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Bingeable Narratives
A Formal Structural Analysis of Netflix Originals

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Bingeable Narratives

A Formal Structural Analysis of Netflix Originals

by

Abdullah Orcun CAN

1745703

A thesis submitted in fulfilment for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries, King's College London

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I love you.

I promise to never do a PhD again.

ABSTRACT

This research stems from a fascination with serial storytelling on television. Since the beginning of 21st century the television landscape has expanded with multiple formats and outlets (Lotz, 2017). The television texts not only became more complex (Mittell, 2015), new ways of engagement with these texts appeared. Since early 2010s, Netflix and other subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms have grown in popularity, not just as libraries of catch-up TV, but catalogues of original content (Johnson, 2019). While the impact of SVOD platforms and especially Netflix have been studied (Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2018a), the narratives distributed by these platforms have not been analysed extensively.

Most research into these narratives rely on single texts or look at certain themes that appear within them. This thesis instead looks at serial texts developed for Netflix (Netflix Originals) holistically, providing a formal analysis of narrative structures. In doing so, it explores four research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of narrative form in televisual serial narratives released exclusively by the SVOD platform Netflix?
2. What possible variations can the form and structure of televisual serial narratives released exclusively by Netflix have?
3. How do paratextual elements (including, but not limited to: the thumbnails, teasers, promotional texts, and interface elements) effect narrative form and structure in Netflix?
4. In what ways can time and temporality in these narratives deviate from televisual serial narratives aimed for broadcast television?

To answer these questions, this thesis proposes a structural analysis model called Serialised Televisual Narrative Analysis (STNA) Model. The STNA Model breaks down episodes of a TV show in terms of its narrative components and displays them in a linear timeline

whenever they appear in the show. The model uses Seymour Chatman's elements of narrative theory, more specifically elements that make up the form of content in a narrative (1980, p. 19-26). These elements: characters, settings, actions, and happenings, are listed down vertically on a datasheet. The timeline of consecutive episodes is listed horizontally. The timeline is divided into story beats and a new story beat is added whenever something happens in the narrative that changes the story's course (Newman, 2006; O'Sullivan, 2010). Any narrative component that appears in any given beat is marked on the datasheet. This results in the narrative form of the TV show being translated into a dataset that can pinpoint where any of the elements that comprise the form of content appear.

As Michael Z. Newman argues, "out of industrial constraints, comes aesthetic strategies" of television (2006, p. 18). Then, I ask what aesthetic strategies may arise from constraints of SVOD platforms? Showing examples of the STNA Model in use, this thesis aims to answer this question. Supporting the STNA Model with contextual programme analysis (Gray and Lotz, 2011) that looks at television texts in terms of how they are positioned among other texts, the thesis also looks at interactive texts on Netflix.

Using the STNA Model, I conducted formal analysis on *House of Cards* (2013-2018), *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2017-2019) and *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013-2019). I have further examined interactive specials. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend*, *Battle Kitty* (2022), *Trivia Quest* (2022) and *Cat Burglar* (2022). From this corpus of analyses, I propose eight arguments on narrative form in Netflix Originals: 1. Netflix Originals are able to experiment with narrative form and structure more freely than serial broadcast television narratives. 2. In the absence of commercial breaks and network schedules, gaps are created differently in Netflix Originals. 3. Some temporal elements of narrative in serial television such as sequential ordering of episodes and the length of beats have become inherent to the form. 4. Netflix is a supernarrator (Kozloff, 1992). 5. Netflix's

interface serves the functions of a broadcast television schedule. 6. Netflix's supernarrative agency enables change in televisual texts. 7. Netflix facilitates repeatability just as it facilitates binge-watching. 8. Interactive specials on Netflix can push the boundaries of interactive narratives in television further and enable a massification of synchronous interactive TV narratives.

Guided by these main arguments, this thesis maps out possibilities of narrative form in Netflix Originals and contributes towards a narrative theory of internet TV.

Keywords: internet TV, Netflix, serial narrative, television, textual analysis

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .... **II**

ABSTRACT .... **IV**

TABLE OF CONTENTS .... **VII**

PREFACE **1**

1 INTRODUCTION **3**

1.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES 4

1.2 INTERNET TV AND VIDEO-ON-DEMAND 5

1.3 NETFLIX ORIGINALS 7

1.4 BINGE-WATCHING 8

1.5 SERIAL NARRATIVES 13

1.6 CASE STUDIES 15

1.7 CHAPTER OUTLINES 18

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND FOR NETFLIX ORIGINALS **21**

2.1 NARRATOLOGY 21

2.2 NARRATIVE STUDIES AND TV 26

2.3 INTERNET TV 40

3 METHODOLOGY **48**

3.1 SERIALISED TELEVISUAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS MODEL 49

3.1.1 STNA Model Version 1.0 54

3.1.2 STNA Model Version 2.0 57

3.1.3 Limitations of the STNA Model 62

3.2 CONTEXTUAL PROGRAMME ANALYSIS 65

3.3 CONCLUSION 67

4 HOUSE OF CARDS 69

4.1 FORMAL ANALYSIS OF *HOUSE OF CARDS* SEASON ONE 74

4.2 BETWEEN THE GAPS IN *HOUSE OF CARDS* 84

4.3 NARRATING *HOUSE OF CARDS* 91

4.4 SUPERNARRATING *HOUSE OF CARDS* 97

4.5 CONCLUSION 104

5 A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS 107

5.1 KEY TERMINOLOGY 112

5.2 A FORMAL ANALYSIS OF *A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS* 115

5.3 STORY BEATS IN A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS 124

5.4 DIEGETIC AND METADIEGETIC TIME IN *A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS* 128

5.5 FROM METAFICTIONAL AUTHOR TO METADIEGETIC NARRATOR 134

5.6 CONCLUSION 149

6 ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT 152

6.1 PREVIOUS RESEARCH 156

6.2 TELEVISUAL AFTERLIFE OF *ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT* 158

6.3 A FORMAL ANALYSIS OF *ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT* SEASONS 3, 4 AND 5 160

6.4 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN SEASONS 169

6.4.1 Season 3 vs Season 4 170

6.4.2 Season 4 vs. Season 4: Fateful Consequences 179

6.4.3 Season 5 vs. Season 4 187

6.5 CONCLUSION 192

7 NETFLIX INTERACTIVE SPECIALS 196

7.1 SUPERNARRATION 200

7.2 INTERACTIVE TELEVISION 202

7.3 HYPERTEXT 205

7.4 RESEARCH ON NETFLIX'S INTERACTIVE SPECIALS 208

7.5 BLACK MIRROR: BANDERSNATCH 212

7.6 UNBREAKABLE KIMMY SCHMIDT: KIMMY VS THE REVEREND 222

7.7 BATTLE KITTY 229

7.8 TRIVIA QUEST 235

7.9 CAT BURGLAR 238

7.10 EXPLODING KITTENS AND NETFLIX GAMES 242

7.11 CONCLUSION 245

8 CONCLUSION 248

8.1 WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF NARRATIVE FORM IN TELEVISUAL SERIAL NARRATIVES RELEASED EXCLUSIVELY BY THE SVOD PLATFORM NETFLIX? 250

8.2 WHAT POSSIBLE VARIATIONS CAN THE FORM AND STRUCTURE OF TELEVISUAL SERIAL NARRATIVES RELEASED EXCLUSIVELY BY NETFLIX HAVE? 252

8.3 HOW DO PARATEXTUAL ELEMENTS (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO: THE THUMBNAILS, TEASERS, PROMOTIONAL TEXTS, AND INTERFACE ELEMENTS) EFFECT NARRATIVE FORM AND STRUCTURE IN NETFLIX? 253

8.4 IN WHAT WAYS CAN TIME AND TEMPORALITY IN TELEVISUAL SERIAL NARRATIVES RELEASED EXCLUSIVELY BY THE SVOD PLATFORM NETFLIX DEVIATE FROM THOSE THAT ARE AIMED FOR BROADCAST TELEVISION? 255

8.5 MAIN ARGUMENTS: TOWARDS A NARRATIVE THEORY OF INTERNET TV 258

8.5.1 Netflix Originals are able to experiment with narrative form and structure more freely than broadcast television. 260

8.5.2 In the absence of commercial breaks and network schedules, gaps are created differently in Netflix Originals. 260

8.5.3 Some temporal elements of narrative in serial television such as sequential ordering of episodes and the length of beats have become inherent to the form. 260

8.5.4 Netflix is a supernarrator. 261

8.5.5 Netflix's interface serves the functions of a broadcast television schedule. 261

8.5.6 Netflix's supernarrative agency enables change in televisual texts. 261

8.5.7 Netflix facilitates repeatability just as it facilitates binge-watching. 262

8.5.8 Interactive specials on Netflix are able to push the boundaries of interactive narratives in television further and enable a massification of synchronous interactive TV narratives. *262*

8.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY AND CONTRIBUTION TO FIELD 263

8.6.1 Towards a Textual Analysis Model for Television Texts *264*

8.7 REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH 265

8.8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH 267

8.9 CLOSING REMARKS ON BINGEABLE NARRATIVES 269

REFERENCE LIST 271

FILM 286

TELEVISION 287

VIDEOS 290

VIDEO GAMES 291

APPENDIX A – ONLINE ACCESS TO STNA DATASETS 292

PREFACE

When I moved to London in September 2017, I booked a hotel room for two weeks until I could find a flat to rent. For two weeks I had take-away food, free toiletries, and a small television set. After years of watching on-demand television, I was exposed to the marvels of broadcast schedule. I watched a show where landlords were forced to live in place of their tenants and another show where people decided on who to date based on how they looked naked, without seeing their faces.

