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# Polymediated Narrative: The Case of the Supernatural Episode "Fan Fiction"

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## **Polymediated Narrative: The Case of the *Supernatural* Episode “Fan Fiction”**

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Modern stories are the product of a recursive process influenced by elements of genre, outside content, medium, and more. These stories exist in a multitude of forms and are transmitted across multiple media. This article examines how those stories function as pieces of a broader narrative, as well as how that narrative acts as a world for the creation of stories. Through an examination of the polymediated nature of modern narratives, we explore the complicated nature of modern storytelling.

*Keywords: polymedia, narrative, rhetoric, fandom, television, story, convergence, transmedia, Supernatural, serialization, storytelling, mythology, popular, media, technology, audience, showrunner, discourse, myth, culture*

Whether one starts with the storyteller or the audience, or with ancient mythologies or new narratives, examining and working through stories is more art than science. Particularly in this media age, the definitions of terms such as *content*, *consumption*, and *authorship* are changing (Tyma, Herrmann, & Herbig, 2015). For instance, audiences are no longer assumed to be passive consumers of media. Academics, producers, and advertisers alike attempt to account for the ways they are blogging, Tweeting during broadcasts, Facebooking spoilers, writing fan/slash fiction, or being involved with participatory television talk shows dedicated to one particular series. These people are active participants, both consumers and producers simultaneously. On the other side, the producers, directors, and writers, traditionally thought of as the *authors* of our public texts, are now forced to interact and react to their audiences in ways that position them as much as interpreter as creator (McGee, 1990). This can be seen most clearly in the recent transformation of stories being created for television (Mittell, 2015). After all, even what we refer to as television is changing, as we binge on Netflix, have continual access via mobile devices, and watch screens within screens, easily flipping from one show to another (Brasel & Gips, 2011). Because of our changing relationship to both medium and content, coming to terms with the creation and continuation of narratives and mythology on serialized television is a daunting, yet necessary inquiry.

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There are multiple theoretical strains to start an investigation into serialized narrative. Jenkins (2006), for example, used *The Matrix* to explain convergence, suggesting that the story was “so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium” (p. 95), that it needed to be expressed across different media, platforms, and devices. This convergent transmedia storytelling “unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95–96). Scolari (2014) showed how classic stories such as *Don Quixote* can be a transmedia story that travels across media. However, we typically think of transmedia stories as similar to those in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which includes comic books, movies (*The Avengers*), television shows (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*), one-shot short films released on Blu-ray (*The Consultant*), and attractions at Disneyland. Transmedia is a central part of storytelling in a polymediated age (Dunn, 2015). However, a transmedia approach tends to focus the critic on the relationship between the content and the medium, not how the creation of content changes via the opportunities provided by media. The question now is: How has the importance of transmedia storytelling changed the nature of storytelling itself?

To understand the impact of transmedia storytelling on contemporary narratives, we take up the challenge from Mittell (2006) that

to understand this phenomenon (complex narrative) we must use formal narratology to chart its structure and boundaries while incorporating other methods to explore how this narrative mode intersects with dimensions of creative industries, technological innovations, participatory practices, and viewer comprehension. (p. 39)

Our contention is that polymediated narrative is a recursive process of creation. Instead of focusing on how or what content flows across media, polymediated narrative looks at the relationship between that flow and the narrative itself. According to Tyma et al. (2015), polymediation “moves beyond media convergence alone, by examining the simultaneous processes and outcomes of convergence and fragmentation” and includes “both the process and product resulting from media producers—who can be everyone and anyone with access—existing within a converged media state” (p. xx). Via the concept of polymediated narrative, we examine the ways in which the flow of content in transmedia contexts necessarily changes the content itself.

Through content designed to travel across channels, there are more points of intersection between stories and our lives and more ways for narratives to evolve. These points of intersection allow us to experience the stories in a variety of ways, and allow us to share the stories with others, re-experience them for ourselves, and go back to “check” or examine consistencies and changes in these worlds. Whether transmediated, remediated, or intermediated, the goal of polymediated narrative is to examine the building of worlds in which storytellers and fans interact, change, shift, and contribute. As part of this process, both the initial storyteller and those who extend the stories beyond their initial offerings are bound by the communicative possibilities of the medium through which they choose to communicate. These texts integrate ideas, characters, settings, context, and media into the creation of a single interconnected world or universe that establishes its own rules and norms. It is a new kind of mythmaking in which the stories vary and the world is what is established.

We start this inquiry into narrative from outside media theory by examining Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm, connecting it to technology's role in building contemporary narratives. These threads lead to an examination of fragmentation in understanding polymediated narrative. We then present an episode of *Supernatural* as an example of the ways in which polymediated narrative integrates various elements from both inside and outside of its world into a single text.

