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# "This Whole World Is a Story": Popularizing Narrative Instability in Contemporary Film and Television

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**Abstract**

In this article, I examine the intersection of two trends in contemporary US popular culture: a tendency of recent films to obfuscate the process of narrative understanding (called narrative instability) and a move towards combining elements of narrative with those of play (ludic textuality). I introduce both trends in more general terms and then look at the film *Inception* and the TV series *Westworld* to exemplify these trends' narrative dynamics. This allows me to argue that narrative instability characterizes contemporary popular culture by an embrace of incoherence and by pleasures that build on an audience willing to actively engage with the text and its narration. While this has originally been a predominant trend in films, more recently, fusions of narrative and play have allowed television's seriality to adopt instability as well, a convergence that I investigate by looking at the synergies between *Inception* and *Westworld*.

*Keywords:* narrative, instability, play, popular culture, reception.
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## Introduction

"This world is not real"—"This whole world is a story." Both statements, realizations by protagonists in the 2010 film *Inception* and the 2016 TV series *Westworld*, exemplify a tendency in contemporary popular culture to turn towards the metatextual: These texts readily point to the fictionality and the narrative constructedness of the worlds that their characters inhabit, and they propose—both in their plot and in their narration—that their audiences take pleasure in such self-conscious breaks with immersion. While metafictional literature used to be mainly characterized as fiction "of," "by," and "for the academy" (Rebein 6), and rarely achieved mainstream popularity, *Inception* and *Westworld* have been notably popular and commercially successful. I suggest conceptualizing these differences as part of two larger trends in contemporary popular culture: an embrace of what I call "narrative instability" (Schubert, *Narrative Instability*) and a shift towards fusing elements of narrative with those of play, which could be labeled "ludic textuality" (Schubert, "Narrative and Play"). These trends, which I will discuss in more detail below, recontextualize other oft-cited tendencies in new media studies and popular culture studies, such as the concepts of convergence (Jenkins), remediation (Bolter and Grusin), and narrative complexity (Mittell). In turn, they point to an ongoing shift in the pleasures of popular culture, focusing on an activation of audiences and a viewer engagement traditionally associated only with 'high' culture.

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In this article, I will argue that parts of contemporary popular culture take delight in confusing their audiences by destabilizing their storyworlds, which enables these audiences to engage with narratively unstable films and TV series not only as narratives but also as a form of play. I will first provide the theoretical background of my understanding of narrative instability and ludic textuality. This will allow me, then, to exemplarily analyze the narrative instability in the film *Inception*, which will establish some of the general traits of such texts. Finally, through a close examination of certain narrative properties of the first season of the TV show *Westworld*, along with a focus on its reception, I will point to an even more recent trend: the embrace of narrative instability in television, specifically, by focusing on unstable elements that afford a 'ludic' engagement with the show's episodes.

## Theorizing Narrative Instability and Ludic Textuality

My focus in this article brings together two trends in popular culture that I have previously investigated individually. The first, "narrative instability," identifies texts that "obfuscate or impede the audience's effort of reconstructing a text's storyworld," thus "impair[ing] and disrupt[ing] the process of narrative comprehension" (Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 26). Instability describes a characteristic of a text's storyworld: By "using a number of diverse discursive techniques, texts can destabilize the storyworld and, simultaneously, draw attention to that very process" (26). These techniques include internal focalizations that are not clearly communicated as such, unreliable and otherwise untrustworthy narrators, polyfocalization or multiperspectivity that pit different tellings of the same event against each other, metalepsis, or a lack of information about the narrative situation. Often used together, these characteristics can lead to sudden significant revisions of the storyworld or to an incoherence that cannot be resolved, either of which metatextually draws attention to the process of reconstructing that storyworld in the first place. In this sense, looking at a text's narrative properties through the concept of the storyworld (Herman 9-14) allows me to highlight the process of narrative understanding, which unstable texts take delight in impeding and complicating.

To illustrate this with an example, in the 1999 film *Fight Club*, the climactic scene reveals that what the audience previously believed to be two separate characters, Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt) and the unnamed protagonist usually referred to as Jack (Edward Norton), is actually the same person, as Jack suffers from a kind of dissociative identity disorder. Tyler is thus part of his 'split' personality, and whenever both Jack and Tyler appear in a scene, the other characters can only see Jack. Only towards the end of the film does Jack realize this—and so does the audience. This is not a revelation for any of the other characters in the story, since they only ever conceived of Jack as one person, but it is for the audience, because *Fight Club* presents its narrative from the compromised internal focalization of Jack (Anderson). This discovery—in the form of a twist—constitutes a major moment of narrative instability, since it prompts a complete reevaluation of most of the elements with which the storyworld had been reconstructed until that point, and it simultaneously points to the flawed or misleading narration itself.