One night during my stay, I watched three consecutive episodes of the American sitcom show *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014) in one sitting. It was a rerun on one of the channels. I was aware of the concept of what has come to be referred to as “binge watching” at that stage, but I was not bingeing it knowingly. There was no other choice available. The three episodes I came across were from Season 6: episodes 13, 14 and 15. At the end of Episode 13 titled *Bad News*, Marshall Eriksen (Jason Siegel), one of the main characters in the ensemble cast received the unexpected news that his father, who we have seen in the episode and (as far as I remembered from preceding seasons) was very influential in Marshall’s life, died from a heart attack. The episode ended with Marshall exclaiming, what would become the significantly prescient words of: “I’m not ready for this”. The next episode titled *Last Words* told the story of the funeral. The sombre tone of the last scene of the previous episode had continued into this one as well. After a brief commercial break, Episode 15 titled *Oh Honey* began with a voice-over narration that explained Marshall was still in his mother’s house after the funeral and continued with Marshall acting like a child in his mother’s house, followed by a joke on cooking hot dogs, going back to its regular, lighter narrative.

Approximately 35 minutes after watching Marshall lose his father, I found myself baffled by how quickly everyone in the story had returned to their normal lives. Just like Marshall, *I was not ready for this*. In frustration, I googled the episodes' release dates. Not only were they broadcast weekly but they had a winter break between these episodes. Between the news of Marshall's father's death and the show going back to its comedic tone, the viewers had more than a month's break. By "binge-watching" them in succession, without breaks, I had broken the intended frequency of the narrative. The script had been written with the knowledge that it would be experienced weekly.

Then I wondered, what would happen if television storytellers knew at the point of conception and as the scripts were being written that their texts were going to be binge-watched? How would such knowledge affect the narrative structure? How could it affect its temporality?

This thesis is a result of this curiosity.

1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis sets out to investigate the narrative form and structure of televisual serial narratives produced and distributed by the Subscription Video-on-Demand (SVOD) platform Netflix. In recent years, there has been growing interest in research into modes of engagement and modes of production in SVOD platforms. Yet, the evolution of narrative form in these platforms has not been explored substantially.

This research seeks to address the following questions;

1. What are the characteristics of narrative form in televisual serial narratives released exclusively by the SVOD platform Netflix?
2. What possible variations can the form and structure of televisual serial narratives released exclusively by Netflix have?
3. How do paratextual elements (including, but not limited to: the thumbnails, teasers, promotional texts and interface elements) effect narrative form and structure in Netflix?
4. In what ways can time and temporality in these narratives deviate from televisual serial narratives aimed for broadcast television?

To answer these questions, this research proposes a new formal structural analysis model called the Serialised Televisual Narrative Analysis (STNA) Model to examine three Netflix Original shows: *House of Cards* (2013-2018), *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2017-2019) and *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013-2019). The thesis further analyses interactive specials on Netflix to extend and deepen understandings of possible narrative forms.

To introduce the thesis, this chapter will first detail the aims and objectives, then discuss relevant keywords and terminology concerning SVOD platforms and Netflix Original shows. This will be followed by an outline of each chapter in the thesis.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

There is a growing body of academic studies on SVOD platforms that focus on television texts. However, no single study exists which explores a narrative theory of serial narrative form in internet TV.

Previous research in television studies mostly ignored narrative structure. Looking back at the 1990s, Jason Mittell argues that research into television narratives had been limited (2006, p. 30). Apart from analytical work on soap operas – a television series that typically deals with the daily events in the lives of a set of characters – helmed by scholars such as Robert Allen (1992, 1995) and Christine Geraghty (1981, 1995); and key studies like Sarah Kozloff's (1992), John Ellis' (1982) and John Fiske and John Hartley's (1978) works on reading televisual texts, there has not been substantial research undertaken on television narratives.

Although Mittell retrospectively pointed out a gap in narrative research, the 2000s did not see a big rise in research interest either. Scholars like Mittell and Michael Z. Newman investigated the narrative structure of contemporary television series to some extent, but analysis was often limited to smaller structures of narrative, mostly looking at single episodes or individual scenes (Porter et al., 2002; Newman, 2006; Johnson, 2006). Formal structural analysis of seasons or whole shows from beginning to end is non-existent. Throughout 2010s and onward, complexities of serial television are still investigated in a mostly case-by-case basis.

Most recently, Kathryn VanArendonk contextualised the television episode (2019), Lynn Kozak and Martin Zeller-Jacques discussed recaps in Netflix Original shows (2021) and Tom Hemingway analysed post-broadcast sitcom shows on Netflix (2021). These studies make connections between the practice of binge-watching and the texts that are binge-watched, but

do not provide a broader map of how these texts are positioned within the television environment.

As this research is meant as an initial study into understanding serial narratives on SVOD platforms, case studies were selected from the SVOD service that has the most subscribers and the biggest library of original content, Netflix. An aim of this research is to develop an analytical model of narratives which can be taken forwards and applied to other SVOD services as well as other forms of television such as broadcast TV. Hence, the scope of this thesis opens possibilities for future research in televisual narrative studies.

The research seeks to generate fresh and comprehensive insight into analysis of the narrative structure of televisual serial narratives in SVOD platforms using a specific tool, the STNA Model. Through this model, it aims to provide an extensive examination of serial narratives holistically.

This study also aims to contribute to the growing area of research into SVOD platforms by bringing the focus to the text itself, rather than its production or reception. The research provides an exciting opportunity to advance knowledge of television narrative theory and contribute to a narrative theory of internet TV.

1.2 Internet TV and Video-on-Demand

The corpus of this research is drawn from serial texts in SVOD platforms, specifically in Netflix; but SVOD platforms cannot be discussed without reference to the wider television landscape. Michael Curtin defines today's television landscape as the era of "matrix media" (2009), a system of multiple different media streams functioning simultaneously. Amanda

Lotz calls it an era of "televisions", using the plural form to refer to the multiplicity of different forms of the medium (2014).

This landscape is inhabited by broadcast television with TV networks broadcasting to television sets as well as new forms of internet TV with various over-the-top (OTT) video on demand (VOD) services. In late 2010s and 2020s, there has been an increasing number of VOD services that offer televisual texts in the internet TV environment.

Here, internet TV should be understood as "internet distributed TV services" and not as television sets equipped with internet access labelled as "smart TV" or "internet TV". This definition comes from The Global Internet TV Consortium established by scholars Amanda Lotz and Ramon Lobato to bring together research on internet distributed television services (Global Internet TV Consortium, 2016). These services include Subscription Video-On-Demand services like Netflix, Transactional Video-On-Demand (TVOD) services like iTunes, Free Video-On-Demand (FVOD) services like BBC iPlayer, and Advertisement Video-On-Demand (AVOD) services like YouTube. Catch-up TV services provided by major television networks in many countries are also considered internet distributed TV.