### Understanding Polymediated Narrative

When interrogating concepts such as narrative and storytelling, it is worth a moment to make quick note about how we use the terminology. There are multiple definitions for the terms *narrative* and *story*, and as other scholars have pointed out, there is often little to no differentiation between the two (Adams, 2008). However, we believe that delineating a difference between the two terms can be productive. Following prominent narrative theorists (Polkinghorne, 1995; Ricoeur, 1992), we contend that distinguishing between *story* and *narrative* allows us to better examine how individual events or episodes contribute to a larger broader world and/or worldview. For our purposes, a *story* is a recounting of a sequence of events in which characters are engaged in the eventual completion of the action, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. *Narrative* is the larger construction of several different stories woven together about a particular experience, phenomenon, person, place, or event that expresses temporality.

However, according to Genette (1990), there is a third element to this relationship. He noted, "as for the pair story/narrative, it is meaningless unless incorporated into the triad story/narrative/narrating" (p. 14). The inclusion of *narrating* accounts for invention. Given the complexities of polymediated narratives, examining how narrating has evolved as both the role of the creator and the role of the audience is essential. Ultimately, we believe that—as narratives evolve in our polymediated contexts — discrete stories will be subsumed into narrative worlds that are narrated by a multitude of voices with intersecting characters, rules, contexts, and plots in ways that reshape the relationship between stories and narratives.

We are certainly not the first to argue that narratives can act as a basis for interpretation. According to Fisher (1984, 1985), people are all *Homo narrans*; that is, we are essentially narrators, or storytellers. Therefore, people interpret meaning based on sets of stories. From these stories, we choose the particular versions that fit our beliefs and values, that help us understand the world in which we live and how to live in it. According to Fisher (1984), the test of a story's narrative rationality is twofold, based on narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. A coherent narrative hangs together well when interwoven with stories we know and when the characters and worlds remain consistent. A fidelitous story matches our own beliefs, values, and experiences.

Accepting that fidelity and coherence are fundamental to narrative modes of understanding means also accepting that narrative understanding is grounded in discourse. Traditionally in narratology, discourse has been treated as the story product. For instance, Genette (1990) had to revisit his original distinction between narrative and discourse to make the point that the process of mimesis calls on elements in other stories that bring those stories closer together. As audiences place story alongside story to assess their merits, the process foregrounds the role of larger cultural discourses in assessing stories.

We can no longer assume that understanding is a discrete act bound to an individual story's contents. This means that whether individuals are "the storytellers" or "the audience," they are constantly narrating. The process of invention occurs at both ends. Building from stories, experiences, images, sounds, dialogue, and more, we begin to see what McGee (1990), Herbig (2011, 2015), and Herrmann (in press) have referred to as *fragments*.

Fragments act as points of connection and disconnection simultaneously. Stories that build on story tropes or familiar characters are taking fragments from other stories that connect them and make them easily consumed (Herrmann, in press). According to Herbig (2015), "approaching a 'text' as fragmented implies that the critic adopts the position that people contribute to discourse through the crafting of existing materials" (p. 34). However, polymediated communication contexts require a new understanding of "existing materials." Stories are no longer just words on a page; they are images on a screen and sounds in Dolby Digital 7.2, as well as words on a screen. To better understand the ways in which these storytelling elements become familiar and accessible, scholars have turned to a metaphor grounded in the age of literacy: *grammars*. According to McLuhan and Fiore (1967), "it is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media" (p. 8). In *The Medium Is the Massage*, McLuhan and Fiore employ changing fonts and images, and the reorienting of words in the volume asks the reader to reconsider the role of "text." They argue "media, by altering the environment, evoke in us their unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world" (p. 148). According to McLuhan and Fiore, we must recognize the communication tools available in a particular medium as a means for creating messages that play on our senses.

The study of media grammars asks the critic to acknowledge the limits and potentials of the medium as a tool for communication. According to Meyrowitz (1998), examining media grammars "entails understanding and recognizing the standard range of production variables within each medium, as well as recognizing the ways in which the variables are typically used to attempt to shape perception and response to mediated communications" (p. 99). What Meyrowitz discusses as "production variables" varies greatly across contexts. In the written medium of novels, styles of font and ordering words from left to right are grammars that allow audiences to access the ideas in the text in a meaningful way. In television, grammars can be something that allows us to identify what we are watching without having to check the channel guide. For example, black-and-white still images bookend sections of the program *NCIS*. Across media, grammars function as a means for communicating in ways that shape and reshape the message.