Understanding *Fight Club* and many other films—such as *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *American Psycho* (2000), *Memento* (2000), *The Others* (2001), *Identity* (2003), *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006), *Shutter Island* (2010), *Looper* (2010), *Black Swan* (2010), *Interstellar* (2012), and *Arrival* (2016)—as characterized by narrative instability highlights that all these thematically diverse texts share an interest in destabilizing the process of reconstructing the storyworld and thus in self-consciously pointing to their own narration. Previous inquiries in cultural studies have explored some of these texts under different monikers, among them puzzle films or narrative complexity (Buckland; Kiss and Willemsen), twist films (Wilson), mindgame films (Elsaesser), and narrative mazes (Eckel et al.). In contrast to many of these investigations, narrative instability makes a wider range of texts visible by highlighting that what they all share is a conscious impediment to storyworld reconstructions; it establishes instability as a gradable, not a binary concept (and notes an increase in instability in contemporary popular culture); it focuses on an investigation of the politics, not just the poetics of these texts[1]; and it emphasizes that this is a trend that works across media. A number of previous studies often focus on single media, especially film. Narrative instability, as I conceptualize it, also first became popular in film, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it was already a transmedia phenomenon then—borrowing techniques from earlier postmodern novels and remediating new-media practices—and has since inspired other media to take up unstable elements in their narration as well, most prominently video games and, increasingly, TV. Narrative instability thus allows us to, first of all, recognize and identify a significant trend in contemporary popular culture and, subsequently, to 'historicize' that part of (especially American) culture as characterized by a high degree of self-reflexivity, by pleasures that lie in the complexity not just of narratives but, especially, of narration, and by ambivalent textual politics (Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 39-51).

The second trend that I identify as typical of parts of contemporary popular culture is ludic textuality, or ludonarrativity: an increasing fusion between the symbolic forms of narrative and play. In my view, what previous research has framed as media convergence or remediation is not necessarily bound to (or fueled by) exchanges between different media but, instead, between larger cultural forms. This terminology can be traced back to Lev Manovich, who considers database to be a symbolic form that is different from narrative, a "new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world" (81). While he links the term to Erwin Panofsky's discussion of perspective as a symbolic form and, in turn, to the writings of Ernst Cassirer, I embrace Manovich's use, which I consider a more open understanding of symbolic forms, seeing them as distinct ways of meaning-making, of structuring and making sense of experience. Different symbolic forms also "entail different pleasures, aesthetics, affordances, and user experiences, which can be studied as elements that characterize a symbolic form" (Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 114). In that sense, I do not conceive of symbolic forms as having

[1] Establishing a text as narratively unstable thus is not only a formal criterion but rather emphasizes how a text's unstable narration is connected to its textual politics and to the cultural work that it does. While I cannot focus on the latter in this article, I have previously discussed both *Inception*'s and *Westworld*'s politics of masculinity and whiteness (Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 157-160, 252-258).

'essential' elements that would homogeneously characterize them. Instead, they can be understood as entailing specific affordances: tendencies or inclinations for how to use and make sense of them, similar to how Caroline Levine speaks of affordances as "describ[ing] the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (6). Especially since the "narrative turn" (Punday 1-20), narrative has been overshadowing other such forms of structuring experience, to the degree that it might sometimes seem that narrative and 'meaning-making' are synonymous, or at least inextricably linked. Once narrative is 'marked' as just one such symbolic form, however, other forms can be recognized as such, among them play, data, ritual, the lyrical, performance, and spectacle.[2] The borders between these forms are not necessarily fixed but instead porous and liminal, so that many texts or cultural artifacts are often characterized by a mixture of, for instance, narrative and spectacle, or play and data.[3]

