that was not perceived as valuable to series of other genres. As Shankar describes it, science fiction "was very much ghettoized" and, although his next several jobs after *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994) ended up being on SFF series, "all along, I kind of felt a lot of pressure to get myself out of that ghetto."[63] This need to escape pigeonholing was a common refrain for SFF writers, particularly those who were working in the industry prior to the 2010s. While some writers happily occupied their pigeonholes, many others, even those who enjoyed writing SFF series and wanted to work in these genres, felt a pressure to lessen the impact of this restriction, especially when there were a limited number of science fiction and fantasy series on which they might be staffed.

Though pigeonholing has become less restrictive over the course of the 2010s,[64] the perception of its impact lingers in discourses, continuing to inform how media practitioners perform their identities. Writing on series of a different genre, for example, is depicted as a significant shift. Rather than framing these job changes as slight or normal, and as part of the regular employment cycle in television writing, writers talk of *escaping* SFF, *moving* to other genres, and *writing their way out* of a genre pigeonhole,[65] portraying writing SFF television as a trap that must be fled with significant effort, or a home that must be packed up and left behind. By shifting their focus to writing and getting staffed on series of other genres, writers attempting one of these (perceived) significant changes attempt to sever the association between themselves and labels like fantasy writer, science fiction writer, or genre writer.

Because of the current proliferation of SFF series (and therefore jobs) on television, pigeonholing is no longer perceived as being quite as dire. However, writers still admit to feeling pressure to associate themselves with multiple types of writing, with early- and mid-career writers advised to write spec scripts (unpaid writing samples) that cover an array of genres.[66] The bias against fantasy and science fiction in particular continues to influence hiring decisions. Many executive producers discussing the process of casting rooms for SFF series

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[62] Grillo-Marxuach and Molina, "Episode 10."
[63] Grillo-Marxuach and Molina, "Episode 10."
[64] Javier Grillo-Marxuach and Jose Molina, "THE BIG PITCH - PART ONE," April 22, 2018, in *Children of Tendu*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/children-of-tendu/id833831151?i=1000409588618.; The Hollywood Reporter, "THR Full Drama Showrunner Roundtable: Sam Esmail, Julian Fellowes, John Ridley, & More," YouTube, June 25, 2016, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kwbbU2fMdA.
[65] See Luciano Saber, "Krista Vernoff," February 28, 2019, in *3rd & Fairfax: The WGAW Podcast*, produced by Writers Guild of America West, podcast, https://3rdandfairfax.libsyn.com/ep-141-krista-vernoff.
[66] Aquillia Mikel, "Go Live Life: How Brusta Brown's Journey Through Her Own Crucibles Brings Depth To Her Stories," October 26, 2020, in *The Beat Sheet*, podcast, https://open.spotify.com/episode/6wfPl1e8D9iRCNle9JMTUd?si=d37664a375404644.; Javier Grillo-Marxuach and Jose Molina, "Episode 3 - Staffing Season," March 17, 2014, in *Children of Tendu*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/children-of-tendu/id833831151?i=1000279728490.

express wariness or even outright disdain toward the SFF elements of spec scripts. As Adam Nussdorf illustrates:

> I really wanted people who could write character absolutely and who wanted to make a family drama. Like, I think it's harder to fill a room with people who really focus on—not so much the bells and whistles and the kind of supernatural stuff and the really fun stuff to write—but actually who are able to just do a nine-minute dialogue scene between a mother and a son. […] we were sent a lot of scripts about aliens and government conspiracies and this and that, but the ones that stood out were the ones that had that deeper layer, where you could grasp onto those characters and, sure, the supernatural stuff was fun, but there was enough there beneath the surface to warrant the story.[67]

There is a tendency for executive producers to frame the SFF elements of scripts as "bells and whistles" and "icing on the cake,"[68] rather than as the result of craftwork that requires specific skills to execute well. In some cases, this disdain for the genres' craftwork translates into generalized disdain for the writers themselves. Eric Kripke admits that when he is staffing a room, "A lot of times the directions I'll give to agents is [...] I actively look to not hire genre people."[69] He claims that his focus is on whether "the characters have depth" and "the dialogue [is] sharp."[70] These discourses suggest an internal tension when issued by writers like Kripke who have built a career and reputation on writing SFF television and would likely be described by others as "genre people." By publicly devaluing the category of fantasy/science fiction/genre writers, they raise the question of whether they consider themselves exceptions to the idea that SFF writers are less valued, or whether they do not define themselves as SFF writers. Their true motivation is beyond the scope of researchers, audiences, and even many of their peers to assess: their frontstage persona builds up their own worth as a writer by devaluing SFF writers while their backstage opinions remain shielded. Regardless of these motivations, when writers, particularly those at the executive producer level who are responsible for staffing, make statements like this, writers interested in being staffed on SFF series are continuously receiving the message that they may need to present themselves as something other than SFF writers in order to be hired. Crucially, Kripke's comments were made in 2017, the same year that shifts in the cultural and commercial value of fantasy television led both Syfy and Amazon

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[67] Ben Blacker, "Roundtable with Peter Tolan, Brannon Braga, Y. Shireen Razack and Adam Nussdorf," February 3, 2017, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000379547701.
[68] Variety, "Variety 'A Night in the Writer's Room' - Drama Panel," YouTube, June 15, 2015, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuwy65tbz0A.
[69] Ben Blacker, "Shawn Ryan & Eric Kripke," February 9, 2017, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000381016712.
[70] Blacker, "Shawn Ryan."

to publicly embrace the genre as part of their programming and branding strategies. Despite this macro-industrial promotional embrace of fantasy, the micro-personal discursive dismissal of fantasy has endured amongst many writers and therefore contestation persists. The history of pigeonholing and ghettoizing SFF writers, and the continued devaluation of their work even in the context of hiring on SFF series, influences contestation surrounding writers' self-identification, as in some spaces they are incentivized to keep these genre labels separate from their professional identities.

This is not to suggest that self-identifying as an SFF writer is entirely discouraged. The need to cast a room means that writers who identify as SFF writers are hired to fill the designated SFF writer spot(s) on staff, where they are valued for their genre knowledge. This role is credited with enabling the room to avoid well-worn ground, subvert genre tropes, and make references that serve as pleasurable Easter eggs for viewers who are fans of the genre. And while there are executive producers who claim to avoid hiring these writers, others indicate a preference for staffing SFF writers, or at least fans. As Glen Mazzara puts it, "I find sometimes if you are in a certain genre and somebody's not really a fan of that, they're not enthusiastic, they can be sort of cynical about things, and I want people who are excited about the material."[71] An appreciation for specific genres becomes an employable quality; just as with writers' room skills, professional genre affiliation can be part of a set of non-writing skills that make writers more employable. These different approaches from executive producers can contribute to contestation surrounding writers' professional identities, as writers are inconsistently incentivized to identify with their genres of choice.

As Misha Green explains, while she does not require writers to be knowledgeable about or even fans of SFF initially:

> you have to be *open* to the genre space, because I feel like a lot of people go, "Oh genre, that's, you know, lowbrow" and I'm just like, "Boo, no!" So you have to learn to love it the way I love it, and I think you don't have to start in that place. When we were looking for writers, I was looking for a diverse group of people to bring their familial experience to the table, knowing that the genre side of it could be learnt.[72]

For writers who have encountered a bias against SFF in the past, hiring writers who identify as writers and/or fans of (or at the very least as "open to") these genres is not simply about the specific skills and knowledge that these writers will bring to the work. It is about ensuring that

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[71] Ben Blacker, "'Writing for TV.'"

[72] Lesley Goldberg and Daniel Fienberg, "August 14, 2020 - Inside 'Lovecraft Country' with showrunner Misha Green; the industry's big consolidation changes and Comedy Central's future, explained," August 14, 2020, in *TV's Top 5*, produced by The Hollywood Reporter, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/tvs-top-5/id1438063915?i=1000488116955.

they will not hinder that work due to negative preconceptions of the genres involved. Labels like "fantasy writer" or "genre writer" can signify that someone will be a positive collaborator, indicating an attitude as well as a professional specialty.

The employment opportunities offered by writers using the SFF label is not always as direct as writers pitching themselves for a specific job. Writers in the industry form many informal support groups based on shared identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual/romantic orientation, and nationality.[73] These groups help one another get hired and provide informal mentorship, particularly for those who are disadvantaged in the job market and may not have easy access to formal mentorship schemes. While many of these groups are centered around demographic identities, Christine Boylan notes that "there's a huge 'genre helping genre' community."[74] Identifying as an SFF writer can grant writers access to a support network that both indirectly and directly helps them find employment, as well as introducing them to professional identity-specific thought styles.

These support networks have in some cases become more formalized. Among the special interest committees of the Writers Guild of America, West is a Genre Committee, which was formed after the 2007–2008 writers' strike to enable writers interested in the same genres to network.[75] In this instance, genre refers more broadly to the concept of genres rather than any specific genres, with the committee claiming that it "welcomes all writers because writers work in all genres."[76] Committee meetings focus on different genres, with speakers invited to discuss issues of interest to writers of the designated genre.[77] These meetings allow writers to become informed about a variety of genres and network with writers who have similar interests.[78] This focus on genres as part of a writer's identity is certainly not systemic throughout the WGAW: the database of guild members lists "Science Fiction/Fantasy" as an expertise rather than a genre,[79] with the only genres in the database being Comedy, Drama, and Comedy/Variety.[80] However, having these kinds of support networks increases the appeal for

[73] Ben Blacker, "Shernold Edwards, Vera Santamaria, & Christine Boylan," July 1, 2018, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000415541154.
[74] Blacker, "Shernold Edwards."
[75] Steve Trautmann et al., "Justin Marks; and Dwayne Johnson-Cochran of the Genre Committee," August 11, 2016, in *3rd & Fairfax: The WGAW Podcast*, produced by Writers Guild of America West, podcast, https://3rdandfairfax.libsyn.com/ep-29-justin-marks-and-dwayne-cochran-of-the-genre-committee.
[76] "Genre Committee," Writers Guild of America West, accessed on July 17, 2021, https://www.wga.org/members/membership-information/committees/genre.
[77] Trautmann et al., "Justin Marks."
[78] Trautmann et al., "Justin Marks."
[79] At the time of writing, 636 writers have self-reported an expertise in Science Fiction/Fantasy in the Find a Writer database.
[80] "Search – WGA Directory," Writers Guild of America West, accessed on June 10, 2022, https://directories.wga.org/?Filter.AdvanceSearch=True&page=1.

writers to identify themselves with certain genres. As David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis argue, "for any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members."[81] The WGAW database framing Science Fiction/Fantasy as an expertise is a crucial form of professional validation as it is one of only two genres deemed as such (the other being superheroes). Other expertise, like food, philosophy, medical, and law, refer to real world topics that are written about in series: "medical" does not refer to a writer's knowledge of the medical procedural genre, but of medicine itself. Shifting cultural and professional values surrounding fantasy have made knowledge of the genre a positive, granting it the marker of expertise. As genre-centered informal and formal support networks have grown and employment opportunities increased, incentives and avenues to identify with these genre labels have also increased, offering counterbalances against the weight of the history of pigeonholing. While these counterbalances cannot immediately change the cultural and industrial devaluation of these genre labels, they help lay the groundwork for a future where incentives for this particular type of contestation amongst writers trying to get staffed might be lessened.