What further complicates this media environment is that most internet TV services – "portals" as Lotz calls them (2014) – can act as two or more forms of video-on-demand services. For instance, Amazon Prime Video is an SVOD service that opens its library to users who pay the monthly Amazon Prime membership fee. However, the library is limited, and the same portal also acts as a TVOD, presenting its users with content that is available to rent or buy. YouTube primarily acts as an AVOD service. Viewers see ads on videos – either through content creators' or YouTube's allocation – and yet, for a monthly subscription, users can navigate the platform ad-free and gain access to a library of original programming called "YouTube Originals" just like an SVOD service. Furthermore, YouTube also allows

its users to rent or buy content inside its platform, functioning simultaneously as a TVOD service.

1.3 Netflix Originals

As mentioned above, the scope of this thesis comprises SVOD services and pays particular attention to Netflix. SVOD services arguably had a significant impact on the television industry with their subscription-based economy models[1]. Netflix garnered over 200 million subscribers by 2021 (Stoll, 2022). Amazon announced that the company has reached 100 million Prime subscribers in 2018 (Spangler, 2018) and by 2021, the number went up to 117 million subscribers (Stoll, 2022). It should be noted that Amazon's Prime subscription includes other services in music, gaming, and online shopping; but Netflix and Amazon are not the only platforms with growing numbers of subscribers. As of 2022, Disney+, AppleTV+, HBOMax and many other SVOD services are in competition with Netflix. Rising subscription numbers in other internet TV portals both globally and regionally such as Hulu in the USA, Stan in Australia or BluTV in Turkey shows an audience that engages with televisual content more and more dominantly through SVOD services.

In turn, there is an increasing amount of televisual content produced and distributed by these platforms that are released in full or one season at a time. Ofcom's *Media Nations* report reveals that in 2018, one-third of all viewing undertaken on SVOD services in the UK has been original programming (Ofcom, 2018). Since original programming is gaining more and

[1] It should be noted that a subscription-based economic model for television precedes SVOD platforms with premium channels operating in many countries. However, the 2010s signal a significant shift with SVOD platforms being able to omit advertisements and mainly financing their companies through subscription fees (Lotz, 2014).

more attention from audiences, analysing elements that constitute these narratives also becomes more significant.

Within the scope of this research, all case studies have been picked from the so-called "Netflix Originals" strand of programming. Netflix is the market leader among SVOD platforms. Ofcom's report shows that almost half of UK households use video-on-demand platforms primarily for watching TV and Netflix is still the leading SVOD service used in UK (Ofcom, 2021). Netflix still holds the broadest catalogue of original programming and has one of the biggest budgets allocated to original programming (Ball, 2018a). The company is also the first SVOD service to produce and distribute original content with *House of Cards* in February 2013. Moreover, Lobato argues that Netflix is "one of the media brands of the internet era to penetrate so deeply into households and the broader popular consciousness" (2019, p. 13). This thesis is further invested in examining how that penetration manifests itself in terms of narrative.

1.4 Binge-Watching

As this thesis examines texts that are Netflix Original shows – produced for and distributed by the SVOD platform – it is presumed that they are intended to be binge-watched. Hence, a description of this phenomenon is required. The exact origin of the term is unknown, but discussions on *The X-Files* (1993-2018) forums on the internet during the mid-1990s demonstrate fans trying to access manually recorded videocassette recorder (VCR) tapes to catch up on previous seasons by "binge-watching" them (Zimmer, 2013). Media scholar Henry Jenkins notes of his binge-watching practice in 1992;

> My wife and I watched the final season of *Blake's 7* in less than a week, sometimes viewing as many as three or four episodes in a row; our fascination with the

> unfolding plot could be satisfied through our control over the tapes in a way that it could not be through weekly broadcasts. When we finally reached the climactic episode, we watched it several times in succession, trying to develop a better sense of how the characters reached their fates. (Jenkins, 1992, p. 73)

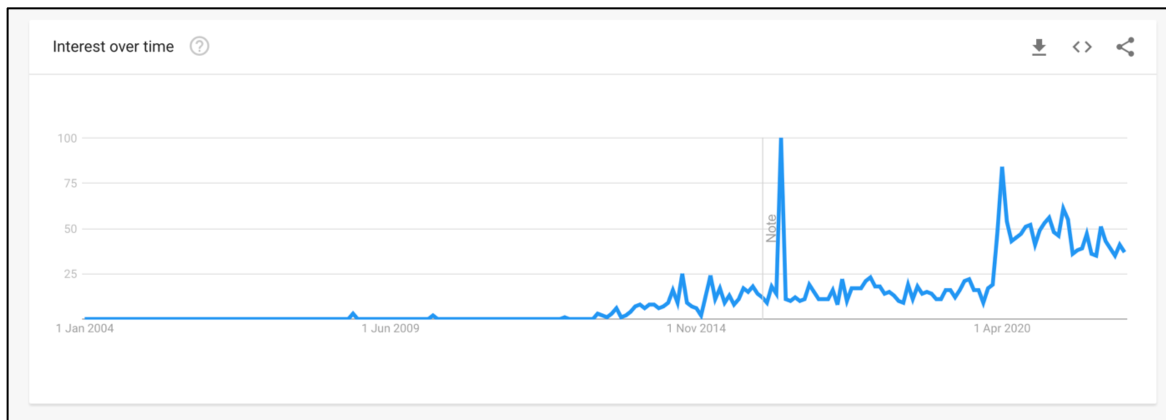
It should be noted that Jenkins' account reveals two types of viewing behaviour: binge-watching in succession and binge-watching repetitively. These two types of binge-watching are further discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

Prior to the internet, there are written accounts in fanzines (Stevens, 2021), taken from minutes of fan conventions, of "marathoning" several episodes of popular TV series such as *Starsky & Hutch* (1975-1979). This shows similar marathon viewing activities existed in the1970s and the 1980s, even if they have not yet been called "binge-watching".

Analysis of news articles dating as far back as 2004 shows a tendency in some audiences to buy DVD box sets of TV shows after the season ends to watch the content at their own pace (Lotz, 2014). A Google Trends analysis of the phrase "binge-watching" shows that the daily use of the term slowly accelerated throughout the 2000s and displayed a sharp upward trend after 2013 (figure 1.1). The year 2013 coincides with the release of *House of Cards*, one of the first original programmes Netflix offered[2]. The next two sharp increases are in early 2016 when Netflix became available worldwide in 160 countries and in spring of 2020 when global COVID-19 lockdowns started.

[2] *House of Cards* is the first show commissioned and distributed by Netflix; but the company started distributing original content in 2012 with *Lilyhammer* (2012-2014), acquiring the rights to release the Norwegian show in the US. See Chapter 2 for further discussion on how original programming in SVODs are categorised.

Figure 1.1



A Google Trends diagram showing the popularity of search phrase "binge-watching" worldwide from 2004 onwards (accessed 24 June 2022).

Netflix has a long and intertwined relationship with the term "binge-watching". The company has been using a release model that they had themselves named as "the binge model" making multiple episodes available simultaneously for most of their original programming, starting at the beginning with the release of the first season of *House of Cards* (Jenner, 2018, p. 109). Over the years the company used weekly-release models, releasing seasons of shows in two parts, or releasing multiple episodes every week but as of June 2022, binge-release model is still dominant in the platform. Hence, it can be argued that the platform still intends for its texts to be binge-watched.

As commonly used as it is, "binge-watching" is still a contested term. There have been multiple attempts at establishing a consistently applied definition. I will here outline two. In both approaches to defining the term, binge-watching is assumed to occur in serialised programming (Jenner, 2018). This is what Lisa Perks calls an 'insulated flow' (2015). It should also be noted that binge-watching is presumed to be conducted in a single television show.

Firstly, Netflix commissioned qualitative research in 2013 that gave insight into how its users engaged with the content (Feeney, 2014). The results, as presented by the company, showed that 73% of their users admit to binge-watching content on a regular basis. Their average binge-watching session was estimated to be slightly longer than two episodes. This provides one approach to defining binge-watching as watching more than two episodes of a television show.

Secondly, Mareike Jenner suggests that in the current media environment, where many viewers watch full seasons in a limited amount of time, two episodes is setting the bar too low to define "binge-watching" (2018, p. 112). She argues that binge-watching can more flexibly be defined as excessive viewing of televisual content. It is difficult to define "excessive viewing", as what might constitute a normal amount of viewing now may change in the future and may differ across different cultures. How much time various viewers allocate to television viewing can also affect the definition of excessive viewing significantly. For instance, Ksenia Frolova argues that parents of young children often have smaller amounts of time allocated to watching adult TV content (2017). How they divide up this viewing time would subjectively signal individual definitions of binge-watching. Jenner proposes three conditions for the lowest common denominator of what constitutes binge-watching: "self-determined viewing of a television text", interruptions in viewing being due to everyday life instead of commercial breaks or TV schedules and viewing the television text on a different outlet than broadcast television (2020, p. 268).