One such particularly prominent fusion concerns the links between narrative and play in contemporary popular culture. Characteristics that mark narrative as a form of structuring experience prototypically include coherence and causality (Nünning and Nünning 66), 'linearity' in representing events (Aarseth 41-42), and a penchant for closure and finality (Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 115-116). Play, in contrast, is characterized by interactivity (Aarseth), agency (Murray 126-153), nonlinearity, and iteration (Schubert, "Narrative and Play" 116-117). In popular culture (and elsewhere), texts or practices rarely belong to just one of these forms. Instead, they embrace multiple characteristics—even though, in literary and cultural studies scholarship, in particular, there might be a tendency to subsume any 'unusual' or experimental characteristic of a text as a variation of (only) narrative. Avoiding any ontological claims about how best to describe certain pop-cultural texts, I instead propose emphasizing the methodological shift entailed in thinking of popular culture as not automatically narrative, which, ultimately, sharpens our understanding of narrativity as well. For instance, in contemporary culture, one of the most visible fusions of play and narrative might be video games, which can range from being characterized almost exclusively by ludic elements (for example, *Tetris* [1984]) or by narrative elements (for instance, so-called "walking simulators," like the 2012 *Dear Esther* [Zimmermann and Huberts]). Most often, however, they lie somewhere in between, with narrativity and ludicness as gradable, not absolute categories. Hence, many of the characteristics of both forms are at work simultaneously in most games, sometimes contributing to each other and, at other times, working against each other. For instance, in a game built around narrative choices, like *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), the narrative's drive towards closure and causality can compel players to think more carefully about the ludic agency they have in affecting the game's nonlinearity. While such characteristics have already been studied (with different terminology) in video games, I suggest that ludic textuality characterizes other examples of

[2] These larger ideas about narrative and other symbolic forms have been formed during meetings and discussions as part of the research network "Narrative Liminality and/in the Formation of American Modernities," funded by the German Research Foundation. For more information, see www.narrative-liminality.de

[3] Throughout this article, as I focus on narrative and play, I investigate these different forms by analyzing the "potential uses or actions" (Levine 6) that their design (the way in which these forms work and can be engaged with by their users) affords.

popular culture, beyond video games, as well, among them choose-your-own adventure stories, certain twist films mentioned above, or contemporary complex television programmes intent to activate audiences.

Finally, I contend that a particularly exciting segment of popular culture combines these two trends: narratively unstable texts that are also characterized by both narrative and ludic elements, or ludonarrative texts that are also narratively unstable. Some of these overlappings are surely quite obvious: One could, for instance, understand some of the characteristics I have noted when describing play, such as nonlinearity and interactivity, as potential motors of instability, impeding a coherent reconstruction of just one storyworld. Still, there is no 'neat' overlap between these two considerations, since there are also many examples of ludonarrative texts that are not narratively unstable (like most video games, for which instability is still less prominent than for film) and since texts can achieve narrative instability without using any elements that would necessarily be considered ludic according to my understanding above. While a fusion of narrative and play in contemporary popular culture might thus be the larger trend among the two, both occur separately across different media and genres. In the following two readings, I focus, first of all, on how *Inception* and *Westworld* can, generally, be understood as narratively unstable but, then, also carve out how this instability is propelled by ludic elements: how ludonarrativity can lead to instability, and how instability affords ludicness. Partly, this will also allow me to argue that the ludic elements in *Westworld* enable, so to say, the show to become unstable, whereas narrative instability had barely been a trait of television series before.

### "Never Just a Dream": Play and Instability in *Inception*

Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception* has been both a box office success and a prominent focus of academic studies, many of which investigate particularly the philosophical and epistemological questions that it raises.[4] Here, instead, I suggest analyzing its narration, focusing on how it creates narrative instability and how, in turn, this instability affords an engagement with the film not just as a narrative but also as a type of play. *Inception* is set in a science-fiction world and revolves around Dominick Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio), who specializes in infiltrating other people's minds in order to either extract information or to plant an original idea in their head (which the film calls 'inception'). Saito (Ken Watanabe) is a businessman who hires him to perform inception on a competitor, Robert Fischer (Cillian Murphy). The film, then, focuses on Cobb assembling a team, in a manner similar to a heist film, and entering dreams-within-dreams in order to be able to plant the idea in as deep a layer of Fischer's unconscious mind as possible. While they traverse through Fischer's mind, they have to fight off both security personnel (created by Fischer's training in order to protect him from such intrusions) and a projection of Cobb's deceased wife Mal (Marion Cotillard), who threatens to destabilize the dream.

Throughout the film, narrative instability is created because the audience can never be quite certain whether what happens to characters takes place in their diegetic reality or in a dream

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[4] See, for instance, the edited collections by Botz-Bornstein; Johnson.