Contestation surrounding professional identities continues beyond the hiring stage as even writers who work on the same series brand themselves differently. This type of contestation is augmented by room casting as different writers perceive themselves to be writing on the same series for different reasons. In discussing his experience on *Jessica Jones* (2015–2019), Micah Schraft distinguishes himself from writers in the room "who are, like, comic book people. Like, that's why they're there. So I didn't bring any of that. As soon as we started talking about what her powers were, I totally tuned out."[82] Writers like Schraft emphasize that these genres are not part of their identities, stressing that "I'm not a fantasy guy"[83] or "not naturally a comic person,"[84] and framing specific genres as elements of craft that come "naturally" to some writers and not to others. In doing so, they are adopting what Arthur McLuhan, Dorothy Pawluch, William Shaffir, and Jack Haas refer to as the "cloak of

[81] David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis, "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory," *Journal of Community Psychology* 14 (January 1986): 12.
[82] Blacker, "Liz Benjamin."
[83] Clara Sherley-Appel and Dani Lowry, "Episode 511 - Be the Hyman (with Brittany Curran, David Reed, and Mike Moore)," March 19, 2020, in *Physical Kids Weekly: A Magicians Podcast*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/physical-kids-weekly-a-magicians-podcast/id1193279151?i=1000468838571.
[84] Ben Blacker, "Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage," December 5, 2017, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000396175810.

incompetence,"[85] deliberately presenting themselves as less than competent for a strategic purpose, in this case to create distance between these genres and their professional identities. While writers who adopt this cloak of incompetence often discuss their lack of genre understanding with a self-deprecating tone, this positioning is still rooted in a sense of superiority. These writers can afford to present themselves as lacking these specific competencies because the skills they are claiming to lack are not valued. When it comes to other aspects of craft, writers emphasize or even exaggerate their skills. Writers do not, for example, claim that they "totally tune out" when others are talking about widely valued elements of scripts such as character, as this admission would undermine their credibility and employability. The cloak of incompetence tends to be adopted only with undesirable genres, emphasizing the undervaluing of these skills as writers attempt to create distance between genres they have written and their professional identities.

Writers frame some aspects of their work as elements of craftwork that they have written in scripts or skills they have learned, while other elements of craft become core parts of their identities as writers. Some writers identify as "not fantasy people," some as having never written fantasy, some as having written fantasy, and some as fantasy writers, regardless of the actual content of their work histories. As Cord Jefferson and Damon Lindelof illustrate in discussing Jefferson's hiring on *Watchmen* (2019):

> Jefferson: I had never been a genre person. I had never really tried writing sci-fi before. I knew that that was a huge part of Damon's catalogue, but it was not really something that I had ever attempted before, so I walked in there thinking that I would be a little bit out of my depth when it came to this kind of storytelling.
> Lindelof: […] I hired Cord after he had already done a season of *The Good Place*, and that is a *genre show*. Like, it may not be sci-fi, but, like, [the characters are] *dead* […] and they're hanging out and they're having realizations. […] you're a great genre writer.
> Jefferson: […] But it's certainly something that I didn't come into the room thinking that I was, and so I […] was a little bit on my heels but then I immediately saw that what we were trying to do wasn't—it was *genre*, but it was also incredibly grounded and full of rich details that I was super interested in, like generational trauma, like Tulsa '21.[86]

Contestation between writers about whether and how series relate to genres, and therefore about what those writers' professional identities are, may be informed by their past encounters with genres. As Lindelof puts it, in a writers' room, "everyone's coming out of different

[85] Arthur McLuhan et al., "The Cloak of Incompetence: A Neglected Concept in the Sociology of Everyday Life," *The American Sociologist* 45 (October 2014): 363, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-014-9240-y.
[86] Jack Smart, "Cord Jefferson & Damon Lindelof," August 13, 2020, in *In the Envelope: The Actor's Podcast*, produced by Backstage, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/cord-jefferson-damon-lindelof/id1234645617?i=1000488033637.

teams."[87] Not only do writers perceive themselves as being in the room to cover different genres, but they also arrive on the same staff from different series, which will influence how they perceive their own work histories. Lindelof, who previously worked on series like *Lost* (2004–2010) and *The Leftovers* (2014–2017) and films like *Star Trek* (2009) that both he and his collaborators identify as science fiction or genre, is potentially primed to view a series like *The Good Place* (2016–2020) as SFF. He is therefore more inclined to view those who worked on it as genre writers. Meanwhile, the writers on *The Good Place* primarily had backgrounds in mimetic comedy series and discussed the series as comedy rather than SFF; therefore, they may not be predisposed to perceive themselves as having written SFF. Jefferson, who does not identify the SFF elements of either *Watchmen* or *The Good Place* as what he "was super interested in," is not inclined to incorporate those labels into his self-identification, and created such a divide between his professional identity and these genres that he was believed he had never written them before and was "out of his depth." A combination of past writing experiences and personal interest informs the extent to which a writer accepts a genre as part of their professional identity, which in turn shapes how writers discuss the genres of their work.

While many writers do not seem to be aware of the divide they have created between their professional identities and the work they have done, some acknowledge the inherent tension, as when Carina Adly MacKenzie jokes during a panel with SFF writers:

> MacKenzie: Weirdly enough, I don't consider myself to be a huge science fiction person—
> Sera Gamble: [*sarcastic*] Get off this stage.
> MacKenzie: I know, I know, right? [*ironic*] I'm just doing a show about aliens.[88]

While MacKenzie's tone and diction reflect her awareness of the dissonance between writing a genre and claiming that she is not a genre person, writers rarely elaborate (perhaps because they are rarely asked) about how and why they draw these distinctions. When it is discussed, it is often vaguely articulated and does not always seem clear to the writers themselves, as Moira Kirland illustrates when describing the beginning of her career:

> Kirland: I was always saying "I don't want to do genre, I don't want to do genre."
> Ben Blacker: Why did you resist it?
> Kirland: I don't know. I don't know. I wanted to do cop shows or I just–I just, I was like, "I don't want to do that." My first job was *Dark Angel*, which of course was genre.

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[87] Ben Blacker, "Damon Lindelof, Jane Espenson, Erin Levy, & Drew Z. Greenberg," March 27, 2011, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000387633795.

[88] Emily Gipson and Caitlin McFarland, "S'MORE from ATX: Women Who Defy, presented by SYFY WIRE's Fangrrls," June 8, 2018, in *The TV Campfire*, produced by ATX Television Festival, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/smore-from-atx-women-who-defy-presented-by-syfy-wires/id1386598065?i=1000427241284.

> But I was like, "I gotta get out of genre. I gotta get out of genre." Then I went to *Dead Zone* and ugh, it's just more people with visions. And then I did *Haunted*, and he sees ghosts. I gotta get out of this! And then I got to *Medium* and *Medium* was sort of in both worlds, where it was a little bit of genre and a little bit of procedural. And as I became less genre and more procedural, I began to truly appreciate […] genre is ordinary people in extraordinary situations. It's the best kind of drama there is. […] it really was genre that made me want to write.[89]

Kirland delivers this account of her career in a rushed, frantic tone, emphasizing her increasing urgency to "get out of genre" despite her inability to articulate the source of that urgency. The need to separate herself from SFF was a firmly held but vague instinctive reaction that she was only able to reflect on once she was working outside of these genres. Her account illustrates the intense emotional reactions that genres can prompt in writers, which fuel the ways they discuss genre, shape their career trajectories, and potentially change over time. The impact of these reactions heightens contestation, as writers create or close the distance between their professional identities and genres in response to these shifting emotions.

While some writers attempt to ascribe a motivation to their emotional reactions, often by arguing for the value or lack thereof of a genre, others will frame it more neutrally and personally as a question of individual interest. Michael Green and Bryan Fuller illustrate these different approaches:

> Green: I have friends who can write and love to write standard procedurals, and are really excited by those puzzles. I admire it because […] I come up cold because my brain just doesn't accept that as a puzzle worth solving.
> Fuller: It's not fun enough.
> Green: For me anyway. The people I know that can constantly be energized by that, it's a fabulous career. It's just not where my brain goes. Part of it is also just you write long enough, you start to identify the things you can do versus what you want to do. […] I know I'm a drama writer. Ideally, a genre drama writer.[90]

Fuller presents an argument for his lack of interest in writing procedurals, dismissing the work and the genre as "not fun enough." Green, on the other hand, frames procedural writing as a form of craftwork that does not excite *his* brain but that he admires in other writers, putting the focus on his level of interest rather than on a failure of the genre in question. In doing so, he also illustrates the contrast between genre as skill and genre as identity. Procedurals are a "thing he can do," but they are not what he wants to write and do not become part of his professional

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[89] Ben Blacker, "Moira Kirland, Terry Matalas, Travis Fickett, and Douglas Petrie," February 16, 2014, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000276075682/.
[90] Kim Renfro, "Bryan Fuller and Michael Green talk 'American Gods,'" May 15, 2017, in *Showrunners*, produced by INSIDER, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/showrunners/id1227115442?i=1000385440701.

identity. It is the genres that he wants to write—drama and SFF—that become who he is. Writers who share skills and work histories will adopt different professional labels based on the individual questions of which writing puzzles feel the most worth solving and energize their brains.

For some writers, genres become deeply personal, interwoven not just with their professional identities but also their personal ones. SFFH writers, particularly those who also identify as fans of one or more of these genres, often speak about their deep attachment as "love" or even "obsessed."[91] Sera Gamble goes so far as to say that she considers herself "to be a horror writer in my soul."[92] Rather than an objective description of the kind of work a writer does, these personal identities are informed by the emotional significance these genres hold for the writers, in part shaped by their other stakeholder roles as readers, viewers, fans, etc. As Fuller puts it, "I really didn't want to be a television writer as much as I wanted to be a 'Star Trek' writer."[93] Attachment to specific genres and/or series can pre-exist, motivate, and in some cases even operate outside of writers' careers. Christina Strain argues that "sci-fi is okay" but "if I had to pick one genre to live in," it would be fantasy.[94] Her use of *live* rather than *work* is crucial, framing the genre as a space for her life to exist in rather than as a type of professional labor she performs. This blurring of professional and personal identities is a common theme in writers' discourses: Gamble does not refer to herself as a horror *fan* in her soul, but a horror *writer*, framing her professional identity as an intimate and integral part of her body. This rhetoric harkens to van Zoonen's argument about work that has a "mythology of being a 24-hour life-style rather than a profession,"[95] with professional identities born from the way work and life can be conflated and inform one another. This blurring contributes to contestation as genre can become completely separate from the work a writer has or has not done.

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[91] Ben Blacker, "Alexander Woo, Keto Shimizu, Katherine Beattie," July 30, 2019, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000473087791.

[92] Clara Sherley-Appel and Dani Lowry, "Episode 401 - A Flock of Lost Birds (with Sera Gamble and John McNamara)," July 4, 2019, in *Physical Kids Weekly: A Magicians Podcast*, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/physical-kids-weekly-a-magicians-podcast/id1193279151?i=1000428364449.

[93] Robert Taylor, "Reflections: Talking with Bryan Fuller," *Comic Book Resources: Reflections* 3, no. 2 (October 26, 2006), https://www.cbr.com/reflections-talking-with-bryan-fuller/.

[94] Clara Sherley-Appel and Dani Lowry, "Super Spandex Spectacular - Interview with Christina Strain," January 24, 2018, in *Physical Kids Weekly: A Magicians Podcast*, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/physical-kids-weekly-a-magicians-podcast/id1193279151?i=1000415229753.

[95] van Zoonen, 138.