This is where we meet the limit of grammars as a metaphor for understanding polymediated communication contexts. On top of building an extensive explanation of grammars, Meyrowitz (1998) creates a separate category for understanding "medium literacy." Citing McLuhan, Meyrowitz argues that

macrolevel medium theory explores such issues as how the addition of a new medium to the matrix of existing media may alter the boundaries and nature of many social situations, reshape the relationships among people, and strengthen or weaken various social institutions. (p. 105)

Particularly in terms of narrative, we argue that this “macrolevel” criticism is dependent on how the grammars of a particular medium are put to use as communication tools. When McLuhan (1994) noted “the medium is the message” (p. 17), he showed that our understanding of the “content” of the message needs to evolve beyond the words that are written or spoken. Intuitively, we know this. We recognize that film and television characters do not always mean what they say without any further explanation; it is there in the visuals and the audio (a laugh track, for example). We realize or suffer the consequences of sarcasm not travelling well through a text message (unless we use the proper emoji). Whether it is an emoji or a particular bit of Foley audio, people employ these message fragments to craft and communicate messages both explicit and implicit.

Therefore, moving from one medium of communication to another is less a liberation of the message and more about narrating in a new set of constraints. Voracious readers will tell you the film is never as good as the book, overlooking the fact that film is a different medium. Translating the written word into images necessarily changes the story. Take, for example, the cultural phenomenon *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This tale is experienced differently during one’s private reading, compared with the public forum of a theater as well as by an avid fan as opposed to a general spectator. It is obviously different when *presented* on screen than *imagined* when reading a text. However, what also makes *Fifty Shades of Grey* interesting is that the book began as a piece of fan fiction involving the characters from the *Twilight* series of books and subsequent films. The authorship of *Fifty Shades of Grey* shows that some audiences are aware of the fragmented nature of these stories, taking the pieces, repurposing them, and finding new ways to tell new stories (Comella, 2013; Isaksson, 2014).

In an interview on *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, the producer/writer J. J. Abrams (2011) talked about the challenges facing the modern showrunner/storyteller:

When we did *Alias*—it was unbelievable in that first season—the connections that people who were watching the show were making to things that we didn’t really even know there were connections to. So, we would decide sometimes to follow something and someone would say “Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, I read that online. Someone wrote . . .” [. . .] The viewers are so smart, and some have a lot of time, and they will literally extrapolate based on where you are “Oh they must be related” and you’re like [looks puzzled]. You know? So you’re in the writer’s room [and] you’re like “what if it’s her father?” and someone else is like “you mean like, you know, Aliasfan7 wrote?”

Polymediated participation is an integral part of narrating the modern narrative, and the stories produced by, commented on, and critiqued by fans are important to the existences of these worlds. However, the lineage of *Fifty Shades of Grey* or the fan fiction about *Alias* is irrelevant or unknown to some as well. Their experience of these stories is unrelated to these outside narrative discourses. According to Simons (2014), not all fans are looking for the kind of deep immersion that some of these stories provide. This creates a wide spectrum of fandom that must account for how audiences and fans can enact varying degrees of both the participant and the consumer, as well as how these differing degrees of fandom impact how stories are told.

Transmedia has made us keenly aware of how stories such as *Don Quixote* are changed based on the medium for their distribution. However, access to transmedia as a platform for storytelling also has led to stories with a growing awareness of the narrative discourses in which they participate. Like Abrams above, fan fiction is judged by its ability to capture the essence of the characters and worlds it re-creates. Examining these narratives requires a fragmented approach that takes into account the mosaics of fragments that influence the stories that are being told. Polymediated narratives are built from stories that are disseminated through a variety of media and also provide the materials for new stories to be built and expanded through many authors and crafted with various and often competing tools.

In that way, these polymediated narratives create mythological worlds that are not bound by Campbell's hero's journey. The intersection of transmedia and myth leads to stories built around worlds rather than just a single character. As Hirschman (2000) claims, "myth surrounds us in the form of television shows and motion pictures, novels and plays" (p. 4). While describing popular culture as folklore, Levine (1992) argues that it "encourages listeners to become not merely participants but even creators of meaning when the message is not explicit; to project themselves into the text in order to invest the empty spaces with meaning" (p. 1386). The connection between modern forms of popular culture and mythology is rife with implications.

The monomyth also presupposes a closed story. In the monomyth, much like a film, we enter the world at a particular moment in a character's life, we go on a journey with them, and then—when our journey is complete—we get up and leave. The modern television story asks us to come back week after week (or on Netflix, episode after episode) for seasons that bring us back year after year. One could argue that there have always been novels and films that end "to be continued . . ." only to give us sequel after sequels, but no medium has embraced the need for serial storytelling as contemporary television has. According to Creeber (2004), "simply in terms of hours alone the series and serial can produce a breadth of vision, a narrative scope and can capture an audience's involvement in a way equaled by few contemporary media" (p. 4). Mittell (2015) discusses this shift as "complex TV" and argues that "to understand television textuality, we must look beyond what appears on a single screen to explore the range of sites where such texts are constituted, and serially reconstituted, through practices of cultural engagement" (p. 7). The ability of serial television—through both traditional forms of weekly delivery and online "bingeing"—to create intricate characters and worlds both new and familiar carved out a unique space for modern mythmakers to tell their stories. These mythmakers create worlds both grounded in contemporary places and fantastical (as well as many worlds in between), leaving many questions about the myths that play a role in our modern lives.