(within-a-dream). *Inception* achieves this effect by aligning the audience's knowledge with that of a number of its characters. This does not, however, offer them privileged information but leaves them as unknowledgeable about ontological questions of the characters' world as these characters themselves. On the one hand, when the characters are uncertain about the status of their world, this is often transferred to the audience as well, since the film offers no higher or 'neutral' narrative perspective from which events can be depicted.[5] On the other hand, whenever the characters do proclaim to know about that reality, such as Cobb's assertion to Saito that "this world is not real," the audience cannot be sure whether such statements can be trusted. The film's instability thus concerns not questions of identity (as, for instance, in the aforementioned *Fight Club* or *The Sixth Sense*) but of reality, and, specifically, on an epistemological level: of knowing which world is real and what, generally, constitutes reality.

The film creates this instability through further discursive techniques: while the different dream levels are presented similar to hypodiegetic narration (stories-within-stories), they also notably differ from them. For one, it is often unclear who the narrator of a particular dream is, since there is a so-called architect, a dreamer, and a subject involved in the creation of a dream's world, and the focalization frequently changes between these characters. Furthermore, the lower levels of a dream can also impact the higher ones, up to the diegetic reality, for instance, in terms of how pain is felt by a character, which constitutes a form of metalepsis (Kiss 40). As Cobb phrases it, a dream is "never just a dream." These narrative elements infringe on the audience's process of accurately reconstructing what happens in the film, for which it would, of course, be highly relevant to know where to physically and ontologically place the events that occur. Instead, the storyworlds that viewers reconstruct will either be full of doubts or be split into multiple possibilities, rendering them unstable.

This way of creating instability is intensified by the film's ending, which features what could be called a "pseudo-twist" (Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 151-152). After Cobb completes the heist, Saito's connections allow him to, finally, return home and see his children, a scene that looks very similar to how viewers have witnessed Cobb revisit it in his dreams before. Due to this eerie similarity, Cobb uses a spinning top, which allegedly allows him to know whether he is in a dream (depending on whether or not the top stops spinning). Yet, when he spots his children, he instead runs towards them, ignoring the top. While Cobb has chased after epistemic certainty throughout the movie's plot, towards the end, he seems to value reuniting with his children over that certainty, as long as he, at least, cannot know for sure that they are not real. However, the scene is also significant discursively: while Cobb walks towards his children out of frame to the right, the camera moves away from him and towards the left, zooming onto the spinning top. This constitutes a significant discursive split from Cobb's internal focalization, which both establishes this as a different perspective and highlights the previous frequent focalization of Cobb. *Inception* ends with this zoom onto the spinning top, cutting to black before the audience

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[5] By contrast, in *Fight Club*, after it has been revealed that Jack and Tyler are the same person, they are depicted fighting each other from the point of view of security cameras, which clearly show that only one person is there, offering audiences a perspective other than Jack's unreliable internal focalization.

could know whether it will eventually topple. This is how I understand the scene as a pseudo-twist: it teases a final revelation about the reality of Cobb's world, intensely focusing on the significance of the spinning top, but then cuts away before reaching a potentially significant disclosure. Somewhat paradoxically, a single moment of narrative instability would have first led to a significant revision of the storyworld, but ultimately it would have restabilized that reconstruction—similar to how, in *Fight Club*, viewers can eventually accept that Jack and Tyler are the same person, since the film also uses other perspectives to objectively reinforce that interpretation. In contrast, withholding such a singular moment of instability prevents an eventually stable reconstruction, leaving the ambivalence surrounding Cobb's reality ultimately unresolved. The film thus suggests that audiences embrace that ambiguity about its ending, to settle for epistemic uncertainty—as in Cobb's case—since there are, ultimately, not enough narrative clues in the film to be able to decide, without doubt, if Cobb is still in a dream during the final scene or not.

The reception of *Inception*, however, highlights that this is not necessarily how most audiences engage with the film, which points to how its unstable elements also afford a 'ludic' engagement with the text. Ruth Tallman, for instance, points to an intense focus on the film's plot by recounting four different larger interpretations of the ending scene (19-20). Such an interest in trying to clarify the film's plot on a scholarly level (see Terjesen; Auxer) is also mirrored on a popular level by fans and critics discussing not only the ending but what is often called 'plot holes' in the film (see Outlaw; "7 Plot Holes"), which is another way of proposing a particular interpretation of *Inception*'s narrative (and its alleged inconsistencies). Such a viewing practice seems to go against what the scene discursively wants to suggest, a move away from an 'obsession' with reality—yet, as mentioned above, the particular discursive setup of the scene not only decouples the perspective from Cobb's focalization, but also emphasizes how much of the film had been focalized through him in the first place. This is also how I understand the film as activating its ludic potential: by leaving the ending unresolved, the viewers are prompted to recall any clues or hints they might have missed in the film in order to be able to judge the status of Cobb's diegetic reality in the final scene, and they are made aware of any potentially unreliable perspectives created by the internal focalizers.