In some cases, these personal identities can be strategically deployed as professional identities. As Naja Later argues, some writers (primarily white cis men) can forge careers for themselves as "promoted fanboys" by establishing themselves as fans of particular genres or intellectual property [IP] who are now able to produce those series.[96] Writers like Bryan Fuller, J. J. Abrams, and Ronald D. Moore have built established brands for themselves as promoted fanboys of fantasy, horror, and science fiction, and more recently, of specific, previously devalued niches, as the Duffer Brothers have done with Dungeons & Dragons through its central narrative role on *Stranger Things* (2016–Present). For audience members who consider themselves fans of particular genres or IP, the status of a promoted fanboy can serve as a signal that the creator or showrunner is "one of them," and conveys the impression that the writer(s) will approach the genre with respect, expertise, and passion. When writers make (or at least promote themselves as making) a specific genre central to multiple of their series, that genre can become part of their author brand. However, as Hadas argues, "In playing this game, author brands must navigate […] their value hinging, in great part, on appearing to be above it."[97] For the author brand to be effective, it must read as authentic. By publicly discussing and even emphasizing the role that a genre plays in their personal identity, a writer can grant that authenticity to their professional identity, thereby incentivizing them to perform their relationship with genres in interviews.

This incentive to perform varies depending on the space a writer is occupying and the audience they think they are performing to, which can create contestation between performances. Bryan Fuller illustrates this tension across various interviews about *Pushing Daisies* (2007–2009), a series he created and showran about a man who uses his magical touch to revive the dead in order to solve murders. At the time of the series's release, Fuller noted in a trade magazine that "Fantasy is sometimes associated with 'Lord of the Rings' and 'Star Wars.' […] What I like to do is almost like a whimsical reality. It's like grounded fantasy."[98] He acknowledges the preconceptions of fantasy and designates a term for the specific type of fantasy he feels he is making. "Grounded fantasy" is a frequent descriptor he uses for his work, placing the emphasis on the series's emotional realism (a concept explored in greater depth later in this chapter). He also describes the series as a "prime-time fairy tale,"[99] echoing the language that ABC used to promote the series. The channel, which was marketing a fantasy

[96] Naja Later, "Quality Television (TV) Eats Itself: The TV-Auteur and the Promoted Fanboy," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 35, no. 6 (2018): 536, 537, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2018.1499349.
[97] Hadas, *Authorship*, 16–17.
[98] Josef Adalian et al. "Masters of Sci-Fi, Fantasy and Horror," *TelevisionWeek* 27, no. 25 (September 29, 2008), EBSCOhost.
[99] Adalian et al., 20.

series in the late 2000s at a time when fantasy had yet to become mainstream on television, stressed the procedural aspect of the series by describing it as a "forensic fairy tale."[100] While in interviews over a decade later, Fuller would mock this phrasing,[101] at the time of the series's release when he may have lacked the professional clout to openly defy the channel, he occasionally used their language in trade press interviews. In doing so, he emphasized an idea of his work as approaching its premise from a fantastical and whimsical perspective.

However, in fandom spaces that are explicitly horror-centric, a genre that Fuller identifies as a fan of, he stresses a different genre for *Pushing Daisies*. In *Eli Roth's History of Horror: Uncut* podcast, Fuller describes the origins of the series:

> what I wanted to do is a horror show that the entire family could watch, and […] do something a little bit different with the zombie genre where there are intelligent zombies [who] could articulate and have instant recall of their lives to solve the problem [of their unsolved murders], so really it was about "how do I take my love for horror, and make it into an ABC show that they'll pay me to make?" The romance of it and the obsession with death and the price that we pay to live all felt like things that were aspects of horror films that I adored, and I wanted to twist them around a little bit to fool the network executives into believing that they were making *Amélie*, but they were actually making something much darker.[102]

When speaking to horror fans, he stresses horror as the primary genre of the series, and frames the reincarnated characters as zombies (in contrast to the series, where a reincarnated character exuberantly refers to herself as "alive again").[103] Not only does this horror lens paint a "much darker" picture of the series, it also emphasizes a different idea of Fuller as a writer. Fuller's career has been associated with a tendency to vocally disagree with channel and studio executives, with the writer often portraying himself as an artist struggling to maintain the purity of his vision in the face of executives' commercial focus. This idea of himself as a creative maverick has become tied to his author brand, and here he weaves that narrative into the genre of his series. Speaking to a horror audience, he stresses his knowledge of horror films and themes, and portrays himself as a trickster sneaking the genre into a network that would not otherwise, he claims, have greenlit it. Crucially, this interview takes place in 2019, after he became more established as an author brand and after his success with series like *Hannibal*

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[100] Gail Pennington, "Magical or morbid? 'Pushing Daisies' brings whimsy to death," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (October 7, 2007), accessed on Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/20071210214105/http://www.stltoday.com:80/stltoday/entertainment/columnists.nsf/gailpennington/story/00F62599DD18C7D48625736C007E60FB?OpenDocument.

[101] Eli Roth, "Bryan Fuller," May 17, 2019, in *Eli Roth's History of Horror: Uncut*, produced by Shudder, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/bryan-fuller/id1453080639?i=1000438313498.

[102] Roth.

[103] *Pushing Daisies*, season 1, episode 1, "Pie-lette," directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, written by Bryan Fuller, aired October 3, 2007, on ABC.

(2013–2015) and *American Gods* (2017–2021) that are strongly associated with horror, unlike his pre-*Pushing Daisies* work of *Wonderfalls* (2004), *Dead Like Me* (2003–2004), and *Heroes* that are more linked to fantasy. As his professional identity has become more tied to horror, he has become increasingly incentivized to portray his career as a long-standing devotion to horror, especially when he is speaking to an audience of horror fans. This is not to suggest that his identification of *Pushing Daisies* as a covert horror series is pure myth for promotional purposes: this may be an authentic origin story of the series, or he may view the series as both horror and grounded fantasy, or his career's turn into focusing on horror may have shifted his perception of his previous work. Writers, particularly those who have been working for many years, tend to organize accounts of their careers into narratives, which by their condensed nature will be unavoidably reductive and filtered by hindsight. Regardless of Fuller's actual backstage motivation, his frontstage performances have presented two different ideas of what his series was and what kind of writer he is: whimsical, grounded fantasy and maverick zombie horror. Professional identities and genres can become contested as writers are incentivized to present their work differently in different spaces, to different audiences, and at different stages of their careers in order to establish trust and gain the support of audiences.

While some writers will change the framing of their work as they gain power and reputation, others will experience their work itself changing over the course of their careers, with their professional and personal identities shifting as a result. Many writers who initially claim they do not have any interest in writing fantasy find that their opinions change after working on fantasy series because doing the actual work challenges their preconceptions. As Mike Moore puts it, "In a way, there was no option for me other than to understand [the genre], appreciate it, learn it, and learn how much fun fantasy and genre writing can be, cause that was literally my job."[104] Writers, particularly in the early stages of their career, cannot always afford to choose a series that aligns with their interests, and when there is "no option" other than learning to write and appreciate a genre that they might not otherwise value, writers have to adapt. When they engage with the reality of writing for an SFF series, they are forced to challenge the theories they had about the work; the contrast between that theory and reality can surprise even established SFF writers. As Richard Hatem outlines:

> I think people do get afraid because they—*I* get afraid. Like, I don't think I like genre TV […] cause I'm like, it's gonna be confusing and I'm gonna have to learn a lot of aliens' names and it's gonna be about something Other. Then the minute you get

[104] Sherley-Appel and Lowry, "Episode 511."

> involved writing it—I mean the *instant*—[…] you're automatically just going, "oh, well, no, of course, yeah, it's about people."[105]

Preconceived notions about these genres can cause writers to exaggerate how different the craftwork is on an SFF series in comparison with other series. When writers are not working on a particular genre, they may create or believe myths about the work, even if they know those myths to be untrue *during the actual work*. This tension might come about in part because of the active paraindustry surrounding writers: writers are encouraged to produce theories about themselves and their work in order to promote their series, and they learn from each others' theories how to think about and discuss their work. As Goffman argues,

> a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name. The front becomes a "collective representation" and a fact in its own right.[106]

These collective representations result from the dominant thought styles among television writers feeding into the constructions that writers share about their work, with these institutionalized myths coloring their understandings of their own experiences. Writers engage with and spread these collective representations of the craftwork involved in an SFF series, which are then only countered by some writers who are actively working on SFF series. The conflict between the lived reality and the collective representation can give rise to contestation as writers struggle to articulate their realities through the discursive norms of their stakeholder group.

The relationships that writers depict between genre and their professional identities are ever-changing. They are contested between writers on the same series, between writers working in the same genres, and even within the same writer over time. Writers may change how they identify, sometimes due to their career status, sometimes in different settings depending on the audience they assume is listening, and sometimes due to changing views of themselves, genres, or the industry's relationship with various genres. Early career writers may feel more pressure to use the channel's rhetoric when talking about a series, or to align themselves with less stigmatized genres in order to improve their employability. Even writers who love writing a particular genre, tone, or craft element may try to identify with different elements of their work and pitch themselves for a range of jobs to ensure a varied career, either due to personal interest or to keep their options open. All these different forces exert pressure

[105] Blacker, "'TV Fantasy.'"
[106] Goffman, 37.

on writers, incentivizing them to lean into contestation by keeping their professional, and sometimes even personal, identities flexible and performing them strategically. Writers' relationships with genres are navigated publicly and discursively, and are therefore constantly shaped by the scrutiny and perceived expectations of other genre stakeholders like audiences, executives, and other writers.

Genre as Series Identity

While writers often express genre as a facet of their professional identities, they also frequently invoke and strategically manage genre as an element of specific series' identities. Channels and studios' negative perceptions of SFF shape the way writers talk about their identities, but they exert an even more direct influence on series identities. As Alexander Kreisberg notes, "We've all heard stories about other shows that were about aliens where the network said, 'You can't say that there's aliens on your show,' or shows about magic where 'We don't want to hear the word magic.'"[107] While this control is most heavily exerted in the texts themselves, it can also impact the specific language that writers use to describe their series and the genres involved. This chapter focuses on the writers themselves, but the influence of these other stakeholders plays an undeniable role in shaping the contestation created in writers' discourses about series identities. Series identities become contested in a multitude of ways, but there are three key sources of contestation: the navigation of genre-mixing, the dramatization of the work in the writers' room, and the negotiation surrounding notions of quality fantasy television.

In series with multiple genres, writers often create "hierarchies" between the different genres, themes, and narrative elements of a series, with some of these parts treated as primary and others as secondary. The primary components are often framed as "what the series is really about," while the others are treated as optional and decorative. As Meredith Averill illustrates when talking about the development of *Locke and Key* (2020–2022):

> Averill: [...] it's really a show about grief […] the [magical] keys and all of the fun fantasy is sort of the exciting layer on top, but it doesn't drive the story.
> Ben Blacker: Those are ornaments.
> Averill: And I do think in some of the other iterations [of the series previously developed at Fox and Hulu by other writers], sometimes the set pieces drove the drama more than I think we want to.[108]

[107] Variety.
[108] Ben Blacker, "Meredith Averill, Chris Collins, & Sarah Gertrude Shapiro + Bonus Interview w/ Julie Plec," September 11, 2018, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000419517987.

Not only are the fantasy elements of the series portrayed as ancillary despite their critical role in the series's plot, but the idea of the series focusing on these elements is framed as a negative. This type of hierarchical language is common and rarely examined by writers, becoming another expression of collective representation. The ubiquity of this impulse to create hierarchies even shows up in academic work of creative practice, with Jule Selbo arguing that "in most cases, one overriding genre will be dominant; the other genres will be supporting the dominant genre and can therefore be termed 'supporting' genres."[109] The choice of language is telling: dominant genre implies an uneven power dynamic between genres rather than a collaboration.