### ***Supernatural* and Polymediated Narrative**

At the outset, we admit we are *Supernatural* "acafans" or "lucky folks who are able to combine their passion for something with their scholarly writing, research, and teaching" (Peloff & Giles, 2013, p. 75). We admire the show as fans and yet are attentive to the many details of interest to scholars. As Peloff and Giles (2013) note, "to be an acafan, then is to straddle the uncomfortable boundary between participant and observer, detached scientist and squee-emitting enthusiast" (p. 75). We find ourselves at



that nexus and embrace our dual role simply because it is through our fandoms that we have discovered the observations we have been able to make.

"Fan Fiction" (Thompson & Sgriccia, 2014), the 200th episode of the drama *Supernatural*, provides an opportunity to explore the nature of polymediated narrative. "Fan Fiction" embraces a number of the aforementioned theoretical possibilities to create a single story, drawing on the rich history of the world created by the previous 199 episodes, the genres that it contributes to and contribute to it, and the dedicated fan base that is central to its longevity. Jeremy Carver—the current showrunner—notes,

It's our love letter to the fans. Many aspects of the fandom are going to see themselves represented in many different ways and in the most loving way possible. It's an episode that takes a long, loving look at the show, warts and all. And we're the first to admit our mistakes or our inconsistencies, and I think long-time fans will have a lot of fun seeing where we acknowledge this one big, happy, messy family that we're all part of. (Prudom, 2014, para. 25)

The ways "Fan Fiction" integrated the norms and grammars of both the supernatural drama genre and the medium into a story that simultaneously incorporated fan fiction and predecessors is a perfect example of how a story in a polymediated narrative operates as a piece of a larger universe. That universe has its own rules, history, characters, and expectations, but is also a world shaped and changed by its interactions with numerous outside forces that are constantly pushing it to evolve.

As is the case with *Supernatural*, not all narratives remain faithful to lived experiences in the same ways. There are stories that take place in "a galaxy far, far away," or in different dimensions, or sometimes in hell. There are stories of ghosts, zombies, vampires, and other phantasmic beings (Herrmann, 2014). Stories such as these—which include aspects of the uncanny or the supernatural—fall under the auspices of Todorov's (1973) genre of the fantastic. Todorov's conception of what makes a fantastic story believable is similar to Fisher's conception of narrative rationality. Todorov noted three conditions that must be met for a fantastic story to be considered rational:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. (p. 33)

According to Todorov, when these conditions are met, the fantastic story can be considered rational and have verisimilitude. However, Todorov (1973) differentiated between two types of verisimilitude: *generic* verisimilitude and *cultural* verisimilitude. Cultural verisimilitude refers to texts that aim to be realistic

portrayals of everyday life. Generic verisimilitude refers to texts in which the narrative details are true to the conventions of the genre.

*Supernatural* easily belongs to both of these categories. You only have to watch an episode to find the standard conventions of the horror and science fiction genres. The series also has cultural verisimilitude. Vampires, werewolves, and demons do not exist. However, if they did exist, it is reasonable to think that they would exist in a world as they are presented in *Supernatural*. The believability of the bizarre and freakish is supported by the overall narrative action, reinforcing that these things can happen and are happening. It also reinforces the notion that these stories need a narrative that can connect to our senses of fidelity and rationality.

At its most basic, *Supernatural* is a narrative about two brothers born into a world where demons, ghosts, and monsters are real and it is their duty to hunt and kill them. Over the period of 10 seasons, Sam and Dean Winchester have fought a variety of foes, sometimes assisted by an angel, demon, or prophet. They have been possessed; sent to hell, heaven, purgatory; marked by the biblical figure Cain; sent back in time; and much more. The arcs in individual episodes of *Supernatural* are time tested and easily identifiable. Like a police procedural, many episodes begin with a problem or a case for the Winchesters to solve. However, *Supernatural* embraces the notion that each episode contributes to a longer arc of a season in the traditions of modern serialized dramas. What makes the episode "Fan Fiction" stand out is how it uses these televisual storytelling tropes while integrating the worlds created by the fans and "metacommentary" about the show itself.

The metacommentary is present from the first moment of the episode. In this moment, audiences are greeted with the longstanding *Supernatural* grammars of "then" and "now" that typically open the episodes. However, between them are not the traditional highlights that prepare us for what we are about to watch. Instead, the words "Supernatural," "Pilot," "Created By," and "Eric Kripke" are typed across the screen complete with typing audio. This change underscores two points right away. First, it is a nod to Eric Kripke, the originator and original showrunner. This is also a reflection of how television functions as a writer's medium. The emergence of showrunners who curate entire multiseason open-ended mythological narratives placed the burden of the narrative on the writers who are responsible for continuity and consistency (Bennett, 2014). In this instance, *Supernatural* acknowledges the role of its first writer as well as the significance of the writing in terms of the journey of the show.