*Inception* builds on such a reception practice on two different levels, both of which are exacerbated by how the film's final scene teases (or 'plays with') the possibility of a narrative twist. For one, by the time of *Inception*'s release in 2010, films that featured narrative instability through one significant twist at the end of the story had attained mainstream popularity, which is also why other scholars speak of 'puzzle films' or 'mindgame films' as if they are genres. By then, audiences that had seen other unstable films might have expected a similar twist in *Inception*, both because of some of its narrative techniques (alluding to such a revelation) and because its director, Christopher Nolan, had previously worked on the twist films *Memento* and *The Prestige* (2006). The film's setup thus exploits what could be called the 'literary repertoire' (Iser 69) that audiences might bring to the viewing experience, their expectations of a twist based on their knowledge of similar movies. Secondly, within the film's story, twists play an important

narrative role: One of the first scenes of the film involves Saito realizing that once he believes he has woken up from a dream that Cobb infiltrated, he is actually still dreaming, in a dream-within-a-dream, a fact that viewers only learn about at the same time as Saito makes this observation. Early on, the audience thus becomes accustomed to being 'misled' by the film narrator, in a pattern that is repeated at a few points in the film. Additionally, Cobb's team's plan to perform inception on Fischer also involves a twist for Fischer that prompts him to reconsider his father's true motives. The infiltration of his mind becomes a carefully orchestrated twist about what Fischer believes his father thinks of him, which the audience learns from 'behind the scenes,' watching Cobb's team perform one step after the other. Through both of these elements, it becomes reasonable for the audience to assume that some kind of twist on the discursive level of the film will destabilize the storyworld they have constructed so far in a similar way, and they might be tempted to think about what exactly that unstable moment will entail. Significantly, only by alluding to such a moment and by building up certain expectations can the lack of a twist then lead to a much more thoroughly unstable storyworld, leaving the question of Cobb's reality unresolved—which is why it could be called a 'pseudo-twist.'

This particular kind of narrative instability, in my reading, affords a ludic engagement with *Inception*: the film foregoes closure for narrative openness, which leads to an iterative viewing practice—there is potential pleasure to be gained for the audience in going back to previous scenes of the film and searching for clues that could clarify what exactly happens in the film's ending. Rewatching (parts of) the film thus also leads to slightly different experiences of the story, depending on one's knowledge of what will happen later and on which possible interpretation one would follow, which metaphorically mirrors a nonlinear experience of the story. On a similar note, while ontologically *Inception* is still clearly a filmic narrative, it allows for an 'interactive' negotiation of what happens in the plot and of what that signifies thematically, depending on when exactly viewers believe Cobb to be in a dream (Tallmann 19-20). Such a reception practice is also valid for many other texts that embrace narrative ambiguity, but here it is specifically engendered by 'playing' with a final moment of instability. Plus, it is connected to searching for clues in the text, which can indeed be found throughout the film, both on the plot level and in terms of discursive details, if viewers pause at certain scenes or compare them with previous ones (practices that are similar to how Jason Mittell prominently describes narratively complex television).[6] In this sense, the film's instability affords a ludic reception practice, which, in turn, allows for an ultimately more thoroughly unstable storyworld compared to earlier twist films like *Fight Club* or *The Sixth Sense*. By 2010, one can thus detect a shift in how unstable films operate, partly because the prominence of twist films had reduced the effectiveness of the twist as a narrative device. The surprise at the revelation, for instance, that two protagonists are, actually, the same person might gradually lose its effect if films repeatedly reuse it, and while narratively unstable texts do encourage an active reception practice that tries

[6] *Inception* furthermore uses these elements of narrative instability and ludonarrativity to metatextually refer to the narrative it tells as also a story about films and filmic storytelling (Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 163-166).

to speculate from where, discursively, the instability will hail, they do not usually want their audiences to correctly predict everything in advance. Instead, constant innovation is needed to keep instability viable as a narrative technique, which works according to a dynamic similar to what Frank Kelleter, for serial television, identifies as a practice of "serial one-upmanship or outbidding" (81). This kind of "one-upmanship" through ludonarrative dynamics is also how, I argue, narrative instability is more recently, and only slowly, taking hold on television.