While all series contain genre-mixing to some extent, the negotiations between genres become more complex with series that contain SFF because of the negative preconceptions surrounding these genres. When writers invoke a genre hierarchy for their series, fantasy is almost always assigned the secondary position rather than a primary one, if it is even acknowledged at all. As Josh Schwartz illustrates while discussing *Runaways* (2017–2019):

> we actually didn't really think of it as a superhero show. We thought of it as a family drama or a coming-of-age drama that happened to have a dinosaur and some Fistigons. But that was never the central drive for us.[110]

There is a tendency for writers who invoke hierarchies to frame SFF, not as a genre of the series, but rather as elements that the series "happens to have." This kind of language is reminiscent of the discussion of *Game of Thrones*'s marketing in chapter three, when a major genre of the series (fantasy) was reduced to a single element (dragons) whose presence was framed as incidental, particularly with regards to the series's plot. Writers invoke this rhetoric regardless of how significant a narrative role these fantasy elements actually play. Rather than seeking to accurately reflect the series, this language aims to assure both audiences and executives that a series is not really fantasy and that the fantasy elements that are present will be insignificant and easy to ignore.

Sometimes this sort of rhetoric is reflective of writers anticipating the genre priorities of channels, based on the assumption that channels will want to downplay the presence of SFF. As Kreisberg illustrates:

> Kreisberg: We were a little trepedatious [about doing *Supergirl* at CBS] cause aliens and flying girls isn't typically what happens at CBS.
> Courtney Kemp: [*quippy*] Does she solve crimes?
> Kreisberg: She actually does.

[109] Jule Selbo, *Film Genre for the Screenwriter* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 7.
[110] Blacker, "Josh Schwartz."

> Kemp: Okay, excellent.[111]

Historically, writers have operated under the assumption that a broadcast network (particularly one like CBS) will only be interested in SFF series if they are also procedurals, a favored genre among networks. Network interests incentivize writers to develop and emphasize genre-mixing in SFF series, and to utilize genre hierarchies to minimize the role of undervalued genres. This need to discursively perform a hierarchical form of genre-mixing becomes particularly explicit in series bibles, the pitch documents that writers prepare for studios and channels that summarize their plans for a proposed TV series.[112] These documents are used to reassure buyers that the writers have a plan for the series in line with the needs of the studio and channel, often explicitly outlining writers' intentions toward genre and tone. For example, the first two pages of the series bible for *Lost* explain:

> IT'S A MEDICAL SHOW. […]
> IT'S A COP SHOW. […]
> IT'S A LAWYER SHOW. […]
> IT'S A CHARACTER DRAMA. […]
> […]
> IS LOST A GENRE SHOW?
> We'd prefer to brand it as an "Adventure Show."
> […]
> If we do our jobs right, we can walk that fine line and never be branded as "Sci-Fi."[113]

The first information the bible makes clear is that the series will primarily focus on and be identified as the procedural genres that were perceived to be bigger audience draws at the time: a focus dictated by the network.[114] The bible explicitly describes the use of genre in the series's identity as branding and claims that it will avoid the science fiction "brand" (an aim that, in retrospect, was unsuccessful). David Fury notes that "Of course, the show *was* always science fiction, but we had to keep hiding it from the network."[115] As sources of authorial intent, series bibles are not useful or accurate, but they can offer valuable insights by allowing outsiders to essentially eavesdrop on the backstage communications between writers and studios, illuminating how writers believe they need to present their work in order to sell them to executives. As Carlton Cuse puts it, "the [bible] is just a sell-job basically. The one for *Lost* is

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[111] Variety, "Variety 'A Night in the Writer's Room' - Drama Panel," June 15, 2015, *YouTube*, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuwy65tbz0A.
[112] Pamela Douglas, *Writing the TV Drama Series: How to Succeed as a Professional Writer in TV*, 4th ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2018), 35.
[113] J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof, "*Lost* Series Format" (unpublished series bible, May 5, 2004), 1–2.
[114] David Bushman and Scott Ryan, "02 David Fury Interview," November 15, 2016, in *Big Bad Buffy Interviews*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/02-david-fury-interview/id1167802126?i=1000441201995.
[115] Bushman and Ryan.

very funny."[116] These bibles do not normally operate as public discourses, though some may be informally distributed around the industry. However, bibles for popular series are sometimes circulated online, where they can contribute to wider discourses around genre.[117] Crucially, these discourses tend to remove the context of what these bibles are for, who the intended audience is, and how aspects of the bible like genre hierarchies are incentivized, and in some cases mandated, by other stakeholders.

Rather than a source of true generic meaning, these series bibles offer a glimpse at the changing backstage perceptions of the comparative places that science fiction, horror, and fantasy hold in these genre hierarchies. Following the success of series like *Lost,* science fiction gained more acceptance within the industry, but this acceptance did not automatically extend to fantasy and writers are conscious of this gap.[118] A decade after *Lost,* the pitch deck (a visual-centric variant of a series bible) for *Stranger Things* explicitly refers to the series as a "sci-fi horror epic" in its first sentence.[119] The pitch deck assures its readers that "The horror in Montauk is supernatural – but rooted in science. Dark matter, black holes, worm holes, alternate universes, string theory... we want to use the mathematics of theoretical physics to ground our horror in reality."[120] In stark contrast to the *Lost* bible, this pitch deck is proudly and immediately labelling the series as SF and horror. Not only are these genres explicitly listed as the series's identity, but readers are assured that the series will be read as these genres rather than as fantasy. SF and horror are granted the primary places on the genre hierarchy while fantasy is excluded entirely, only nodded to indirectly with the frequent use of the term "supernatural" in the pitch deck and later promotional materials.[121] While science fiction and horror have been granted the legitimacy to rise higher up the hierarchy, fantasy has not received the same benefit. All genres under the SFFH umbrella are not subject to the same treatment in genre hierarchies.

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[116] Ben Blacker, "Writers Panel Throwback: Mike Schur, Carlton Cuse, and J.J. Philbin," January 21, 2020, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000473087789.

[117] The most famous example is the *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009) bible, which opened with an oft-quoted essay titled "Battlestar Galactica: Naturalistic Science Fiction or Taking the Opera out of Space Opera" that operated as a manifesto of sorts. It outlined the series's intended approach to genre, which creator Moore termed "naturalistic" science fiction. Ronald D. Moore, "*Battlestar Galactica* Series Bible" (unpublished series bible, December 17, 2003), 1–3.

[118] "Conversations With… Speaker Series - Ronald D. Moore," March 27, 2009, in *USC School of Cinematic Arts Conversations With… Speaker Series Podcast*, produced by USC School of Cinematic Arts, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/usc-school-of-cinematic-arts-conversations-with/id1436359543?i=1000419770996.

[119] The Duffer Brothers, "Montauk" (unpublished pitch deck), 1.

[120] The Duffer Brothers, 11.

[121] On Netflix, *Stranger Things* is primarily listed under Horror and Supernatural altgenres, with a handful of Sci-Fi altgenres and notably the Dark Fantasy altgenre that, as discussed in chaper four, tends to be used for horror series.

In some cases, the hierarchies invoked by writers when discussing genre are motivated by a channel's mandates. Over the past couple of decades, this often meant including procedural elements in the series and emphasizing those in pitches and in interviews, particularly interviews with trade press where writers are more explicitly intended to serve as the promotional mouthpieces of their series. As Fuller observes, networks like to use procedurals in order to make a fantasy series "much more digestible in terms of what the audience would be familiar with."[122] The inclusion of these procedural elements can create a disconnect between executives and writers about what kind of series they are making and what they believe audiences will respond to. As Ildy Modrovich illustrates while discussing *Lucifer* (2016–2021):

> especially at the beginning, there was many discussions between us and the studio and the network cause they really wanted a procedural, you know, where the episodes can stand alone and be aired out of order. That's great for international, it's great for kind of the business of it? But we knew that […] a show like this, like *Buffy* […] *depends* on the mythology a little bit. That our audience is not going to care about solving crimes so much [*giggles*] and that that is the spine, that's the skeleton you hang everything on. It's a great engine for story—procedural—I'm not going to lie. It's great to solve a crime cause it just gives you an automatic story. But we knew that the stuff that we cared about and that our audience was going to care about, was the relationships and the exploration of Lucifer, the fallen rebellious kid.[123]

As televisual storytelling has increasingly shifted toward serialized narrative, so too have channels' priorities, which impacts and will continue to impact how writers organize their genre hierarchies. While writers frequently talk about the importance of having a procedural in order to supply a narrative spine (also called a story engine) for generating episode plots, the perception that channels and OTT services are more accepting of serialized narratives and mythology has the potential to shift genres like fantasy higher up the genre hierarchies, particularly over the course of a series's run. Some writers frame procedurals as a genre that they include in the first season to "gain the network's trust" and then slowly pull away from as the series progresses.[124] The roles that writers assign to genres in hierarchies will be subject to future contestation based on the collective perception of what gatekeeping stakeholders like channels and OTT services are looking for.

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[122] Ben Blacker, "BONUS EPISODE The Devoted Niche vs The Casual Mass panel from ATX Television Festival," June 25, 2015, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000345611929.
[123] Adron Buske and Wendy Buske, "Lucifer Co-Showrunner Ildy Modrovich," May 26, 2017, in *Nerd for a Living*, produced by Nerd for a Living, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/lucifer-co-showrunner-ildy-modrovich/id850569477?i=1000385832086.
[124] Blacker, "BONUS EPISODE."

In some cases, these hierarchies are invoked not because of the value attributed to the genres in question, but in order to make a series appear unique in a genre space that is perceived as crowded. For example, Aron Eli Coleite talks about his experience of pitching *Daybreak* (2019), a series about high schoolers in a post-apocalyptic world after a zombie outbreak, during a time when there were concerns that the market was saturated with zombie series. Coleite's solution was to pitch the series as having "more in common with *Mad Max* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* than *The Walking Dead*," stressing the post-apocalyptic and high school aspects of the series over the zombie ones because invoking that hierarchy made the series seem comparatively more novel.[125] The notion of novelty is itself contested: different genres and subgenres are subject to different standards of what is considered "a saturated market." While there were already more high school series on air than zombie series, the high school element was considered the fresh component of the series. This distinction is yet another way in which genre hierarchies are expressed: the "market" is perceived as able to sustain more of some genres than others.[126] While writers' participation in genre hierarchies is often influenced by value judgements, the need to sell a series to executives and audiences also has a profound influence on these discourses, creating contestation around a series's identity in order to argue for its uniqueness.

Many writers' discourses around series identities contain these genre hierarchies, which often seem aimed at performing an idealization of their work. The use of hierarchies is not universal: plenty of writers speak about the different genres of a series as ingredients that need to be balanced, framing the genres as mixed rather than in competition. But as Goffman argues, "a performer tends to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products."[127] In order to perform an idealized version of series' identities (and by extension their work and professional identities), writers underplay or outright conceal those genres that do not fit with the ideal. When writers invoke genre hierarchies for a series, they are creating a myth about what a series is about, and in doing so are making an argument about their worth as practitioners. By stressing themes and genres that are perceived as having more cultural value, writers attempt to add merit to the myths surrounding their professional identities.

When the idealization centers around the content of a series, the audiences of these performances can fact check these discourses by watching the text and formulating their own

[125] Freedman and Watson, "Showrunning."
[126] Coleite notes that Netflix initially rejected the pitch on the basis that they already had a single zombie series at the time. Freedman and Watson.
[127] Goffman, 56.

opinions about genre (albeit likely shaped by any discourses they've been exposed to). However, some of these idealizations are delivered as part of dramatizations of work performed in private spaces. When writers discuss the work that occurs in a room behind closed doors, they are not offering an objective account. Rather, they are performing a dramatization of that work. As Goffman argues, "the representation of an activity will vary in some degree from the activity itself and therefore inevitably misrepresent it."[128] Regardless of the intended honesty of writers when they speak about private work publicly, they are inevitably creating a myth that will often be idealized. Rebecca Roach argues that "interviews are a construction, that the writers tell a legend more than a truth."[129] These myths are particularly potent because the work of the room is only known to the people in it and therefore these narratives cannot be scrutinized or fact-checked. Carlton Cuse claims that the *Lost* writers "probably spent 80% of the time in the room talking about characters, and about 15% of the time talking about mythology, and 5% of the time talking about *Top Chef*. And that was the actual cocktail of *Lost*."[130] *Top Chef* joke aside, the use of percentages suggests a level of precision to the accounting of time that is not evidence-based. There is no way of knowing what the actual breakdown of writers' room time was spent on. Statements like Cuse's at most communicate that the writers *felt* that the majority of their time was spent talking about characters, but these feelings are likely colored by his perception of what was important on the series. The dramatization is based on an idealization of writers' labor, and serves to reenforce hierarchies about what is deemed important on the series.