The episode begins as any good procedural crime drama does: the setup (Douglas, 2007; Hauge, 2014). The setup sets the stage, creating the problem for our main characters to confront and resolve in this specific episode. In this case, the setup acts as both an establishing sequence for the episode and another moment of metacommentary. It is important to recognize that criticisms of *Supernatural* have been generally harsh. Whereas some of the criticism is certainly justified, some comes in the form of high-culture critique. In his review of the pilot episode, Tom Shales (2005) of *The Washington Post* wrote a mixed review of the show, concluding "'Supernatural' definitely gets the job done, but it's highly debatable that it's a job worth doing" (para. 14). Ever since science fiction and fantasy stories were relegated to B-movie status, similar critiques have been leveled against other shows in the genre, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files*.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that when the curtain rises on a school rehearsal of "Supernatural: The Musical" in the 200th episode, it is derided by a drama teacher as "this awful, unbelievable horror story," exclaiming, "Theater is about life. Truth. Truth! Where's the truth in 'Supernatural'?" Moments later, she is attacked by a tree monster, which looks eerily similar to the demon-possessed trees in the *Evil Dead* movies. As metacommentary, it must have been cathartic for the writers to attack the character and voice of their high-culture critics. This metacommentary and the nod to the *Evil Dead* are two of many nods to the world "outside" *Supernatural*. As such, they represent examples of how this episode acknowledges its role as part of a genre, a series, and a set of ongoing and evolving discourses.

After the abduction of the drama teacher, the episode cuts to inside the theater where we see Marie, the director of the musical, keenly dressed like the lead character from the movie *Rushmore*, agonizing over the sign for the show. Suddenly, the episode then cuts to every title card *Supernatural* has ever used. Most of these title cards would make no sense to people who are not avid followers. However, those who are avid viewers would recognize the exploding wedding cake title card, which references an earlier episode in which Becky, a fan of the *Supernatural* book series, drugs and marries Sam. There is the "angel's wings" title card, which premiered with the introduction of Castiel, "an angel of the Lord," as a major character. There is the "Metatron" title card, referencing a fallen angel who attempted to take over writing the series in his own image. Much of this is playfully and historically self-referential. On top of these, this series of title cards also connects *Supernatural* to larger popular culture discourses. To wit: The title cards include a "Western" map burning (a nod to *Bonanza*); a black-and-white opening (a nod to the Universal Monsters); and a facsimile of *The X-Files* opening, with the "S" of *Supernatural* as a stand-in for the "X." All of these were used in previous episodes, so from the get-go the *Supernatural* audience knows this will be a hell of a metatextual ride.

When we first encounter Sam and Dean in "Fan Fiction," we take care to place this episode in the long story of the season(s). As the customary classic rock begins to play in the background, we hear the sounds of a socket wrench and see Dean's arms elbow deep in "Baby," a 1967 Chevrolet Impala, itself an important character (Bruce, 2010). Dean is recovering from demon possession and acting a little strange. When Sam joins him by the car, Dean proclaims he has found a "case." Despite that the report Dean discovered does not seem like a case, they pursue it anyway. This scene is important because of its larger narrative function. As in the original pilot, Dean tosses a gun into the trunk of the Impala and states, "We've got work to do." This act purposefully connects this episode to the larger world of the 199 previous episodes. Unlike *Bones*, which used its 200th episode to depart from its previously established world, *Supernatural* kept its narrative arch going right through this episode.

Those who do not regularly follow *Supernatural* are probably wondering how a high school musical about the main characters of the program fits into the overall narrative. For that explanation, we must introduce you to Chuck Shurley, an awkward affable character, introduced in the episode "The Monster at the End of This Book" (Siege, Weiner, & Rohl, 2009). Chuck is the writer of an unsuccessful book series about the Winchesters called *Supernatural*, based on his visions about the brothers' exploits. We learn from Castiel that Chuck is a prophet, and the *Supernatural* book series will one day be referred to as "The Winchester Gospels." The Winchesters are confused that a prophet is writing about their lives. In one hilarious moment in the episode, Dean, who is sitting in a Laundromat, says to Sam, "I'm sitting in

a Laundromat reading about myself sitting in a Laundromat reading about myself. My head hurts." The book series *Supernatural* is the inspiration for Marie's musical.