**"This Whole World Is a Story": *Westworld*, Play, and Narrative Instability on TV**

As previously noted, television shows have not embraced narrative instability as much as film, partly because of their seriality, since sustaining a narratively unstable setup "over multiple seasons can be difficult . . . —either the revelations are postponed to future seasons, which might frustrate audiences, or an unstable season finale builds a similar expectation for the subsequent season, leading to increasingly more unstable elements having to be introduced . . . and thus potentially compromising the coherence and believability of the reconstructed storyworld" (Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 34). Hence, besides singular episodes in specific series, there have been only few shows in the last three decades that can be understood as narratively unstable, among them, more prominently, *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) and *Lost* (2004-2010), whose reception, ultimately, suffered from the audience expecting closure to the many 'unstable' mysteries (Mittell 310). More recently, however, more TV series seem to have adopted ways of generating narrative instability, among them *Mr. Robot* (2015-2019), *Westworld* (2016-), *The Good Place* (2016-2020), a third season (or revival) of *Twin Peaks* (2017), *Russian Doll* (2019-), *Devs* (2020), and *Bandersnatch* (2018), a standalone film from the anthology series *Black Mirror* (2011-), which is also an example of an increasing convergence between TV and film, particularly on streaming services such as Netflix. Notably, these series usually (but not always) feature a different kind of instability from the earlier unstable films at the turn of the millennium, which focused on singular moments of instability, often related to the identity of the protagonists. In turn, many unstable television series are characterized by a kind of instability more similar to how *Inception* works: focusing on questions of reality and textuality rather than (only) on identity, and created not by singular moments of instability but by either multiple successive pseudo-twists, or a larger, more ambivalent embrace of narrative uncertainty. Such instability is well suited to be enjoyed and engaged with ludically, which is how television's seriality affords and sustains a poetics of instability, as I will exemplarily demonstrate in *Westworld*.[7]

*Westworld* is set in a world loosely based on the eponymous film from 1973, in an undisclosed future in which (particularly affluent) people can enter a kind of amusement park, called Westworld, which presents a world inspired by the Western genre and populated by

[7] Such a 'ludic' reception is generally encouraged by a number of narratively complex TV shows, but it is especially rewarding in narratively unstable ones because instability invites an engagement with the series' narration as well. In this sense, play and instability invigorate each other thanks to TV's seriality, which allows audiences to continually speculate about the exact ways in which a show's episodes will create instability.

artificial humanoid beings, called 'hosts.' The first season of the show, which I will focus on here, centers on both human and android characters, inside the park and 'behind the scenes,' in its management facilities. Among the main cast are the hosts Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) and Maeve (Thandie Newton), who go on a journey to achieving self-consciousness; the park's visitors William (Jimmi Simpson), Logan (Ben Barnes), and a so-called Man in Black (Ed Harris); and a number of members of the park's management, among them the founder of the park, Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), its head of programming, Bernard (Jeffrey Wright), and the head of quality assurance, Theresa (Sidse Babett Knudsen).

Narrative instability in *Westworld* builds on earlier narratively unstable texts but is ultimately created from a higher narrative level than in *Fight Club* or *Inception*. Namely, instead of centering its instability on identity or reality, it destabilizes what could be called its own textuality. *Westworld*'s first season focuses on presenting two distinct worlds, the one of the park and the other of the facilities in which that park is operated and managed. It openly communicates how the park works to the audience not just on a technical but also on a narrative level—how it is designed, behind the scenes, to offer an affective narrative experience to its visitors. This impression is strengthened by how openly the park's employees talk about the need for a "new narrative" (S1E2) or about the focus on "immersion in a hundred interconnected narratives" (S1E1). Visitors of the park, such as the Man in Black, are equally aware that "[t]his whole world is a story" (S1E4). While laying bare how the park operates narratively and textually, *Westworld* conceals that the show itself works in a similar way. It thus uses the 'trust' audiences might have placed in the show's narration (since they gained an insight behind the scenes) to, eventually, destabilize their viewing experience to an even greater extent.