Many writers claim that the majority of time in writers' rooms is spent focusing on character; however, occasional comments acknowledge that these are idealizations and that more time may be spent on the SFF elements of the series than writers like to admit in performances. While talking about the work on the writers' room of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Marti Noxon illustrates:

> When you're creating a world with rules—and for us, we had a different villain, monster-of-the-week in most episodes, so that would mean new rules for that monster and a new goal for that monster every week—and that was the stuff that didn't really matter, in a way? It was usually servicing a character story, and often it was a metaphor for whatever the main point [of the episode] was, but you could put ten smart people in a room and watch them talk themselves into a corner about why the cast of Phlebotinum shouldn't be at the temple, it should be over in the Thing Thing and they're doing like eight things to get to it, and Joss [Whedon, the showrunner] would walk in and be like,

[128] Goffman, 72.
[129] Rebecca Roach, "'To Unreel a Whole Story': Julia Kerninon on Writers' Interviews," *Biography* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 312, https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2018.0025.
[130] Ben Blacker, "300th episode," November 6, 2016, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000377870003.

> "Why do we care about any of this? Where's the feeling? What's going on in the *story*?"[131]

Despite the *Buffy* writers' room's frequently stated goal of focusing on character above all else, Noxon acknowledges that in reality, a lot of time was spent on fantasy and details of plot mechanics. There is a gap between the dramatization of the work—what the writers discursively claim is the core of the series—and the reality of the work, but that gap is rarely acknowledged by writers when they talk about process. Much of the paraindustry that surrounds writers focuses on their creative process, with discourses framed as mentors sharing advice and guidance. The success of this paraindustry relies on writers performing their dramatizations as if they are faithful accounts of their work, with only occasional references to the gap between dramatization and reality.[132] As Maras argues, "screenwriting is a practice of writing, but it is also a discourse that constructs or imagines the process of writing in particular ways."[133] While writers are claiming to offer an insight into their personal experiences and the creative process, they are producing an argument for the dramatic principles that they believe should be prioritized on SFF series. By infusing their dramatizations with hierarchical rhetoric, they are reproducing the biases that created these hierarchies in the first place under the guise of objective advice about process. Dramatization leads to a contested view of genre, with writers downplaying the amount of work in the room that focuses on fantasy in order to emphasize the idealized myth of the series identity.

The discussion of series identity also becomes fraught and contested as writers attempt to separate "good" fantasy from "bad" fantasy. Oftentimes this delineation centers around the relationship that fantasy has with "the real world." When fantasy is discussed in a positive light, the genre is often framed as powerful and beneficial because it allows writers to discuss elements of the real world by circumventing viewers' preconceived notions with unfamiliar settings, characters, and abilities. As Jane Espenson puts it, "I have the luxury of [talking about our world today] through the lens of a fantasy world. I just think you can speak a lot more bluntly and directly and say what you want to say because you have that safety lens of the

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[131] Ben Blacker, "Mutant Enemy writers room reunion," March 17, 2015, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000337806371.

[132] For instance, Javier Grillo-Marxuach notes that when he writes a first draft, "Writer Javi writes a little bit more from the heart, and then I go back and I look at it and go, 'Okay, did I actually fulfill any of the intellectual goals that I've laid out for people who read my essays [about writing].'" He has to retrospectively align his later drafts to the dramatization of his work that he performs in public. Meg LeFauvre and Lorien McKenna, "46 | Writing Great TV Characters w/ Javier Grillo-Marxuach," May 23, 2013, in *The Screenwriting Life with Meg LeFauvre and Lorien McKenna*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-screenwriting-life-with-meg-lefauve-and-lorien-mckenna/id1501641442?i=1000522797405.

[133] Maras, 12

metaphor."[134] Historically, this "safety lens" was particularly useful as a method of circumventing censorship, with writers crediting it for enabling them to discuss and portray topics that were not otherwise allowed on television, such as *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966–1969) critiquing fictional analogues of the Vietnam War and *Buffy* depicting sex scenes between two women in the form of spells.[135] While fantasy is often accused of being escapist, writers stress that the genre actually enables them to engage more closely with the real world. Sera Gamble argues:

> sometimes I get a little choked up, just the tool is so powerful sometimes. Like, what better way to express orgasm than they're flying on the ceiling? What better way to express "I've never been able to show who I am to my father" than do a tiny piece of magic in front of him and he just watches it and you [the viewer] watch the father watch the son? As a writer who gets to write this kind of stuff, you're handed such powerful tools.[136]

Though fantasy is often criticized for allowing viewers to disengage from reality, many SFF writers insist that the genre actually grants them special tools to engage with reality more than other, more literal genres can, particularly within the confines of what is permitted on television. These safety lenses and tools are framed as a positive ability of the genre that grants it cultural value.

Sometimes this framing goes further, claiming that the genre *only* has value when it enables the real world to be placed at the forefront of a series. Eric Kripke claims:

> good genre is determined entirely on how well the metaphor works for what's going on in our world. Cause any good genre isn't just about spaceships or monsters or whatever—it's a reflection and an opportunity to comment on the world we're all living in.[137]

Writers frequently assert that a "good" SFF series does not focus on the SFF elements, but instead uses the genres to talk about the real world. They claim that fantasy series should not be about fantasy, though it is not entirely clear what it would mean for a series to be "about fantasy." As Joseph Rex Young argues, "There is, in fact, no such thing as a story *about*

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[134] Christopher Golden, Jonathan Maberry, and James A. Moore, "Jane Espenson," September 20, 2017, in *Three Guys with Beards*, produced by Project Entertainment Network, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/jane-espenson/id993261195?i=1000392521657.

[135] Adam Savage, "DC Fontana," September 8, 2017, in SYFY25: Origin Stories, produced by SYFY Wire, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/dc-fontana/id1280023077?i=1000391982438.; Tariq Raouf, "Changing the Narrative, ft. Drew Z. Greenberg," May 25, 2020, in *Entertainment Queerly*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/changing-the-narrative-ft-drew-z-greenberg/id1503212363?i=1000475755539.

[136] VanDerWerff.

[137] Ed Gross, "'The Boys': Eric Kripke On the Challenges and Joys of Adapting the Comics," December 30, 2020, in *Voices From Krypton*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/voices-from-krypton/id1497054975?i=1000467378533.

dragons, or wizards, or aliens, or zombies. Such phenomena do not exist, and an author cannot discuss them without contextualising them in relation to that which does."[138] Rather than articulating something specific about what a text that "is not about" its fantasy elements does with those elements, this rhetoric seems primarily targeted at denigrating the genre by delineating the acceptable forms of fantasy. There is an oft-repeated assumption that fantasy is only good if it is dealing in metaphors that are deemed worthy by the viewer, though it is rarely clear what metric assesses the success of a metaphor, nor is there an admission that such a metric is subjective. Writers tend to frame their own series as good,[139] and while doing so, they often assert a separation between their series and the genre, such as when Nathaniel Halpern describes *Tales from the Loop* (2020) as "more about life as we know it versus necessarily an escapist science fiction-fantasy"[140] and Raphael Bob-Waksberg asserts that he "didn't want [*Undone*] to be just a sci-fi/fantasy show."[141] In claiming legitimacy for their work, some writers claim that because they feel their series are good, they are not actually SFF. What makes a good SFF series is that it is not SFF.

While some of this reliance on metaphor has roots outside of television and is established rhetoric within fantasy literature circles, the focus on metaphor is also a result of writers imitating series that they believe to be successful examples of fantasy. *Buffy*, for example, is frequently referenced by television writers as a good fantasy series, in particular because of its use of emotional realism. Initially coined by Ien Ang to describe a technique in soap operas, emotional realism refers to a narrative quality where "what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a 'structure of feeling.'"[142] Emotional realism provides room for a series to engage with both realist[143] and nonrealistic elements; while the literal experience of the plot may not be plausible, the subjective and emotional experiences of the characters aims to be. *Buffy* writers have frequently discussed, both during the series's run and in the years since, how the key directive in the room

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[138] Joseph Rex Young, *George R.R. Martin and the Fantasy Form* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 160.
[139] Some writers may, when reflecting on series that they were not happy working on, retrospectively declare a series as "the bad stuff," but even then they attempt to assert their legitimacy as writers by shifting the blame (whether subtly or overtly) onto other writers. However, unless a writer does not care about burning a bridge with their former collaborators, they are incentivized to avoid being too harsh or naming specific writers whose work they do not like.
[140] Ben Blacker, "Nathaniel Halpern (creator, Tales from the Loop) and co-host J. Holtham (Supergirl)," March 26, 2020, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000475796469.
[141] ATXFestival, "Undone Q&A // ATX TV Festival (2019)," YouTube, June 8, 2019, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3LGapTDSaY.
[142] Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. Della Couling (Methuen: London, 1985), 45.
[143] As discussed in chapter two, the notion of realism and realist elements are themselves highly contested.

was to find the metaphor, in particular by having the "monster" in each episode represent a piece of the characters' emotional journeys.[144] Writers who worked on the series often identify emotional realism as the main lesson they have taken into their future work, regardless of genre.[145] This devotion to emotional realism has expanded beyond the writers who worked on *Buffy* to influence writers they have worked with on other series and even beyond. Jane Espenson claims that when she was working on *Once Upon a Time* (2011–2018), showrunners Adam Horowitz and Edward Kitsis had "the *Buffy* model in their mind" and would use similar rhetoric to what had been used in the *Buffy* room despite not having worked on the series, purely because they had spent so much time consuming paraindustrial discourses about the room's process.[146] This pairing of fantasy-as-metaphor with emotional realism has become a frequently discussed approach to fantasy television writing in some circles, with Jose Molina commenting that he often hears "'monster is metaphor' from the Whedon camp,"[147] as if it is a school of thought with regards to how fantasy television should be made. The insistence on fantasy justifying itself through metaphor has become a learned practice that is firmly incorporated in the collective representation of television writing. The approach taken toward this genre from a single writers' room was passed on both by direct collaboration and the paraindustry. Writers learn from one another how to speak about and write fantasy television, which gives rise to a particular approach to the genre that discursively downplays it.

Another common, related manner in which television writers attempt to delineate "good" fantasy stems from a focus on character. This emphasis on character as the core of good writing is common among television writers of all genres, often framed as a key component of the writing and appeal of television as medium. Much of this discourse positions the focus on character as a virtue and a source of legitimacy, presenting it as a creative choice that grants quality to the series who choose it. However, this framing often ignores the role that television production plays in the centrality of character. As Ali Adler points out:

> As large as this show is, we still try to keep it personal like that [with small scale, but important-to-the-character stories], because at the end of the day, we only have this much visual effect budget, we only have this much time on the day for stunts.[148]

[144] Blacker, "Mutant Enemy."
[145] Blacker, "Mutant Enemy."
[146] Blacker, "Mutant Enemy."
[147] Javier Grillo-Marxuach and Jose Molina, "Episode 12 - So you wanna write a television pilot…," May 19, 2014, in *Children of Tendu*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/children-of-tendu/id833831151?i=1000313221175.
[148] Ben Blacker, "Ali Adler," March 22, 2016, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000365269408.