While there is an ongoing debate on an ultimate definition for the term, a discussion of its use in this thesis should be provided. The analytical model created for this research aims to explore the elements of narrative structure of multiple episodes in sequence. In that sense, this research is more interested in instances of consecutive viewing, and less on how many units constitute a "binge-watching" session. The model looks at multiple episodes together to

examine if there are any features of the narrative form that connects episodes in a way to facilitate consecutive viewing.

The connotations of the term 'binge-watching' should also be considered. Alternative terminology to define the viewing activity has been proposed to negate the connotations of the word "binge". It invokes excessive and compulsive behaviour such as binge-eating or binge-drinking. Hence, the term binge-watching arguably reflects an expression of unhealthy behaviour. Lisa Perks argues that there are cases where binge-watching contributes to wellbeing and proposes the term "media marathoning" instead (2015). For instance, through interviews with patients recovering from illness or medical operations, she suggests that media marathoning can support the recovery process. Moreover, she argues that most people engage in marathoning activities not compulsively, but knowingly, planning their engagement beforehand. This alternative term of "media marathoning" frames the viewing activity around media, encapsulating all paratextual activities that the viewer may engage in while binge-watching, such as participating in discussions on social media, watching after-shows, interviews, and clips, reading reviews and so on. Likewise, Tanya Horeck notes how binge-watching's negative connotations were recast as acts of self-love during the COVID-19 pandemic with the rise of what is referred to as comfort TV – shows that are easy to watch and usually have uplifting stories (2021).

For this thesis, I argue that the cultural currency of "binge-watching" should be recognised and acknowledged as crucial for the advancement of studies in this field, particularly because the term is used both on the production side (e.g., Netflix's own branding of bingeworthy shows) and on the reception side (e.g., daily use of the term to define viewing activities). Hence, the term "binge-watching" is used throughout this thesis to refer to the activity of prolonged engagement with serial televisual texts regardless of how long the sessions are.

1.5 Serial Narratives

The central object of this study is narrative, and this thesis considers television narratives to be texts. Moreover, it considers Netflix Originals to be "serial narratives" according to Jennifer Hayward's definition of seriality: "an ongoing narrative released in successive parts" (1997, p. 3).

In his book *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette conceptualises narrative in three distinct notions: the discourse of telling of an event or a series of events, the event or series of events themselves, and the event of telling of the event or a series of events. He defines these three notions as "narrative", "story" (or diegesis) and "narrating" (1980, pp. 25-27). This thesis draws on Genette's classification. As such, "narrative" is used to define discourse, "story" is used to define content and "narrating" is used to define the act of narrating, performed by the narrator of the text. Furthermore, "story" and "diegesis" are used interchangeably in this thesis and "narrative" is sometimes used to refer to the whole text.

There are different narrative forms in the current internet TV landscape. While some of these forms are so named by the industry for promotional reasons, others are significantly distinctive and need to be addressed. A distinction should be made between television "serial" and television "series". Historically, series refers to an episodic form of storytelling (Mittell, 2015). Each individual story told in the series begins and ends in the length of an episode. While there may be plot lines that extend to further episodes, the central stories will normally appear and resolve in a single episode. Crime procedural series such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015) are classic examples where every episode centre around one case to be solved.

Serials, on the other hand, have ongoing storylines that extend beyond multiple episodes. A classic example would be soap operas such as *Coronation Street* (1960-) (Geraghty, 1981). Jason Mittell argues that the contemporary television landscape of "complex TV" blurs the lines between serials and series, suggesting that "at its most basic level, narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration" (2015, p. 18). This research acknowledges that these two forms of television narrative are now more intertwined than ever. Therefore, this thesis will refer to its case studies as serials or "television shows" unless they are specifically referred to their episodic structure as a series.

To avoid further confusion, "series" will not be used in the British context to define multiple episodes that are released simultaneously or in the same television calendar. In this case, the US-centric term "season" will be used instead. The only instance where a specific term instead of "season" will be used is if a show's instalments are labelled differently on Netflix (e.g., *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* [2018-2020] has "parts" instead of seasons).

On a final note, industry-led terminology such as "anthology" series (TV shows that follow a theme rather than a story), mini-series, event series, limited series (names that indicate there will be a small number of episodes or seasons) or documentary series will only be used when terminology helps further understand the narrative of the corresponding TV show (Reiher, 2014).

Informed by the above considerations on terminology, this thesis will first review the literature relevant to its scope, then explain its methodological approach. This is followed by three chapters of case studies. A final chapter focuses on interactive narratives, followed by a conclusion.

1.6 Case Studies

This thesis analyses three Netflix Original Shows as main case studies. These three shows are *House of Cards, A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *Arrested Development*. Other content from Netflix is drawn upon and referenced to reinforce arguments but that are not analysed holistically with the STNA Model. All three case studies analysed here have now finished conclusively with no further seasons or episodes planned. Each case study aims to address multiple research questions and each of them are significant for various reasons. Below, I expound how and why each case study is a crucial part of the corpus of this research and explain the rationale behind the order of their presentation in the thesis.

The first case study presented here is *House of Cards* in Chapter 3. The political thriller show was released in 2013 as Netflix's first acquired original series. As a case study, the significance of *House of Cards* comes from the fact that it was the first television show Netflix commissioned from the beginning of development and it was the first Netflix Original show that was developed with a guarantee that the first two seasons would be released (Andreeva, 2011a). The case study aims to address the first two research questions on narrative structure and characteristics of the narrative form. *House of Cards* did not have a precedent in terms of being developed to release all episodes simultaneously for a global SVOD platform. The omission of commercial breaks, the abolishment of time constraints and the guarantee of two seasons meant the show was in uncharted narrative territory. It has won many accolades and have kept its popularity until the final season, so it is compelling to analyse how much the narrative structure branches off from a serial broadcast television narrative. With this goal in mind, the first season of the show, consisting of 13 episodes has been analysed.

The next case study is *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, a comedy-drama that follows the misadventures of the Baudelaire Orphans; Violet (Malina Weissman), Klaus (Louis Hynes)

and Sunny (Presley Smith). The show is based on the children's book series of the same name. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is the only show in the corpus of this thesis that was designed from the beginning with the knowledge of when the series would end (Snetiker, 2017). As the show was based on a book series of 13 instalments, the writers had more information on how to parcel out the story into episodes and seasons. This resulted in each book being adapted into two episodes for a total of 25 episodes — the final book was made into a single episode.

The show was previously adapted to big screen under the title *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2004). Daniel Handler, the writer of the book series was very closely involved with both adaptations. As the same story has been told in three different forms with the involvement of the original writer in all cases, it presents a unique case study. Moreover, Handler states that the books were influenced heavily by serialised melodramas in how they tell the story, making it an interesting case to see how serial narratives unfold in different formats (Lucero II, 2017). The scope of analysis in this case study covers all 25 episodes across all seasons. The analysis is used to address three research questions on narrative structure, characteristics of narrative form, and time and temporality in narratives.

The final case study is *Arrested Development,* an American sitcom that follows the once wealthy Bluth family and its members' struggle with their new identities after their father — and head of family company — is sent to prison for fraud. The show ran in the American television network FOX between 2003 and 2006 for three seasons. Exclusive rights to release new seasons were acquired by Netflix in 2011 and with much of the creative team and cast on board, its fourth season was released in 2013 (Hibberd, 2011). Netflix released its fifth and final season in two parts, endings its run in 2019. The show had 84 episodes in five seasons with another set of 22 episodes created by recutting material from the fourth season.

Arrested Development is one of the first Netflix Original shows. In fact, it is the first sitcom and the first renewed/revived show that the SVOD platform exclusively released. Its two seasons on the platform have significant differences from each other and from the earlier three seasons on broadcast television. The fourth season has 15 episodes, each focusing on a character but covering events that occur over approximately the same stretch of time. A remix of the fourth season was released in 2018, recut to consist of 22 episodes that no longer focus on one character each, but move the story forward chronologically. This remixed season has replaced the original cut as the official season four and the original versions have been put under the Trailers & More hyperlink on Netflix. The fifth and final season followed the footsteps of the recut season 4, adopting a broadcast television-like sitcom formula throughout.