*Supernatural* puts its history on display in "Fan Fiction." The Winchesters walk beneath the "Supernatural: The Musical—One Night Only" sign outside the high school auditorium without noticing. Inside the auditorium, they encounter a young woman in a beard and a baseball cap saying "Idjits," a clear reference to the Winchesters' surrogate father Bobby. Another young lady dressed as Castiel repeats, "Hey ass-butt," a reference to the angel's difficulty mastering the nuance of language. Then, there is a musical rendition of their mother's death, referencing the pilot episode. As the camera goes askew, the brothers are noticeably thrown. When asked who they are, they can only muster "Smith and Smith, no relation," as their faux names when introducing themselves as "agents" who are there to investigate the teacher's disappearance. This is significant. First, it is a reference to Agents Smith and Smith from *Die Hard* in which the "no relation" line funnily points out the obvious: One Smith is black, and the other white. Second, it shows how shaken the Winchesters are; they cannot come up with the popular culture aliases they usually use, such as "Ford and Hamill" (*Star Wars*), "Campbell and Raimi" (*Evil Dead*), "Stark and Banner" (*The Avengers*), and as Castiel hilariously called them, "Spears and Aguilera." Sam states, "There is a case. Probably has something to do with all of this." This moment epitomizes the episode's acknowledgment of *Supernatural's* history steeped in both the absurd and the sublime.

"Fan Fiction" presents both celebrations and critiques of the show's history. For the purposes of this article, two critiques are worth noting. The first is a jab at the unresolved plotline of Adam, Sam and Dean's stepbrother who has spent the past five seasons in hell. When one of the participants in the musical appears as Adam, Sam asks, "Who's that?" stage manager Maeve replies, "Oh, that's Adam, John Winchester's other kid. He's still trapped in the cage. In hell. With Lucifer." At this, Sam and Dean give each other troubled, knowing looks. This scene is a metatextual recognition by the writers of the show that a subsection of *Supernatural's* fan base finds this unanswered dilemma problematic.

The second represents a recognition of a more fundamental shift in storytelling of *Supernatural*. After Season 5, creator and showrunner Eric Kripke left the series, some say to its detriment. His exit coincided with when prophet Chuck Shurley stopped writing his *Supernatural* book series within the show. Therefore, the written record upon which Marie builds her musical ends at Season 5 (although the series itself is now in its 11th season). However, Marie, like many fans, is unsatisfied with how the *Supernatural* book series ended, so she constructs a new ending complete with aliens, robots, ninjas, and other battles the Winchesters have never fought. On hearing Marie's new ending, Dean tries to tell her what really happened to the Winchesters after Season 5 (after Chuck/Kripke stopped writing). Marie laughs in Dean's face, calling it the worst bit of fan fiction she has ever heard.

This rift between Kripke fans and post-Kripke fans is an important dimension of *Supernatural* fandom. Kripke, as creator of the show, is often lionized by fans, similarly to how Joss Whedon was lionized by fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. When Whedon left *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to work on *Angel* and *Firefly* simultaneously, fan reaction to the new writers was mostly negative. The post-Kripke showrunner faced the same dilemma. As Jennifer Dussourd (2013) of *Blast Magazine* wrote about Seasons 6 and 7 under new showrunner Sera Gamble,

She completely butchered the show. . . . It's sad that this beloved show went from great writing, great storytelling, to just another show on the CW network. It's become so bad that fans who still watch out of loyalty can tell you how bad it is. (para. 7)

Complicating the issue is, just as the prophet Chuck was a fictionalized representation of Kripke, many viewers assumed that Sera Gamble was represented through the character of Becky, a fan of the *Supernatural* book series, notably and completely obsessed with Sam (Dussourd, 2013; Macklem, 2013). Gamble confessed that she is a "Sam Girl," a fan and devotee of the younger Winchester brother, as compared with "Dean Girls" who adore the older brother. Many fans, and not just "Dean Girls," accused Gamble of stunting Dean's character development, killing off many secondary characters, and leaving open numerous plot holes, so that Sam could have more screen time. Becky, like Gamble herself, was demonized. Noticeably, when Gamble stepped down at the end of Season 7, new showrunner Jeremy Carver did not face nearly the same amount of scrutiny.

Relatedly, "Fan Fiction" incorporates elements of actual fan fiction into the episode. According to Sivarajan (2010), "*Supernatural's* fans have gained a measure of power that will help them feel more included in the general fan base, communicate better with the creators, and, possibly, force the creators to address critical and difficult problems in the show—all through transformative fan works" (para. 1.4), in particular, what is referred to as slash fiction, which is fan-created content exploring the potential nonhetero relationships between the men on the show (Kustritz, 2003). Slash fiction goes as far back as the original *Star Trek*, as writers explored the Kirk and Spock relationship, but it rose to prominence with the arrival of the Internet. Famous slash pairings include *Stargate: SG-1's* Jack O'Neill and Daniel Jackson, *Smallville's* Clark Kent and Lex Luthor, Angel and Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, multiple Harry Potter partner variations, and *Lord of the Rings* (Keft-Kennedy, 2008; Kustritz, 2003; Smol, 2004).