As an example, this way of destabilizing the viewers' previously reconstructed storyworld is established very early on in the series. The first few scenes of the show's first episode introduce Teddy (James Marsden), a newcomer to the park's town of Sweetwater, and Dolores, a rancher's daughter. Eventually, Teddy has to try to save Dolores from the Man in Black, who is about to violently abuse her. These scenes are accompanied by a kind of voice over, as the audience sees and, then, continues to hear Bernard talking to Dolores outside the park, in the maintenance facilities of Westworld. The way these two scenes are combined initially introduces Teddy as a new arrival to Sweetwater; in the confrontation with the Man in Black, however, it is revealed that Teddy is also a host, and as a host he cannot hurt the human visitors in the park. These first few minutes of the show thus reenact the plot of a 'traditional' twist film, which would have culminated in the revelation that the protagonist (in the first scenes, Teddy) is somebody else than he and the audience thought. Here, however, it marks only the beginning of the TV series. After again showing Teddy arrive via train at Sweetwater—the hosts have been reset after a day and begin their 'loop' anew—the show then zooms out further and further from the train. Eventually, this zoomed-out perspective on Westworld metaleptically turns into a small-scale replication of the park, which forms the central hub from which the park's employees monitor the hosts and guests. This shot, and the subsequent ones from behind the scenes, provide the audience with a privileged position in terms of knowing how the park operates. Teddy's identity

is revealed similarly to how the narrative setups in previous unstable films work, showing an awareness of this narrative technique. At the same time, the subsequent scenes (and episodes) maintain a narrative separation between the park and its management, luring viewers more deeply into the details of how the park is narratively created.

In later episodes, however, *Westworld* includes significant narratively unstable moments that affect both the world of the park and the diegetic reality of the park's behind-the-scenes operation, or even only the latter, 'betraying,' so to say, the trust the show had established with the audience so far. Specifically, Bernard, who manages the park's hosts' programming, is revealed to also be a host. In a second twist related to his identity, it becomes apparent that he, in a way, is another character repeatedly referenced throughout the show: Arnold, who co-founded the park together with Ford many years ago. Unlike in Teddy's case, the show thus uses this twist about Bernard's identity without strictly separating the narrative worlds of the park and the diegetic reality outside that park. Additionally, many of the scenes of Bernard talking to Dolores are, in turn, revealed to not actually show Bernard but Arnold. In fact, *Westworld* had been presenting two very different timelines as occurring simultaneously, which also affects the identity of another character: William and the Man in Black are one and the same person, but decades apart. Significantly, the two timelines only relate to how the show tells its narrative to the audience. At none of these points in time is it unknown to these characters who or where they are; this is an effect that only works on the level of the audience because of how the show portrays these story arcs side by side. Overall, through the use of unreliable narration, by misleadingly privileging the audience with access to the park (as it is presented behind the scenes), and by building on viewers' knowledge of unstable narratives, *Westworld* manages to destabilize the efforts of reconstructing the storyworld by drawing attention not only to a character's identity or the reality of a world it depicts but to the way it tells its story.

This kind of narrative instability affords a ludic engagement with the text. Remarkably, *Westworld* often evokes notions of play or playing itself, weaving ludic tropes into its narrative (Kanzler) and its narration (Schubert, *Narrative Instability* 264-265). Additionally, it can be understood as a fusion of narrative and play in how it affords a particular kind of viewer reception. Since the world of the park is built like an elaborate narrative, the show invites viewers early on to speculate about its mysteries, centrally evoked through some of the characters' obsession with the so-called maze. This focus on finding out what might happen in the plot of a TV show is similar to, for instance, mystery series. However, *Westworld* additionally emphasizes the way in which it is narrated as a potential source for uncovering these mysteries. This is, in fact, signaled early on through the narrative twist about Teddy. In a way, the show suggests not trusting its narration too much, since it 'teaches' its audience about the android status of Teddy through a moment of narrative instability rather than in a more narratively coherent way. One potential way of gaining pleasure from the show is to 'interact' with its plot and meanings, which aesthetically mirrors the interactive engagement of play. This is combined with a viewing practice similar to the iteration involved in playing: It is narratively 'worth it' to closely rewatch episodes or specific scenes not only for what happens but also for

how exactly that is told, since the show's narration provides clues for later revelations.[8] Such details add to a kind of narrative instability that fits into a serial narrative, since the weekly gaps between episodes can be filled by viewers with repeated viewings and active speculation about how exactly the overall narrative, and narration, of *Westworld* works, trying to anticipate how the storyworld will be destabilized. Narrative instability on television thus affords a viewing practice that is part of what Henry Jenkins calls participatory culture and similar to Mittell's notion of forensic fandom—practices that apply to other television shows as well but that are even more rewarding in narratively unstable narratives and that are especially encouraged by them.