The research investigates the narrative experimentation in *Arrested Development* through analysis of season three, its final season on broadcast television; season four, its first season on Netflix; the recut version of season four; and season five. The analysis seeks to address all research questions and explore narrative structure, characteristics of narrative form, time, and temporality — especially its operation in terms of order — and paratextuality. A total of 66 episodes across three seasons are analysed.

The case studies are presented in order of the size of their STNA data. *House of Cards* is presented first with 13 episodes, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is second with 25 and *Arrested Development* is the final analysis chapter with 66 episodes[3]. I outline each chapter below.

[3] The STNA Model data for all analyses can be found on https://netflixnarratives.wordpress.com. Appendix A also provides hyperlinks to each case study's dataset.

1.7 Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2 reviews literature that inform and underpin the thesis' research questions. The review is summarised in three parts: Narratology, narrative in TV and internet TV. It introduces three key scholars whose work informs this thesis: Gerard Genette, Seymour Chatman, and Sarah Kozloff. Finally, the chapter positions the thesis within these three fields of study, pointing out to the gaps in literature that this research seeks to fill.

Chapter 3 lays out the methodological approach to this research. It proposes a new formal structural analysis model for serial television texts, called the STNA Model. It breaks down various iterations of the model and explains how data collection and analysis was undertaken. It provides an example of how the model works, using the pilot study of *Love* (2016-2018). The methodology chapter further details a second method used in this research: contextual programme analysis.

Chapter 4 provides a formal analysis of the first season of *House of Cards* using the STNA Model. Investigating the form and structure of narrative, the chapter focuses on temporality by looking at how the narrative text functions in the absence of weekly schedules and commercial breaks. It argues that the show uses its text to create gaps in the narrative, particularly through the use of stand-alone episodes.

The chapter further analyses the use of asides (a character breaking the fourth wall and addressing the audience directly) and evaluates the agency of Frank Underwood as a character that narrates. Finally, the chapter looks at the complex relationship between the text and Netflix, focusing on Netflix's signature sound and its use of promotional materials for *House of Cards*.

Chapter 5 provides a formal analysis of all three seasons and 25 episodes of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* using the STNA Model. Providing a structural analysis of the text, the chapter discusses how the story is broken down into small segments of storytelling – beats – and how these segments may differ from broadcast television shows.

The analysis also focuses on the text's property as an adaptation and considers the intertextual connections between the show, the film adaptation, and the source text of book series. Looking at different levels of diegesis, the chapter argues that Lemony Snicket, the fictional author of the books transforms from a metafictional author to a metadiegetic narrator. The chapter further makes note of the self-reflexivity of the text, especially on its references to SVOD platforms.

Chapter 6 provides a formal analysis of the third season, fourth season, the remixed fourth season and the fifth and final season of *Arrested Development* using the STNA Model. The structural analysis is divided into sections comparing each season with the others. Formal analysis points out to variations and experimentations with narrative form facilitated by Netflix.

The discussion is contextualised in terms of the show's revival on Netflix after its original run on broadcast television had ended. There is a specific focus towards *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* which revolves around the discussion of how Netflix can influence the text.

Chapter 7 shifts focus to interactive specials on Netflix. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* (2020), *Battle Kitty* (2022), *Trivia Quest* (2022), and *Cat Burglar* (2022) are examined with a special focus on how these texts use interactivity. Instead of using the STNA Model for formal analysis, the chapter breaks down the structures of these five interactive specials. Providing diagrammatical visualisations for each, the chapter contextualises interactivity in Netflix.

Moreover, the chapter remarks on *Exploding Kittens* (2022), a Netflix mobile game and a tie-in animated original on Netflix set to be released in 2023. Elaborating on Netflix's newest endeavour, Netflix Games and how it ties into Netflix Originals, the chapter considers what narrative possibilities the platform may hold in the future.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by summarising responses to each research question and presenting the main arguments that arose from this thesis. The conclusion emphasises the contributions this research makes into the field of television studies and reflects on the research process. It ends with recommendations for future research.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND FOR NETFLIX ORIGINALS

This research positions itself between three areas of study: narratology, television narratives and internet TV. The literature review has been divided into three sections accordingly, to fully convey the scope and theoretical framework of study. There are some notions informed by audience studies and studies on participatory culture and fandom as well as terminology borrowed from platform studies, but these will only be mentioned when they are deemed relevant.

2.1 Narratology

A "narrative" is the "representation of real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence," (Prince, 1982, p. 1). Narratology is the study of narrative structure (Chatman, 1978). It consists of an ensemble of theories and techniques that are used to analyse, understand, and evaluate narratives (Bal, 1985). Narrative studies analyse the structure to look at how various layers of the story interact with each other (e.g., how narrating effects story and discourse, or how discourse effects story and narrating) and to contribute to literary theory, or what is referred as poetics (Genette, 1980).

Narratology seeks to understand the structure of narratives, so that various texts can be distinguished. Roland Barthes opens his 1975 article on structural analysis of narrative with a question; "How can we tell the novel from the short story, the tale from the myth, suspense drama from tragedy (it has been done a thousand times) without reference to a common model?" (1975, p. 237). One of the main objectives of this thesis is to provide a contextual answer to this question. Can we distinguish serial narratives on SVOD platforms from those

on broadcast television? If so, how is this distinction made? Can a common model be generated to make these distinctions? Ultimately, the aim of this research is to introduce a structural analysis model that is able to identify and examine the specificities of this narrative form.

Compared to literature or film, study of narrative form in television does not have a long history. Analysis and close reading of televisual texts in television studies were sparse before the 1970s (Gray and Lotz, 2011). By the time television studies began to grow, other fields such as literary studies, linguistics and film studies were already analysing narratives through textual analysis. Literary Studies and especially the formalist movement "New Criticism" in the United States and "Practical Criticism" in the United Kingdom, argued that literary works could best be studied through formal textual analysis (2012, p.46). The formal analysis they referred to stemmed from the Russian formalist tradition through the work of Vladimir Propp. Propp analysed folk tales and myths and broke them down to their components to explore common characteristics in the form (1968). He argued in his *Morphology of the Folktale* that there were a finite number of plots — strands of narrative, events, and happenings in the story which he called functions — and a finite number of different characters that ran in all folk tales. When all these components were listed, all tales could be decoded as formulae.

Another key figure in the development of formal analysis was the Swiss anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss was prominent in developing the structuralist approach, arguing that all elements of human culture should be investigated in terms of their relationship with an overarching structure (1963). In his work, *Structural Anthropology*, he examined myths. He suggested that no matter which culture they originated from, all myths were connected to similar, universal structures.

Literary theorists that follow a formal, structuralist of this tradition such as Barthes, Genette and Tzetan Todorov separated the study of narratives from the fields of literary criticism and argued that poetics should focus on the study of literary discourse instead (Chatman, 1978). Todorov argued that all poetics were structural "since the object of poetics is not the sum of empirical phenomena (literary works) but an abstract structure (literature)," (1992, p. 10). He contended that poetics seeks to evaluate the "literariness" of texts (1992, p. 7) and that formal analysis seeks to "propose a theory of the structure and operation of the literary discourse, to present a spectrum of literary possibilities, in such a manner that the existing works of literature appear as particular instances that have been realised," (1969, p. 71). In that sense, the aim of formal analysis is to find elements in one narrative that are applicable to other narratives. The form takes precedence from the interpretation of the content. This approach to formal analysis is key to this thesis as it prioritises the narrative text as the source and aims to develop a wider understanding of internet TV narratives. Borrowing from Todorov's statement on literariness, a poetics of Netflix Originals would then seek to evaluate the television-ness or televisuality of these texts.

A structuralist approach divides narrative into two parts: story (consisting of existents and the chain of events) and discourse (the telling of the story) (Chatman,1978, p. 19). There are nuances in how different theorists further elaborate on this taxonomy. Barthes breaks down narrative into three levels: functions, actions, and narration. According to him, narration is discourse, actions are all the happenings (the chain of events), and functions are what emerges because of the actions (as also described by Propp) (Barthes, 1975). Hence, the story is broken down into different elements.

Genette also breaks down narratives into three parts, identifying narrating as a third element in narrative. Genette's essay on *Narrative Discourse* (1980) provides a framework for what to inspect in narrative form for this research. Genette introduces five aspects of narrative: order,

duration, frequency, mood, and voice. The first three out of these elements relate to temporality. Like literary examples Genette used, televisual serial narratives are temporal texts. Research Question 4 examines characteristics of serial narratives and investigate their relation to time and temporality. As I elaborate later in the case study chapters 4-6, order, duration and frequency are all critical in terms of articulating the characteristics of narrative structure of serial texts both in broadcast TV and internet TV. I will later argue in Chapter 6 that these three temporal aspects are key not only in perceived bingeability but also in repeatability of Netflix Original shows.