One particularly important genre of slash fiction for *Supernatural* is Wincest, the noncanonical sexual and/or romantic relationship between the Winchester brothers. It is important for two reasons. First, it simultaneously tackles two supposedly taboo sexual subjects in our larger cultural discourses: homosexuality and incest. Second, the homoerotic incestuous subtext that has run throughout *Supernatural* becomes part of text itself. As Torrey (2014) notes, "what is distinctive is the way in which both the existence of slash and the fan practices with which it is associated have been incorporated into the series' diegesis" (p. 164). The aforementioned *Supernatural* uberfan Becky herself is a Wincest author. *Supernatural* shows the intimate and recursive relationship its writers have with fans. The Winchesters discover the existence of Wincest in the episode "The Monster at the End of This Book":

Dean: What's a slash fan?  
 Sam: As in Sam-slash-Dean . . . together.  
 Dean: Like *together* together?  
 Sam: Yeah.  
 Dean (*horrified*): They do know we're brothers, right?  
 Sam: Doesn't seem to matter.  
 Dean: Oh, come on, that . . . that's just sick!

In "Fan Fiction," Dean, uncomfortable with how close the actors portraying him and Sam are standing, repeats this line. Marie replies, "Well, duh, but subtext." This is another nod to the fans that their subtext is now, indeed, part of the text.

Much like how the reference to *Rushmore* is integrated into those first moments of the episode, *Supernatural* continues to integrate itself into our world with references to popular culture throughout the episode. Some of the references are obtuse. For example, there are two references to musician Frank Zappa. The first (that correspondingly works with the 200 motif) is that Sam and Dean are staying in the Route 200 Motel: *200 Motels* is the title of one of Zappa's movies. The second appears at the entrance to the theater, where a poster notes the upcoming "St. Alphonzo's Pancake Breakfast," which is the name of a Zappa song. Cultural references to Zappa, *Wolverine*, *Kindergarten Cop*, and *Orphan Black* all situate this story in a world that is simultaneously as real and as fantastical as Todorov (1973) suggests.

There is little in *Supernatural* that grounds the narrative and binds the stories like the Kansas song "Carry on Wayward Son." According to the *Supernatural Wiki*, the song "is the closest thing *Supernatural* has to a theme song" ("Carry on Wayward Son," para. 1). Although the song did appear in an episode of Season 1 of the program, its significance was cemented when it was used in the Season 2 finale "then" and "now" opening flashbacks. From that point forward, "Carry on" became a song of conclusion and transition for *Supernatural*. It appears in the season finales for Seasons 3 through 9. In the 200th episode, it marks a transition from the first 200 to the future. As part of the musical in "Fan Fiction," we see the actress playing the brothers' mother step forward to deliver the opening line: "Carry on my wayward son / there'll be peace when you are done." She is joined by the actresses playing their father John, Bobby, and stepbrother Adam. Finally, the actresses playing Sam and Dean join them. This melodramatic interpretation of the de facto theme is intercut with shots of the brothers reflecting on its significance. Ultimately, the rendition is met with applause from the audience.

At this point, the musical, much like the episode, has come to its conclusion. Sam and Dean drive off into a sunset that bears a striking resemblance to the sunset on the stage of the musical. Ultimately, the episode ends with an appearance of "the publisher." Budding playwright Marie is alerted to his presence by Maeve and she runs up to him. Marie acknowledges that the second act is "a little bit wonky," but also that the first act has some problems, metatextually representing the post-Kripke and Kripke eras, respectively. "What did you think?" she asks. As the camera pans around, "the publisher" turns out to be Chuck Shurley. Chuck simply nods, smiles, and congratulates Marie with "Not bad." The camera pulls in on Shurley's smile, emphasizing his satisfaction, and fades to credits, ending the metacommentary and the episode.

Beyond the elements of the episode itself, there is another important dimension to this experience: the medium. If you will allow me to metaphorically break the fourth wall for a moment, I (Art) currently reside in the Midwest. I receive my television and Internet signals from Xfinity. Currently, my cable provider does not have an HD Channel for the CW. So, I typically watch *Supernatural* via Xfinity on Demand. Xfinity on Demand offers an episode of a show for up to 4 weeks after it has aired, so in the process of writing this article, it disappeared from my viewing options. Therefore, to write this article, I had to choose between reestablishing my Hulu subscription or purchasing the single episode on Amazon. I

chose to pay the \$2 for the episode and it is up on a monitor beside me as I write. This irked me because in October 2015, Season 10 of *Supernatural* was made available to me via my Netflix subscription like all of the previous seasons. I now have redundant access. (I, Andrew, on the other hand, only have cable Internet and my digital antenna cannot pick up the CW. So after re-binge-watching Seasons 1–9 on Netflix over the past 7 months—approximately 9, 315 minutes, or 155 hours—I too turned to Amazon.)