Limitations of time and budget have encouraged television writers and producers to define the medium as focused on character in order to keep their series producible, particularly when dealing with genres that may require (or are at least perceived as requiring) more time- and money-draining visual and special effects. Jeff Pinkner argues that the focus on character also helps to alleviate channels' concerns that SFF series might confuse audiences, claiming that character relationships pull audiences in.[149] Writers often insist that, particularly as serialized storytelling has become more common, characters and their relationships are core to retaining viewers across seasons. However, despite how ubiquitous these discussions are, writers often frame the focus on character as unique to their series, implicitly or explicitly casting aspersions on how other series treat character. Eric Kripke illustrates this tension when he claims that "Everyone says they want things to be character-driven, but it's a bullshit buzzword that people say, but I think we've managed […] to really have done that."[150] While arguing that character-driven can be used as a "bullshit buzzword" that is not reflective of a series's actual writing, he insists that *his* use of the phrase is genuine and should be trusted. In attempting to position their work as unique, writers who draw on commonly used legitimating phrases like character-driven can end up either delegitimating other series or revealing the performance in the language, accidentally offering audiences a peek backstage.

This emphasis on series being framed as character-driven is central to fantasy-as-metaphor. As part of the insistence on emotional realism, characters' interactions with the fantastic are meant to be metaphoric expressions of real-world struggles. Fantasy's presence can only be justified if it is in fact a way of including reality. As writers seek to position their work as uniquely high quality, they often claim either implicitly or explicitly that this focus on character is unique to their use of these genres. Hatem argues that

> you have a bad or a boring genre experience, and then you sort of go, "Oh yeah, cause that's that stuff that's all about goofy aliens and they're separate and it's not about me." But the good stuff—and so much of it is good now—it's about you and it's about me.[151]

Setting aside the question of what it would mean for a series to be "all about goofy aliens," Hatem's rhetoric highlights the way that SFF and character-driven are perceived by some to be in conflict: either they do not co-exist, or if they do, the work is of uniquely high quality. When executive producers discuss the spec scripts they review when staffing rooms, they emphasize that the ideal scripts place the focus on well-developed and interesting characters. If SFF is

[149] The Paley Center for Media, "Fringe - Creating Engaging Standalone Shows (Paley Center, 2009)," YouTube, April 23, 2009, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcvEGDIdJKI.
[150] Blacker, "Shawn Ryan."
[151] Blacker, "'TV Fantasy.'"

perceived as being at the forefront, the script is labelled weak. The language used here is particularly crucial; rather than simply portraying these scripts as poorly written, the blame tends to be placed on the genre. The hierarchy is again invoked: the weakness of the script is that it places SFF above character, rather than because the character and/or SFF elements of the script were poorly executed. It is not a failure of craft, but a failure of genre. These discourses assume a competition between the various elements of a script, and when SFF is one of those elements, the only way for the script to be praise- and job-worthy is if those genres are minimized.

For writers who have worked in these genres for much of their careers, this framing of character and genre as at odds can provoke tension between writers. Jane Espenson recounts a job interview:

> I met the showrunner and said, "I'm so glad that you're making a sci-fi show." And he said, "Oh! Wait. Don't call it that. I'm not writing sci-fi; I'm writing character." And I just wanted to punch him. Like, yeah, sci-fi *is* character, what do you think...?[152]

The use of hierarchical language can create friction between writers, either causing writers to avoid working with showrunners with differing opinions on the genres being written about or to feel unwelcome on staff.[153] Writers working on the same series may disagree about the role that different elements are meant to play, both in the actual series and in the room's work. Early career writers in particular are incentivized not to say anything while they are actively working on a series or trying to maintain connections for future career opportunities. However, some writers may feel empowered later on to voice their disagreements, which can create contestation about a series's identity and implicitly reveal the performed nature of this kind of rhetoric. Some writers even acknowledge the discrepancy between how they talk about their work publicly and how they personally view it, admitting to the performance. Robert Kirkman, who wrote *The Walking Dead* comic books and worked on the television adaptation (2010–2022), jokes that he knew that Frank Darabont was the right person to adapt the series because Darabont's initial reaction was "'oh, it's just a character drama. You know, the zombies are just a backdrop.' And I'm like, 'Yeah yeah yeah, that's the stuff I say in interviews. Good job.'"[154] Writers are conscious of the hierarchical language that they are expected to use in

[152] Blacker, "'TV Fantasy.'"
[153] Bryan Fuller claims that the *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001) room "discouraged you from being the geek in the room," and that he felt pressured to hide his enthusiasm. Despite being in a science fiction writers' room, he did not feel encouraged to be open about his feelings for the genre. Mick Garris, "Bryan Fuller," May 24, 2017, in *Post Mortem with Mick Garris*, produced by DREAD Podcast Network, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/post-mortem-with-mick-garris/id1204949508?i=1000385756562.
[154] Ben Blacker, "Robert Kirkman," February 5, 2013, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000131927848.

promotional discourses and at times negotiate simultaneously invoking and critiquing that language.

The final common way that writers use legitimacy to create contestation surrounding the genre identity of a series is through the emphasis on series being "grounded." Grounded is a buzzword used within the industry to claim that a series is realistic (or at least emotionally realistic) and therefore has resonance, seemingly attempting to counteract accusations of television as frivolous or escapist. By framing a series as grounded, writers argue that their series focuses on relatable human experiences, regardless of premise or genre. Tamara Becher-Wilkinson, in discussing her experiences of writing for different showrunners, argues that

> the one constant in all of it is that you're telling stories about people and about characters and I think in every job that I've had, that what the showrunners always want are these grounded human emotions and telling authentic stories about people, and so that's sort of been a throughline for all these shows for me across all the genres.[155]

The emphasis on series being grounded is present throughout genres, and becomes the basic expectation of a "good" television series. However, the framing becomes more vital with genres like SFF, particularly fantasy. As Eric Kripke argues when discussing *Supernatural* (2005–2020), "with this genre, it needs a grounding influence, to ground the show to family and to the elements of family and the care that these brothers have for each other."[156] When used to refer to SFF series, grounded is often coupled with fantasy-as-metaphor and character-driven as the required standards for the genres. A television series must be grounded in order to avoid being escapist, a concern that becomes more fraught with genres that are already accused of being escapist.

Grounded is such a common term that it has become a known part of the collective representation of television writing, though not without controversy. As Javier Grillo-Marxuach explains:

> there is a word that is the worst word that anybody has ever said and that I hear all the time and it makes me homicidal, and that word is grounded. "Grounded" is network executive speak for "we don't trust you to not make it cheesy." […] Grounded is the word that would have made an adaptation of *Iron Man* made in 1994 about how Tony Stark got nanites but didn't really have a suit. Because they'd be like, [*exaggerated whiny voice*] "you know, the suit just doesn't feel *grounded*. […] We need to *ground* this in our reality."[157]

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[155] Alex Freedman and Nick Watson, "Writing Heroes and Breaking Genres ft. Tamara Becher-Wilkinson (Doom Patrol/Daredevil) (PT144)," July 22, 2019, in *Paper Team*, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/paper-team/id1139535081?i=1000445020820.

[156] The Paley Center for Media, "Supernatural - Kripke on Pitching the Show (Paley Center)," YouTube, June 22, 2009, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDQn7h0_jzA.

[157] Ben Blacker, "Pulp Page to TV Panel," August 9, 2016, in *The Writers Panel*, produced by Forever Dog Productions, podcast, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-writers-panel/id455020248?i=1000373905904.

While some writers like Kripke seem to believe (at least publicly) in the importance of a series being grounded, others view it as a term aimed at reassuring audiences and executives about how realistic and "good" their series are. Regardless of how writers feel about the term, it is accepted as a necessary part of performing an SFF series's identity in order to counteract the stigma from and minimize the role of the genre. Writers claim legitimacy for a so-called grounded fantasy series by assuring audiences and executives that it will be acceptably unrealistic. Despite Grillo-Marxuach's public dislike for the term, he uses the term "grounded" in multiple series bibles over the years.[158] In doing so, he is giving what Goffman terms a cynical performance:[159] a performance that he does not believe but assumes his audience (in this case, executives) is demanding from him. While writers may not like the language that has developed surrounding their work, they will draw on it as needed to try to ensure a sale and future work. These cynical performances create contestation surrounding a series's identity, particularly when writers offer other stakeholders glimpses backstage.

The rhetoric of grounding is invoked differently between fantasy and science fiction, reaffirming the perceived hierarchy between them. The use of the non-specific "science" is framed as a grounding influence, with SFF that invokes (or at least pays lip service to invoking) scientific principles treated as inherently more focused on reality. Jeff Pinkner claims that on *Fringe* (2008–2013), "we had a rule that […] you can imagine anything you want, and then we have to ground it in science. And it can be fringe science for sure […] but nonetheless it's science."[160] As a result, Roberto Orci argues that the series is "embedded less in less of a fantasy world than I think you might expect."[161] Writers often seek to establish a link between science and the fantastic elements of their series, drawing on the vague notion of "science" to invoke ideas of reality and objective truth in order to claim that a series is grounded in realism. The type of science does not need to be rigorous or broadly accepted: Pinkner admits that it could be fringe science that is highly speculative and/or largely disproven. The invocation of "science" seems to refer more to science as a discursive claim, such as when Julie Plec repeatedly asserts that the witchcraft and vampires in *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017) were

[158] Javier Grillo-Marxuach, "D.M.S./Department Zero" (unpublished pilot pitch, July 31, 2009), 2.; Javier Grillo-Marxuach, "Archangel Jonathan" (unpublished pilot pitch, June 25, 2012.); Javier Grillo-Marxuach, "Xena: Warrior Princess" (unpublished event series pitch, December 9, 2015), 4.
[159] Goffman, 28.
[160] The Paley Center for Media, "Fringe - The Science Must Be Grounded In Reality (Paley Center, 2009)," YouTube, April 19, 2010, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVmJuIiEDlE.
[161] The Paley Center for Media, "Fringe - The Science."

"ground[ed]" in "basic science."[162] The discursive insistence on the grounding influence of "science" is more revealing of writers' attitudes toward fantasy than it is of the texts themselves.

This rhetoric often implicitly or even explicitly creates a hierarchy between science fiction and fantasy, asserting the idea that science fiction, with its supposed ties to science, is inherently more realistic and that the genre (and therefore the series in question) is more valuable or legitimate. As Matt Duffer illustrates while discussing the dark alternate universe of the Upside Down in *Stranger Things*:

> I like that it is—it's hardly grounded, but it is grounded in some sort of science. I like the fact that I believe that maybe something like this could have potentially happened. So the horror is tied in with the science fiction instead of with fantasy.[163]

While he frames this as a personal preference, Duffer also implies that *Stranger Things* is better for being grounded in science fiction rather than fantasy. As Ross Duffer goes on to argue, "It's not fantas—it's *fantasy*, but it's happening in a very real setting that people can relate to."[164] There is an inherent assumption that fantasy does not take place in real settings, perhaps as a result of associations from fantasy literature that the genre tends to be set in secondary worlds, though secondary world fantasy only reflects a portion of fantasy subgenres and is less common on television.[165] Even when fantasy series do take place in secondary worlds, the assumption that viewers would struggle to feel invested in settings that do not reflect their immediate lived reality is a dubious argument in light of the disproportionate amount of US television set in Los Angeles. But even more telling is Duffer's phrasing of "It's not fantas—it's *fantasy*" as he attempts to separate his work from the genre before reluctantly acknowledging its link. In doing so, he illustrates the tensions surrounding the use of the term of fantasy as a series identity, claiming that his work is not fantasy (unrealistic), but *fantasy* (grounded in science). Not fantasy (bad), but fantasy (good). As writers attempt to argue for their series' value, these implied but invisible qualifiers make this genre term polysemic and contested, resting on vague notions of a divide between bad fantasy produced by others and good fantasy that is not fantasy because it is good.