Genette's work on paratexts – a supplementary text that provides the actual literary text with "a setting and sometimes a commentary" (1997a, p. 3) – is also central to some of the arguments made in this thesis. These paratexts are seldom seen as texts on their own, but they are positioned at the periphery of the main texts and contribute to meaning making. For a literary work, this could be the book cover, title page, footnote, or page numbers. As one of the methods this research project employs is contextual programme analysis, which looks at each text in relation to other textual elements around it (Gray and Lotz, 2011), Chapter 3 details what paratextual elements are present in Netflix. Research Question 3 explores how paratextual elements in Netflix contribute to narrative form in Netflix Originals.

Key scholars like Christian Metz and Seymour Chatman have contributed towards a narrative theory of texts that extend beyond written works and onto films. Chatman investigated the two elements of narrative; story and discourse and elaborated on the structure of narratives. He breaks narrative down to its structural components. On one side, he examines it in terms of forms and substances of content in its story; on the other side, forms, and substances of expression in its narrative. Chatman's taxonomy of forms of content and expression inform the design of the analytical model used in this study (1978, pp. 22-26).

Chatman's categorisation and further discussion of how it is used in the analytical model can be found in Chapter 3.

Christian Metz explored semiotics of film in his book *Film Language* (1974). His work emphasised the temporal nature of film narratives and "duality of time" in narrative. This dual temporality can be described as a story time — the time of the thing told — and narrative time — the time of the narrative (1974, p.18). Genette built on the idea of dual time in his essay on narrative discourse (1980). Research into television narratives frequently refers to this duality of time and elaborates on its relationship with other temporal elements such as schedule or the fragmental watching experience of viewers (Kozloff, 1992; Booth, 2012). I will explore the notion of dual time in contemporary internet TV to analyse to what extent it applies to narrative temporality of Netflix Originals. Viewers have the options of pausing, fast forwarding, rewinding, playing in slow-motion or high-speed. Encapsulating all these options, they have control over the duration, frequency, and order of their viewing experience. Chapters 5 and 6 on *Arrested Development* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events* discuss the notion of dual time in more detail.

As this study aims to provide a formal analysis of serial narratives on Netflix, it follows the formalist tradition and breaks down narrative structure to components as proposed by Barthes and Chatman. The structural analysis model proposed here uses Chatman's taxonomy. Furthermore, it is further informed by Genette's classification of elements of narrative, as well as his concept of paratextuality. As seen on the next section, a significant body of work on TV narratives follows a similar approach.

2.2 Narrative Studies and TV

Television studies can be divided into three main fields of study: programmes, industries, and audiences (Gray and Lotz, 2011). The study of programmes and television narratives developed slower than studies of industries and audiences. Moreover, the approach taken towards analysis of programmes evolved over decades, shifting from a focus on aesthetics of television to the impact of television programmes on everyday life first, then returning to an interest in researching television narratives (2011, p. 59).

Analysis of television narratives was significantly limited until the 1970s. Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz identify three reasons for this. Firstly, they point to the belittlement of TV as an art form in its early days, not being deemed worthy of a close reading. Secondly, they argue that emergent media is usually viewed as a single organism. They point out that as a new media form, most studies on television considered the medium as a whole. Thirdly, they indicate playback technologies have had a big impact on the analysis of the televisual text. VCRs with pausing, rewinding and fast-forwarding capabilities only emerged in the 1980s and before that, analysis of most television content had to be done in real time as the content was broadcast (2011, pp. 43-45). A large portion of research focused on content and not on form, analysing phenomena such as representation and distribution of power (Gray and Lotz, 2011). This notion of the late arrival of close analysis is still relevant. SVOD services and the binge-watching mode of engagement is emerging as relatively new phenomena and research that focuses on close reading of internet TV narratives is still very limited. Contemporary research tends to take SVOD services and internet TV landscape as a whole and little attention is afforded to individual components of this media environment.

One of the key studies on textual analysis in television was produced by John Fiske and John Hartley. They posit content analysis and semiotics as tools of analysis in their book *Reading*

Television (1978). While these tools have been used extensively to explore the above-mentioned phenomena around representation and power they have not been utilised as effectively to analyse the structure of narrative discourse. John Ellis argued that narration (discourse) in TV is the same for fictional series and non-fiction programmes (e.g., news segments) (1982, p. 159). He further suggested that an analysis of TV narratives can be made by looking at multiple segments broadcast consecutively instead of looking at each segment separately. While this approach takes into consideration the contextuality of televisual texts, it is difficult to apply to an SVOD landscape where programmes do not run in segments. Moreover, as Chapter 7 discusses, not all content on Netflix has linear, formulaic structures. How can an interactive experience like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) be analysed the same way as a television show that follows a linear narrative? This is why I argue later in the Methodology chapter that a combination of contextual analysis with the formal analytical model provides a flexibility to analyse each show in terms of how they are narrative structured within Netflix's textuality.

A considerable body of research in television narratives originates from the field of genre studies. Scholars like Jeremy Butler (1995), Christine Geraghty (1981, 1995), Robert C. Allen (1992, 1995), Roger Hagedorn (1995) and Sarah Kozloff (1992) have contributed greatly to the analysis of soap operas. While a significant part of these studies focuses on identity, ideology and representation, key texts in understanding television narratives have also emerged from these scholars' efforts to analyse soap operas as serial narratives. Arguably, if a narrative theory of television can be spoken of today, it is in part due to the work of TV scholars analysing soap operas.

One of the most cited studies in television narratives is Kozloff's analysis of televisual texts to characterise common traits of American television in the 1980s and the 1990s (1992). Kozloff argues that while all narrative can be split into two elements – as Barthes suggested –

television narratives have an inherent third element: schedule. This is the outermost layer of televisual narrative structure. Kozloff posits that the power of creating schedules led to the emergence of a new actor in narrative, the *supernarrator*. According to Kozloff, TV networks or television stations are the ultimate narrators of all stories they tell, shaping them on the outermost layer with schedules, gaps between episodes and seasons, and having the final say in deciding the length of episodes, seasons and shows. Kozloff attributed the supernarrator feature to TV networks due to their relative power over other layers of narrative structure. As she puts it, the supernarrator can "interrupt, delay, or preempt other texts at will," (1992, p. 94).

One of the research questions in this study is whether there are differences in the narrative structure between serial broadcast television narratives and Netflix Originals (RQ2). A further question I ask is how paratexts can impact narrative form and structure (RQ3). If the schedule is what gives TV networks a supernarrative power over all content, what happens to the distribution of this power when the schedule is exchanged with libraries of content and user interfaces? How does the ability to interrupt, delay or preempt other texts manifest itself in SVOD platforms? How is narrative impacted by these capabilities? Chapters 4, 6 and 7 provide insight into this question.

While Kozloff listed common features of television narratives, she did not provide an analytical framework on how she deduced her list of traits. M. J. Porter, D. L. Larson, Allison Hartcock and K. B. Nellis. (2002) provide a formal analysis of television narratives a decade later. The model combines Barthes' structural analysis with Chatman's notions of kernel and satellite events in the story[4]. Porter et al. identify specific functions of kernel and satellite

[4] As Chatman discusses, kernel events are essential to the story, meaning they keep the story going forward. Satellite events, on the other hand, are complementary, only existing to reinforce subplots or exposition (1978).

scenes in a television episode. Using their "Scene Function Model", they break down episodes of TV series into stories and lay out the function and purpose of each scene (2002).

According to their Scene Function Model, the researcher asks the same question of every scene in an episode: "What is the function/purpose of this scene for the telling of this story?" (2002, p. 4) Asking the same question of each scene and coding the answers according to a limited number of functions available for kernel and satellite scenes, they break down the narrative structure (figure 2.1). Scene Function Model breaks down every scene in terms of which storylines in the episode it serves and investigates if it corresponds to any of the six predetermined kernel and 11 predetermined satellite scene functions. The numbers opposite the scene functions imply the act and scene numbers. For instance, kernel function number 3, which is 'complication', is only seen in Storylines A — the main storyline — and B. It was present in Act 1, Scene 4 and Act 2, Scene 5 (2002).