The empirical reception of *Westworld*'s first season is a case in point for this way of drawing pleasure from the show's narrative instability. For instance, the fan community on the *Westworld* subreddit of the discussion website *Reddit* has been very active from the beginning of the show's run. A number of posts and discussions in the subreddit, especially when a season is aired, revolve around what the fans call 'theories,' speculation that often centers around what might happen in the show or about who a character really is—anticipating, in effect, the show's narrative instability. Such fan activity thus goes beyond the mysteries on the text's surface—such as the 'maze' that some of its characters search for—and extends to the discursive elements of the show, to how it is being told. For example, already after only the first four episodes of the first season had been shown, a user in the subreddit correctly speculated that there are "[t]wo [t]imeframes," that "Bernard is a [h]ost," that "William is the MiB [= Man in Black]"—which, according to the user, are "a few popular theories" that had already been circulated by others—and newly added the 'theory' that in the scenes between Dolores and 'Bernard' mentioned above, "Dolores is actually talking to Arnold" (OthoHasTheHandbook). In terms of their main ideas, all of these 'theories' will later prove to be correct. This does not mean, however, that every unstable element had already been accurately speculated upon by *Reddit* users, since there were also many other posts on the *Westworld* subreddit that did not prove to be correct, for instance by a fan insisting that the "Man in Black is the Man in Black" and "not anyone else in the show" (PullTheOtherOne). At the same time, other posts in these threads point to the heterogeneous reception practices of the show, noting, for example, that "most people here are working hard to debunk [these theories] day in and day out" (deicide666ra in OthoHasTheHandbook) or that "this sub[reddit] has developed an allergic reaction to theories this past week" (bunka77 in OthoHasTheHandbook). This multifaceted reaction, ultimately, points to the affordances of the show's narrative instability, allowing—and, arguably, encouraging—a reception based on 'interacting' with the text of the show and rewatching it, which its narrative and interpretive 'openness' explicitly signals. A popular thread posted after the finale of the second season—which some fans and critics saw as too narratively convoluted

[8] As just one example, when Bernard, struggling to reconcile the revelations about his identity, is depicted going through his memory (S1E9), viewers are shown a scene they saw before, of Bernard talking to his ex-wife on a video call—this time, however, for a split second, they can spot Robert Ford instead of Bernard's ex-wife talking to him, alluding to the fact that his wife never existed but was part of the backstory Ford provided for Bernard, and that Ford uses these calls to monitor him.

when compared to the first—points to this encouragement by the show as well, proclaiming satirically: “Congrats! EVERYONE’s theories were right!” (EmergencyOpening). Encapsulating the pleasure involved in such a reception practice, the poster mentioning multiple theories also states: “It’s just fun to speculate, even if I’m completely off the mark” (OthoHasTheHandbook), which is exactly the kind of viewer engagement that instability and seriality afford, investing additional time and going much further than ‘only’ watching an episode or a season once.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have pointed to two different but overlapping trends that characterize contemporary American popular culture: an embrace of narrative instability instead of more ‘straightforward’ or coherent narratives, and a fusion of traditionally narrative elements with ludic ones that encourages a ‘playful’ engagement with these pop-cultural artifacts. Both trends, generally, establish a tendency towards experimentation in certain aspects of contemporary popular culture, one that aligns with other pop-cultural developments, like a move towards narrative complexity, as well. While these two trends describe only a particular segment of popular culture, recognizing their specifics still allows us to differentiate between similar but distinct impulses in contemporary culture, overall contributing to a better understanding of the diversity and heterogeneity of popular culture. Additionally, the commercial and mainstream success of narratively unstable and ludonarrative texts speaks to a shift in potential pleasures that, traditionally or stereotypically, were associated only with ‘high’ or avant-garde culture. Moments of narrative instability draw attention to the process of narration and to the fictional status of these texts, and yet such metatextual elements do not seem to have driven audiences away, instead indicating that self-reflexive fiction has recently found mainstream success in film and television in particular.

While narrative instability in film has achieved commercial popularity approximately since the turn of the millennium, more recently, television series have begun to adopt unstable narrative techniques as well, a development I hope to have illuminated by highlighting how the affordances of seriality and instability have been aligned through ludic elements. In other words, recent fusions between narrative and play have enabled television’s seriality to adopt narrative instability as well. Understanding narrative and play as symbolic forms with particular affordances—with different ways of structuring experiences and making sense of them—has allowed me to specify that much of contemporary popular culture is characterized by convergence not only between media but also between these different cultural forms. In the coming years, if the current paradigms of participatory, convergent, and spreadable popular culture continue to hold sway, it will be particularly exciting to observe how narrative instability in serial television shows might travel, in evolved shapes, to other media again, and how these developments will contribute to new forms of narrative, play, and potentially other symbolic forms in popular media.

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