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[162] Blacker, "Meredith Averill."
[163] Brian Gary, "The Duffer Brothers," July 13, 2017, in *3rd & Fairfax: The WGAW Podcast*, produced by Writers Guild of America West, podcast, https://3rdandfairfax.libsyn.com/ep-68-the-duffer-brothers.
[164] Gary.
[165] Katarina O'Dette, "Fantasy Worlds on the Small Screen: Worldbuilding in Original American Fantasy Television," *Extrapolation* 61, no. 1 (2021), 45, https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2021.3.

Conclusion: Discursive Lag Time

Though genre is sometimes perceived as a neutral descriptive label, it is a cog in the industrial reflexivity machine, with individual genres and the very concept of genre itself pulled in different directions as writers attempt to assert legitimacy for themselves and their work. That perception of neutrality is particularly pernicious as audiences and academics often engage with writers' paraindustrial discourses without taking into consideration all the factors that influence those discourses. The four forces that Deuze and Lewis identify as exerting themselves on media practitioners' professional identities—content, connectivity, creativity, and commerce—all incentivize and are incentivized by the professional and personal perspectives and needs of the writers using them. By tracing contestation in their genre discourses, we discover not only the role that genre and genres play for writers, but more generally how writers mythologize and understand their own value and values.

A particularly crucial element of that mythologizing is the way that writers collectively construct and draw from a collective representation that primes them to understand and discuss their work in shared ways. Of particular note in this chapter is the way that, while there are some instances of thought styles shifting (for example, in the greater acceptance of science fiction), the rhetoric surrounding fantasy as a genre has not changed much over the time period covered. While writers talk about shifts in industrial acceptance for SFF and the increase in SFF production, they continue to use the same hierarchical language when discussing fantasy in their own work. This continuity suggests that these thought styles can create lag time, with writers regurgitating enshrined language and the resulting value judgements even if they do not necessarily reflect the current market. The discursive disdain for SFF, and in particular fantasy, may therefore maintain a holdover into future decades, continuing to inform the shape of discourse and the ways in which writers are taught to think about and value their work.

While analyzing writers' discourses does not provide a definitive understanding of the reality of their work, it reveals the social institution of television writing and its values. Focusing on fantasy highlights the complex, contested ways in which writers ascribe genre to themselves and their series as they negotiate questions of genre-mixing and the cultural value of their work through dramatization of their craft and business practices. By creating hierarchies between different elements of their series, and emphasizing discursively valued elements like character and groundedness, writers reveal the lenses through which they are taught to view their work as valuable, and the methods through which they are taught to communicate that value. Tensions between the discourses of a single writer in different contexts illustrates the extent to which writers perform genre, and the extent to which they are

aware of the benefits of that performance. While some writers claim that genre does not matter to their process, its presence in discourses reveals its importance on the levels of connectivity and commerce. And for writers who have personal and professional investments in genre, it gains further importance to their content and creativity. Genre may not primarily impact writing in the way it is often thought to—as a template of plots and tropes that is imported into relevant series—but it proves to be a vital character in the performance of the working lives and discourses of media practitioners.

Yippee Ki-Yay, Motherforker: Conclusion

REBECCA
Oh my god. You're one of those "they" that name stuff.

KEELEY
Shit, I think I might be.

— Phoebe Walsh, *Ted Lasso*, "The Strings That Bind Us"

While researching this thesis, I made a critical mistake: on Christmas morning, when my mother-in-law was collecting suggestions for a seasonal film to watch, I jokingly suggested *Die Hard* (1988). While the now four-year ongoing family debate over whether *Die Hard* is a Christmas film is a source of persistent frustration, it offers a living example of how widespread and common debates over genre contestation are. Far from a theoretical, academic debate with limited applications, it spreads across genres, media, formats, stakeholder groups, languages, countries, and even into my living room.

This thesis has explored how contestation between and within genre stakeholder groups impacts understandings of genre, as well as how the needs of genre stakeholders impact their definitions of and approaches to genre. In doing so, it has analyzed what stakeholders' investment in genre reveals about genres, fantasy, and the stakeholders themselves, and how and why stakeholders use genres in general, and fantasy in particular, when they are so contested.

Chapter one outlined the major threads and methodological hurdles of genre studies, making the case for the necessity of drawing on a cultural approach to fantasy and television genre. It framed academics as genre stakeholders who are themselves responsible for authoring genre discourses through their work, rather than neutral researchers. For these stakeholders, contestation has often served to limit understandings of genre and specific genres, as academics in pursuit of definitional and taxonomic rigor have argued for an overly restrictive classificatory conception of genre that has particularly hindered research into the notoriously contested fantasy genre. This narrow perception of genre is more reflective of the desire for genre to serve as a convenient research tool than for a rich understanding of the messy reality of genre as a cultural construct. Academic investment in genre has often revealed an interest in enabling the formation of clear corpuses of texts or distinct theoretical concepts, or as shorthands to gather likeminded researchers together. When genre is deemed insufficient to

meet these aims, it is all too often declared useless, despite its continued presence across multiple stakeholder groups.

Chapter two explored the cultural and commercial values that have incentivized contestation surrounding fantasy and television in the United States, with the devaluation of genre and medium separately discouraging some stakeholders from acknowledging their joint presence. The valorization of realism and active viewer behaviors, and the denigration of escapism and passive viewer behaviors, has encouraged the delegitimization of fantasy, television, and fantasy television. Contestation offers a way for stakeholders to negotiate these different ideas of cultural and commercial value, with some stakeholders avoiding using a term like fantasy, others embracing it, and still others trying to infuse these values into their usage of the term. These values contribute to contestation as stakeholders form differing ideas about genre and medium depending on the cultural and commercial values they perceive in them. Fantasy in particular sparks fraught conversations around the perceived acceptability of engaging with that which is not possible. Genres can be a source of moral panic, an escape, or a politically-charged rallying cry, depending on which stakeholders talk about them and which discourses they are exposed to.

Chapter three analyzed the genre stakeholder of channels, examining the branding of HBO and Syfy and in particular the promotional positioning of their respective fantasy flagship series of the 2010s: *Game of Thrones* and *The Magicians.* Individual channels author different ideas of genre through the filters of their brands, with genres presented differently across channel, series, and time. These genre discourses respond to one another, with HBO in particular influencing the ways other channels produce a genre like fantasy as they respond to the popularized HBO-ified version. The need for a unique channel brand influences whether a genre is produced, how it is produced, how and when it is framed to different audiences, and even what specific subgenres of the genre are produced. Channels' investment in genre reveals their desire for promotional shorthands that they can position themselves in relation to. Contestation allows channels to strategically position themselves and their series, rendering genres flexible and therefore useful for branding.

Chapter four examined the genre stakeholder of OTT services, focusing particularly on the interfaces of Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Contestation on these interfaces is reflective of the broader purposes these companies see themselves serving. Netflix creates contestation by reflecting ideas of genre based on the individual user beholding it, with genres shaped by the service's personalization and categorization systems. Amazon, meanwhile, creates contestation due to its lack of central investment in genre as an organizational feature on

interface, responding to the lack of importance placed on the interface and content within the wider Amazon Prime flywheel. Both services create individual ideas of genre amongst their members by producing a high volume of varying genre information, while simultaneously framing that information as objective fact rendered by machines. OTTs' investment, or lack thereof, in genre reveals the impact of algorithmic culture on shaping genre discourses. Contestation allows these services to organize their series into a variety of discoverable categories for a range of members. Netflix uses genres because they are contested and flexible, while Amazon seems to include genre only as a reflex.

Chapter five analyzed the genre stakeholder of television writers, examining their paraindustrial discourses in interviews. Contestation between different writers' performances of their professional and series identities creates varying ideas about not only the genres themselves, but also the value of those genres and the types of craftwork that writers bring to them. The hiring and working practices of writers, as well as the creative values they have learned to aspire to from each other's discourses, shape their performances of genre. As writers attempt to argue for the value of themselves and their work, they create conflicting ideas of genre. Their investment in genre reveals that, rather than solely (or even primarily) influencing the ways writers approach constructing texts, genres are a way of articulating and making sense of their largely unseen work to other stakeholders. Writers continue to use genres both because contestation renders them flexible for these strategic performances and because these genre negotiations are established discursive norms of their stakeholder group.

Across stakeholders, contestation incentivizes the use of genres by rendering them flexible for redefinition and strategic framing in discourses. This malleability has contributed to genre's longevity, as has genre-mixing, which enables tactics like genre hierarchies and multicasting. Theory- and text-centered genre studies that conceive of genre as a rigid classification system have portrayed both contestation and genre-mixing as weakening pure categories, but the cultural approach taken by this thesis has highlighted that both are central features of the operations of genre and its continued use. The very messiness that has made some academic stakeholders wary of genre has formed its value to other stakeholders.

Genre offers a way for stakeholders to identify themselves and their work in a multitude of ways. In some cases, as seen with Syfy, Netflix, Amazon Studios, and some writers, acknowledging genre in discourses and presenting themselves as informed on specific genres or genre more generally allows them to frame themselves as having a unique expertise. That expertise makes them a destination: for audiences, parent companies, subscribers, producers, and fellow writers. Promoting themselves as knowing about and paying attention to a genre

becomes a discursive boon. For other stakeholders, as with HBO and some writers, genres are labels that are kept at more of a distance, in some instances a pejorative association to be avoided and in others a type of specificity that limits their appeal. A genre like fantasy is acknowledged only insofar as the stakeholder can present themselves as authoring a new version of it that is culturally valued, often times by divorcing it from the genre entirely (either by claiming it as good and therefore not fantasy, or by shifting the genre to an additive element, e.g., a show about dragons). For other stakeholders like Amazon Prime Video and some writers, genre is a discursive instinct but not the focus: a reflection of assumed rhetorical norms rather than something they are personally invested in.

These different approaches can clash and come into conflict with one another, creating contestation between stakeholders, but they can also create contestation within the same stakeholder groups and even the same individual. In some instances, this contestation reflects the different audience a discourse is targeted toward, and in other instances, a change over time. Particularly at a time of significant change and upheaval for the television industry, the relationships stakeholders have with genres in general and fantasy specifically are subject to renegotiation and debate, as illustrated by the two rebranding efforts of Syfy and the evolving discursive norms of writers. These relationships reflect the changing cultural and commercial values of the stakeholders themselves and of fantasy. While fantasy is perceived as having more value now than it was at the beginning of the century, the enshrinement of dominant thought styles contributes to a lag time in discourses. Common rhetorical strategies deployed toward genres may not be reflective of current views, and yet their persistence continues to have an impact, shaping how stakeholders talk about genre and the work they produce as a result.

In examining the use of genre by channels, OTT services, and television writers, this thesis has highlighted the relevance of genre to television studies more broadly and media industry studies specifically. By analyzing a highly contested genre like fantasy in industrial discourses, the professional, commercial, and cultural investments of these stakeholders become apparent, from the business strategies of channels and OTTs to the collective representations of television writers. In using fantasy to argue for their own value, stakeholders reveal the norms and myths on which those industrial and cultural values are based. Far from irrelevant to contemporary television research, genres expose stakeholder struggles at a moment of great industrial change.

This thesis also offers a framework for fantasy studies and other contested genres to approach their object of study. Rather than avoiding or denying the lack of consensus, this

thesis advocates for an embrace of it; lack of consensus renders a genre more useful for researchers, not less so. Contestation is rife throughout genres and media, and by understanding that contestation, researchers can better understand the discursive practices of industries and stakeholders who wield it. Contestation is a feature of genre rather than a glitch, and this thesis has modelled how to empirically research and center that contestation.