Figure 2.1

K-3: Complication	1:4 2:3	2:5 3:2 3:4			
K-4: Confrontation	2:7 4:4	4:2			
K-5: Crisis	3:5 4:4	4:2	4:7		
K-6: Resolution	4:4	4:3	4:7		
Satellite scenes					
S-1: Exposition	1:2		2:2		
S-2: Dramatic question				1:1	
S-3: Introduction of new character	2:1	2:1			
S-4: Action	2:6				
S-5: Plan revealed	3:3				
S-6: Relationship affirmation	3:3	3:1		2:1	4:6
S-7: Clarification	4:1			4:5	
S-8: Conflict continues					
S-9: Relief		3:2			
S-10: Theme					
S-11: Foreshadowing					

M. J. Porter et al.'s Scene Function Model in an episode of *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) (2002, p. 28).

Porter et al. argue that their Scene Function Model tackles the question of "why we appreciate the richness of some texts and may find others lacking," (2002, p. 9). While this exhibits an investigation into narrative complexity, the model only tackles narratives on an individual episode basis. Series and serials are cumulative texts that consist of multiple episodes.

Secondly, the way their model is used fails to recognise the time-based aspect of television. How long did the scenes last? How much screen time can any kernel or satellite function have

at any given episode? Temporality is largely ignored in this model. The resulting data table does not provide a temporal snapshot of the episode from beginning to end. Thirdly, adding to issues with logging temporality, the resulting dataset is difficult to translate back to a coherent linear narrative. For instance, Figure 2.1 shows the reveal of a plan and an affirmation of a relationship – both satellite functions – that happen in Act 3, Scene 3, both contributing to Storyline A. Looking at the dataset alone, the researcher is not able to figure out which of these functions happened first. The limitations of the Scene Function Model were influential in the design of the STNA Model for this research.

Like Porter et al, Kathryn VanArendonk focuses on the television episode (2019). She argues that "an episode can stand by itself but cannot exist alone; it is a unit defined by its content as well as its organizing frames; it is a form that produces objects that can appear both formulaically identical and entirely dissimilar," (2019, p. 68). In theorising the television episode, she also argues that televisual seriality is different than serial narratives in other forms:

> [T]elevision seriality does not work like seriality in the novel, or seriality anywhere else in this sense, for this form, the whole is something less than the sum of its parts. Perhaps it's because television series can be so inordinately long, or because they're often entities that exist outside of any single creative mind and are instead the product of multiple producers, writers, or showrunners. Or perhaps it's because television has figured out how to do seriality differently—how to make the serial part an end in and of itself and not just a means to something bigger. (2019, p. 74)

Her stance reinforces the aim of the STNA Model where each episode, broken down into its narrative elements are shown next to each other. Looking at the model this way, one can see how seriality works within the episode and between different episodes.

VanArendonk also makes a point that "episode" is overlooked in close reading of television narratives in 21st century (2019). Indeed, there was a clear rise in interest towards a close reading of television narratives during 2000s. The next two decades also serve as the setting to

the emergence of terms like art TV (Thompson, 2003) and complex TV[5] (Mittell, 2006). Kristin Thompson explores the notion of "art television" through exemplary shows like *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) pointing to parallels between art cinema and the small screen (2003). Jeffrey Sconce focuses on what he calls conjectural forms of narrative in television series that can "engage in stories that are wholly conjectural — performative exercises in character, style and narration," (2004, p. 107). Conjectural forms of narrative include live episodes that are broadcast simultaneously as they are shot, crossover episodes that bring characters from different series together and individual episodes that function outside the overarching storyline.

Most recently, in looking at television narratives, Ionut Paul Boca uses content analysis, extracting information from IMDb pages to look for common features in half-hour TV shows on SVOD platforms (2018). He concludes that a clear deviation from broadcast TV conventions of the time, especially with varying episode lengths is present in half-hour shows made for SVOD platforms (p. 28). He further argues that the sitcom genre gets highly serialised – rather than being episodic – as it experiments with more complexity. Finally, he argues that Netflix shows tend to use strategies to attract more young audiences and audiences from the LGBTQ+ community. While his research scope is wide, looking at a total of 111 television shows across SVOD platforms and broadcast TV networks (2018, p. 8), the analysis is superficial as all data — including synopses of episodes — were extracted from the internet. Hence, the research does not provide a close reading of these texts.

Jason Mittell (2006, 2015) and Michael Z. Newman (2006) have both further elaborated on how storytelling practices changed in television in 2000s. Mittell argued that a "shifting balance between episodic and serial forms of storytelling was at the heart of this shift in

[5] See also, 'quality TV' as a predecessor term (Caldwell, 1995).

television narratives in the 2000s," (2006, p. 34). He coined the term "complex TV", suggesting that "at its most basic level, narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration," (2015, p. 18).

In his book of the same name, Mittell uses the subtitle *poetics of contemporary television storytelling*. He mentions two approaches to poetics that informed his approach to this storytelling mode. The first approach is Robert C. Allen's (1995) application of "reader-oriented poetics".

Allen originally borrowed the term "reader-oriented poetics" from Wolfgang Iser, who was at the forefront of developing reader-response criticism. In his article, *The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,* he put forward the fundamental notion of a virtual dimension of the narrative, which consists of half the physical text itself, and half the reader's experience reading it (Iser, 1972). Following in Iser and Allen's footsteps, phenomenology, as the study of objects as they appear in people's experiences, or how people gather meaning from objects, may provide meaningful insight to how narratives of Netflix Originals are formed (Giangiulio Lobo, 2013). The phenomenological approach can be useful in looking at serial narratives in connection to the practice of binge-watching. However, this is an audience-centric approach and as discussed elsewhere, this study is more interested in a formal analysis of texts and less in their reception.

The second approach to poetics that Mittell's work is informed by, is David Bordwell's (1989) "historical poetics of cinema". Bordwell suggests examining what options are open to media makers at a given time and takes into consideration social contexts as well as industrial, economic, and regulatory factors (1989). The narrative environment that Netflix facilitates, the cultural currency of binge-watching and the release model of all episodes being available at once, should all be considered when looking at televisual texts designed for SVOD platforms.

Gray and Lotz propose a similar approach in an analytical method they name "contextual programme analysis" (2011). They argue that "we always encounter television in a specific setting, next to or alongside other programs. Moreover, as we attempt to make sense of programs, we will always do so in part with structures learned through previous programs and experiences," (2011, p. 131). This approach to poetics, as well as Gray and Lotz's contextual programme analysis can be seen in the close reading of the texts that are examined in this thesis.

Since textual analysis is key to this study, a further discussion about the rationale behind construing narratives as texts should be considered. When Mittell proposed that narratives have become complex, he was also indicating to the complexity of the volume of paratexts and transmedia applications that surround these narratives. To refer to this combination of textualities that impact a text, a relatively new approach towards exploring the objects of contemporary television storytelling considers them to be narrative "ecosystems" instead of texts (Pescatore, Innocenti and Brembilla, 2014). The underlying claim of this theoretical proposition is that these narratives "are no longer textual objects, they are instead the result of an ecosystemic design where a general model is developed in advance as an evolutionary system with a high degree of consistency among all its components," (2014, p. 1). I contest a sharp contrast between a text and an ecosystem. Narrative texts have been examined as systems before (Bal, 1985) and can be construed as both texts and designed structures depending on the approach. Pescatore, Innocenti and Brembilla further refer to serial televisual storytelling as vast narratives, but it is not clear how these narratives are vast. Are they vast because of all the transmedia elements? Are they vast because of the paratextual content revolving around them? Or are they vast in their story universes confined within the narrative of the series? Are all television series vast enough to define as narrative ecosystems?

Pescatore, Innocenti and Brembilla list a number of characteristics that define a narrative ecosystem:

- They are open systems with stories and characters that can change;
- They are interconnected through sequels, spin-offs, reboots etc.;
- Over time a balance in the story universe is maintained;
- They are defined more by elements of environment and characters rather than the sequence of events;
- They are formed by a narrative component — that is the story — and a media component — that is the media landscape in which they appear. (2014, p. 1)

The features listed above can all be examined under approaches to textuality, intertextuality and paratextuality. Moreover, Pescatore, Innocenti and Brembilla argue that "narrative ecosystems" are "designed" (p. 1). This approach focuses on modes of production as it implies that there are actors that design these narratives. While this thesis is informed to an extent by industry studies in terms of how SVOD platforms function in television landscape, it explores narrative components through a formal analysis, requiring a close reading of content. Hence, this study considers these narratives and all the paratextual elements that surround them as texts.