I take the article down this tangent because it is important to note the storytelling dimensions of my ability to watch this episode across various screens and devices. Jenkins (2006) has discussed the flow of content across media as convergence, but my experience here is not about convergence as much as it is about interaction with the fictional world of *Supernatural*. I can fall into a world like one created in *Supernatural*, but there are limitations and rules for my participation. Distribution, access, and subscription become factors in my ability to both participate and re-create. As the access to these worlds becomes more fragmented, the medium itself becomes more important. In the case of *Supernatural*, we are in an era in which what we mean by *streaming*, *cable*, and *subscription* is changing. What it means to be a “network” program is evolving. For these reasons, the medium itself is not something transcended through convergence. It is something to be attended to through analysis. These narratives and how they are built are also the places where we will be able to most clearly identify how and what changes are occurring.

If one wants to understand why so much has been written about worlds such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, one would begin with the ways that polymediated narrative has evolved from single-airing episodes on television, through DVDs and Blu-rays with their multiple commentaries, to streaming services on devices accessible in our pockets. For the media critic, this is a golden age. For the media worlds created for these devices, it means the need for increasing awareness of continuity in all of its forms, as well as increased sensitivity to the ways in which a program, character, or storyline can be co-opted by fans. Just as we have produced interpretations of this episode for this critique, others have as well. This article exists within that discourse, not separate from it. In fact, much of this article would not be possible without the tremendous archival work going on the *Supernatural Wiki*. There you can find deep character histories and examinations of *Supernatural's* world. Here is where to go to further explore evidence and theories about whether Chuck Shurley is not a prophet but God himself.

The idea that Chuck Shurley (and by extension Eric Kripke) is God because he is the creator of *Supernatural* brings us to one final important point regarding polymediated narrative. The fans of the show who are in the know, whose creative ideas were incorporated and built on in the *Supernatural* narrative, are essentially authors as well. And if Chuck/Eric is God, then as coauthors, it would seem that as creators, these fans are all “gods” now as well. In the case of the metanarratively informed and participatory fan, polymediation strips away the last vestiges of the divide between creator, consumer, producer, and audience, and replaces them with a narrative world steeped in how it is transformed through the discourses it produces and participates in.

### Conclusion

This recursive process between “producers” and “consumers,” showrunners and fans, words on a page, and images and sounds for our screens and more, enables an episode such as “Fan Fiction” to come to fruition. It reflects a clear recognition of the role of polymediated narrative in its storytelling. This episode is not as much an individual story as it is a piece of discourse that acknowledges its many influences while trying to craft those influences into fragments that can become part of its single “episode.” It is about building narratives using the grammars of storytelling format, shooting style, camera angles, editing, character development, popular culture, genre, and more that create worlds for audiences to both inhabit and co-opt. In the end, this episode is an affirmation of the fact that serialized storytelling is a discursive text meant to be connected to other texts, examined by audiences, and changed through how people build their own understandings of how it functions.

What makes this episode an excellent story to examine to better understand polymediated narrative is its overt acknowledgment of both the external fragments and grammars that have influenced the show and the internal ones that have been created by the show. “Fan Fiction” represents a moment of reflection in a long serial narrative that reveals how both intricate and flawed these world can be. Whether it is the recognition of what “Carry on Wayward Son” has come to mean to the narrative or the fact that one of the most celebrated episodes of one of its predecessors—*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—was also a musical, this episode embraces the idea that modern narratives are woven together as part of interconnected discourses.

Many have tried to account for changes, shifts, or evolutions in the kinds of stories told on television as a product of a top-down evolution of the writer (Bennett, 2014) or as a product of new outlets such as HBO or Netflix (i.e., Creeber, 2004). According to Mittell (2006),

By exploring the formal structure of this mode of storytelling we can appreciate connections with broader concerns of media industries and technologies, creative techniques, and practices of everyday life, all of which resonate deeply with contemporary cultural transformations tied to the emergence of digital media and more interactive forms of communication and entertainment. (p. 39)

“Fan Fiction,” as an episode in the serialized narrative that is *Supernatural*, provides an expansion and explication of a number of interrelated themes. It is both an episode of television and a recognition that the worlds of *Supernatural* are not bound by the medium. It expands application conceptions of narrative as a story crafted to fit the larger narratives and discourses to which it is connected. It is more than a simple text; it is the intermingling of multiple textual threads, media, stories, and grammars. The episode is the result of, and shows the impact of, recursivity between producers and consumers via polymediation, while simultaneously incorporating fragments from previous episodes, genre conventions, grammars, and so forth. Yet, even with all of these influences and changes and variables, the episode “hangs together,” and for those familiar with the series, the story is narratively fidelitous. Rather than an impediment to coherence and fidelity, the recursive polymediated activity enhances the episode as it works on multiple



levels: as a strictly episodic story, as part of the overall serialized narrative, and as an appreciative "meta"-acknowledgment to hardcore fans.

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