This thesis has examined a selection of case studies in great depth—academics, channels, OTT services, and writers in the US television industry in the first two decades of the 2000s. This focus has left many rich sites of contestation to be explored in future research: other genres, media, industries, countries, languages, time periods, and stakeholders. Each of these sites will have their own unique histories and notions of cultural value to navigate, their own technological affordances, and their own industrial and linguistic norms. Future research on other genres may center contested and devalued genres like reality television and romance, but may likewise focus on comparatively less contested genres such as sport and medical procedurals to analyze whether and how the more subtle operations of contestation play out in genres with greater levels of consensus and cultural and commercial value. Research on another medium could center contestation within and across media such as film, user-generated video, music, and video and/or board games, analyzing how contestation occurs in media whose genres are shaped by different histories, industrial practices, and cultural and commercial values. It might also engage with the contested boundaries between medium, genre, and form themselves as broader categorization systems, as in the case of animation. Research into contestation across industries and countries would explore other cultural and industrial approaches to fantasy, analyzing how contestation operates under different sets of cultural and commercial values. Contestation across languages offers a particularly rich and underexplored site of contestation, analyzing whether and how a genre like fantasy exists in different linguistic and cultural genre traditions, as well as the discursive norms of stakeholders in these different traditions. Contestation across time could engage with stakeholders responding to shifts in culture and industrial norms at different time periods. And future research into different stakeholders could consider nonindustrial stakeholders such as policy makers, popular press, and audiences, as well as industrial stakeholders that are less often centered in industrial conceptions of genre, such as trade press and below-the-line media practitioners like editors, production designers, special effects crew, and assistant directors. Genre has much more to reveal about the industries and cultures in which it operates, and the working practices and myths of those who work in them. By engaging with these other sites of contestation, future

research can challenge the notion of which stakeholders are assumed to be the primary authors of genre discourses.

In addition to specific sites of contestation, there are broader questions raised for future research. To avoid past academic tendencies to claim some stakeholders as more valid than others, this thesis made the deliberate choice not to engage extensively with the power dynamics between stakeholders. However, future research might explore whether some stakeholders' genre discourses hold more sway than others and what role power plays in contestation. It may also investigate what power means in the context of contestation and what types of power stakeholder groups hold: for example, do industrial stakeholders hold economic power while audiences have semiotic power, and how might clashes between these types of power play out? Other questions this research raises are whether there are other axes along which stakeholders might be usefully divided (such as stakeholders who are invested in the genre, as in the case of Syfy, versus uninvested, as in the case of Amazon Prime Video), whether (and if so, how) researchers could construct genre corpuses that account for contestation, and how adaptations shape contestation (particularly in the IP-driven US film and television industry). Centering contestation in genre research paves the way for many complex questions on the mechanics and dynamics of the stakeholders, genres, and texts involved in that contestation.

Debates such as the infamous "is *Die Hard* a Christmas film?" highlight how widespread discourses about genre contestation are, in some instances even forming cultural staples. This thesis has focused on fantasy television because cultural and academic debates about the value of both fantasy and television highlight the extremes at which genre operates, but the workings of genre and stakeholders that it has revealed apply to a wide variety of research subjects, and even to a meta reflection of research itself. Over the past few years, I found myself incentivized to strategically position the primary disciplines of this very thesis in different spaces: as media industry studies, as genre studies, and (unsurprisingly rarely) as fantasy studies. This thesis is itself contested, and that contestation has proven beneficial in positioning both myself as a researcher and this work. Here, safely buried two-hundred pages into a thesis, I reject hierarchical and strategic framings of my work and unapologetically claim it as every field it encompasses. Ask me at a conference or in a job interview, and I will likely give different answers depending on who is asking. No answer is necessarily truer than any other, nor are the answers themselves all that telling on their own. The differences between them? That is the interesting part.

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Appendix A
Netflix Interface Methodology

On Netflix, the primary way that I compiled data on genre categorization was by tracking series across different altgenres. First, I had to generate the URLs for each altgenre page. Each altgenre is identified by an ID, which is inserted in the base URL https://www.netflix.com/browse/genre/ID. Some altgenres and IDs came from external compilations, like the Netflix ID Bible and finder.com, but most came from searching Netflix itself. By navigating to the Sci-Fi & Fantasy altgenre under the TV Shows tab, I was presented with an entire page of SFF altgenres rows. Clicking on an altgenre name directed me to the unique page for that altgenre. Most of these individual pages organized their series in rows of related altgenres, which allowed me to access other relevant pages.

By building a database of these names and links, I developed an understanding of how these names were phrased, and could search for pages that were likely to exist but had not yet been generated for me. For example, I searched for "Romantic Fantasy TV" and got a list of ten different relevant altgenres. Clicking on a name in the search results, like Fantasy TV for Hopeless Romantics, generated a new URL containing the altgenre's ID number, in this case 3298158:

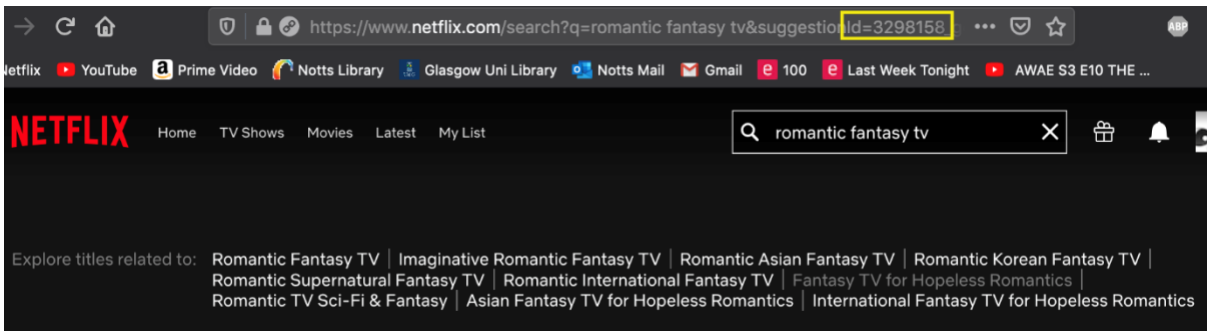

Figure 22. Search results for "Romantic Fantasy TV" on Netflix on July 30, 2020

I then added that ID to the base URL: https://www.netflix.com/browse/genre/3298158. It is crucial not to confuse the search results URL with the altgenre URL, as the search results page only displays a limited selection of the series that are categorized into the altgenre in question.

After generating a database of over 230 relevant altgenres and their URLs, I checked each page to see which series Netflix categorized in that altgenre. In order to ensure that pages would show me the specific series I was tracking, rather than filtering them out if the alogirthms thought I was not interested in watching them, I added all the series I was tracking to My List. The first row to appear on an altgenre page is usually a version of My List that contains only the series that are categorized as belonging to that particular altgenre, so this technique ensured easy reference on each page to all series of interest.

Appendix B
Amazon Prime Video Interface Methodology

Much of my analysis of Amazon Prime Video involved recording the genre labels on different product pages (profiles) for individual seasons of specific series. However, genre labels on the profiles and in the metadata are not always the same. In order to expose the metadata, I used Amazon's product filters, currently located on the left side of the page. For example, when I enter the search term "Carnival Row" in the Prime Video category, Amazon generates twenty-six results, only two of which are seasons of the series *Carnival Row* (2019–Present). The list of genres available on the side bar shrinks to only those genres tagged in the metadata of the series in the search results (see Figure 23). By clicking on any of those genres, the genre becomes a filter and any series not tagged as that genre in the metadata will disappear from the search results. Thus, we learn that *Carnival Row - Season 1 (4K UHD)* is only tagged as Drama and *Carnival Row - Season 1* is tagged as Fantasy, Drama, Romance, and Mystery & Thrillers. By applying subgenre filters, we learn that it is specifically Mystery, rather than Thriller. Only some genres have subgenre filters, which can be accessed by starting a search using a genre filter and no search terms. While Fantasy does not have any subgenres, Science Fiction has a list of "Science Fiction & Fantasy Subgenres" as a secondary filter (see Figure 24).

APV does have individual genre pages that can be accessed through the hyperlinks on the product pages, but these pages do not always correspond to the genre pages that can be accessed from APV's homepage. For example, when the Fantasy page accessed from product

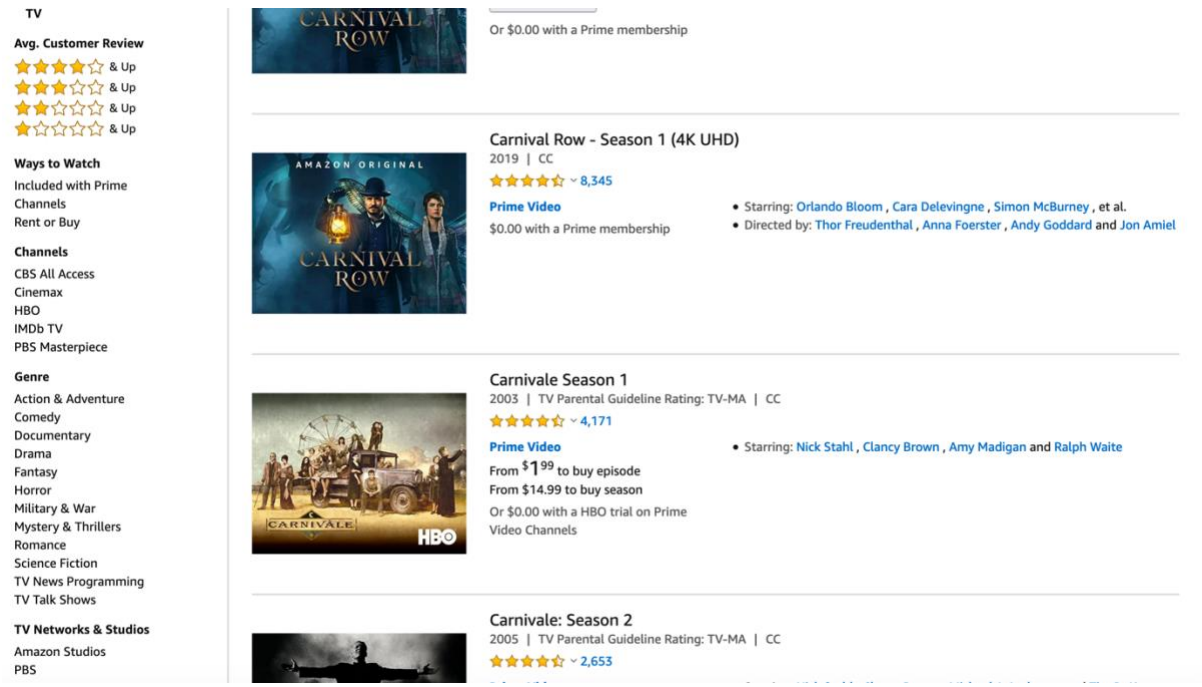

Figure 23. Available search filters for "Carnival Row" on Amazon Prime Video on June 23, 2020

Figure 24. Science fiction subgenre filters on Amazon Prime Video on June 23, 2020

pages like *Good Omens* and *Carnival Row* is given the refine filter of "TV shows," it does not return the same results as the Fantasy TV page accessed from APV's homepage. The Fantasy TV page has more than twice as many series listed (currently almost 1,100 compared to under 450 on the fantasy page) and includes series like *Law and Order: SVU* that are not identified by other stakeholders as fantasy. These latter pages cannot simply be discounted in a discussion of genre discourses, particularly when contestation is considered, but the distinctions between them must be acknowledged and engaged with.