As discussed elsewhere, this thesis follows Barthes and Chatman's notions of events and existents in terms of structural elements of a story. As these stories are temporal in their nature, temporal elements used in this thesis should also be defined. Newman analyses these complex TV narratives from their core to the outermost layer: from the smallest beats of the story to the overall story arcs that run through several episodes or seasons (2006). Newman – informed by industry practice prevalent in United States – considers beats to be the smallest temporal units of storytelling in television.

> Situation comedies, episodics, and serial dramas all organise their stories into rather short segments, often less than two minutes in length. Viewers might call these

> scenes, but writers call them 'beats', and they are television's most basic storytelling unit. (Newman, 2006, p. 17)

The distinction between "scenes" and "beats" is important to this study. Scenes refer to the source material, the script of the story on screen. A scene can start with one beat and transform into other story beats along the way. As time and space in the scene remain constant, a long scene may consist of several beats. The analytical model used here is informed by Newman's attribution of beats as the smallest unit of storytelling. As a beat change refers to a change in any narrative component, beats are more flexible than scenes (a scene change requires a change in setting or time) making it more efficient to break down episodes during the data collection stage.

Kristin Thompson (2003), Sean O'Sullivan (2010) and Lynn Kozak (2018, 2021) also position beats instead of scenes at the heart of television storytelling. Especially, Kozak's work focuses on how televisual narratives use diegetic visual cues. Her case study of *Stranger Things* (2016-), a Netflix Original show, marks down every time a drawing of the main monster of the series appears in any scene to understand how the show uses diegetic visual cues (2018). By marking down every time diegetic recap cues appear on an episode, she can construct a diagram which illustrates if there is a pattern of recap throughout that episode. Kozak's work reinforces the argument that temporality plays a significant role in the analysis of serial narratives on Netflix.

Another discussion of temporality in television narratives is introduced by Paul Booth (2012). Booth asserts that there are three layers of time in television narratives. In his monograph *Time on TV*, he argues that in most television series released in the 2000s, there is a textual play with time. The innermost level is where the audience is exposed to the story being told according to the characters' sense of time. As seen in shows like *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-

2014) and *Lost* (2004-2010) the characters of the show may remember things differently, forget details, and recount experiences in an untruthful way.

Booth suggests the next layer of play with time is constructed as the same story may be shown from different vantage points or with pieces of the story given in different sequences, leaving it to the audience to put the pieces together to compile a coherent story. This suggests a play with narration time. Booth further argues that at the third and outermost layer of narrative structure, there is another play with time when the audience needs to reconstruct viewing experiences of previous episodes and seasons to make sense of the overall narrative, taking into consideration all the gaps and breaks between scenes, episodes, and seasons.

I combine Booth's argument with Genette's notions of order, duration, and frequency. In the cases of serial narratives on Netflix, the audience not only pieces together the narrative through the events of the old and new episodes, but arguably they also participate in the construction of the narrative via the choices they make in terms of order, duration, and frequency. The order of the episodes and seasons they watch, how many hours they spend in one sitting, and how many times a week/month/year they watch it may all be significant for the narrative structure. They all signify a play with time at the outermost layer. This is especially true in the case of interactive specials on Netflix where some texts cannot even proceed temporally without input from the viewer. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

While interactive specials may have a distinct relationship with time, in Netflix Originals, the play with time is facilitated via the potential absence of gaps: gaps between seasons, gaps between episodes, even the commercial gaps between acts of an episode for broadcast TV. Sean O'Sullivan (2006) discusses the notion of gaps through the serial *Deadwood* (2004-2006). Making comparisons between Charles Dickens' serial novels and two seasons of the show, he argues that the gaps between seasons significantly contribute to the narrative of the story. He

suggests that at any given point the audience has "old" knowledge from previous episodes and "new" knowledge that comes from the episode being watched at the moment. Then there is the "between". This is between two seasons, or between two episodes where the previous episodes have already become old knowledge, but new knowledge is not yet accessible (2006, pp. 119-122).

Where does a serial narrative produced for and distributed by Netflix stand in a discussion of temporal layering of narrative? All three questions on Genette's (1980) elements of narrative seem central here: In which order are the episodes released or viewed? How long are the episodes and how many episodes are there in a season? What is the frequency of release? Once the viewer has access to all seasons and episodes of a series, the order in which they view the episodes becomes tangible. The viewer can start from any season or any episode they prefer. For long-running series like *Supernatural* (2005-2020) or *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-), this means the show can hook new viewers with new storylines and larger production budgets in later seasons, and the viewer can go back and start from the beginning if they are fully invested in the show. Several Netflix Original series have played with this flexibility. For instance, the fourth season of *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2016-2019) which was distributed by Netflix as original programming consists of episodes that contain story arcs that are not linear throughout the season. This means as long as the viewer begins with the first episode and ends with the final episode, the order in which they watch the remaining episodes can be changed without jeopardising the integrity of the story.

In fact, one of the earliest notable studies on narrative in Netflix Originals is on construction of narrative in Season 4 of *Arrested Development.* Maíra Bianchini and Maria Carmem Jacob de Souza (2017) provide an insight into how the fourth season was built on a different structure than the previous ones — which were on broadcast television — and they discuss how Netflix afforded the capability to introduce a different structure. Their study approaches the show

from a production standpoint and looks at how the season was constructed to work in this specific way.

Netflix experiments with different episode orders in some of their other original series, most notably the anthology series *Love, Death & Robots* (2019-) where users are randomly given one of the four different episode orders (Liptak, 2019). Netflix's play with sequence of episodes is discussed in detail within the context of supernarrative agency later in Chapters 6 and 7.

Lastly, the Netflix user arguably has more control and flexibility over the frequency of viewership too. They can choose to view sitcoms during the day and dramas during the evenings. They can reserve their weekends to binge their favourite show. For shows like *Chef's Table* (2015-) which only releases a few episodes each season, they can even spread their viewing into several months to better navigate the time between the release of two seasons.

Another point to take into consideration when discussing frequency is the specifics of time spent watching content. When a viewer 'binges' a whole season in one weekend, that rarely means watching all episodes back-to-back without ever pausing or giving a break. There are still gaps between – or within – episodes in bingeing, but the duration and nature of these gaps change. Discussions of frequency are overlooked both in analyses of television narratives and audience research. As Netflix experiments with different release strategies – weekly episodes, daily episodes, seasons, and half-seasons – it is important to note the frequency of narrative text in overall narrative structures of Netflix Originals.

Overall, these questions and discussions point towards a gap in the literature that looks at the narrative structure in television. As Mittell (2006) and Newman (2006) suggested, there is very limited literature that focuses on a formal analysis of television narratives. Gray and Lotz further argue that as television studies moved forward, the "field showed interest less in the aesthetics and evaluation of television, and more in television's role in everyday life," (2011, p.

44). As an emerging branch under television studies, research on internet TV has so far not been able to provide a comprehensive formal analysis into serial narratives made for SVOD platforms too.

I argue that with the growing prominence of SVOD platforms and binge-watching practices, this is an ideal time to explore televisual narratives. A thorough analysis, focusing on formal structures of these narratives can uncover inherent characteristics, and the findings can contribute to a narrative theory of internet TV.

2.3 Internet TV

I have positioned my research in relation to narratology and narrative studies in television. Now I will situate it within research undertaken in television studies, specifically in the growing pool of research on internet TV. As Amanda Lotz points out, for most of the 2000s television and the internet were articulated as different media. She further argues that the expectation during that time was that the new media of the internet would replace television (2018b, p. 114). What transpired was not a replacement, but a new media landscape of television coexisting with the internet. Still, the rise of internet television was such a significant change in the television industry that many scholars frame this shift as a new era of television (Curtin, 2009; Jenner, 2014; Lotz, 2018b). In order to historically situate Netflix Originals inside television studies, I will first identify this era.

Roberta Pearson categorises American TV into three periods: TVI, era of channel scarcity between the 1950s to the early 1980s; TVII from the 1980s to the late 1990s with network expansions, network branding strategies and quality television; and TVIII from the late 1990s onwards, the era of proliferating digital distribution platforms (2011, pp. 105-131). One

approach to identifying the new era of television is to deem it as TVIV. Mareike Jenner argues that "technological shifts, changes to content and marketing strategies that target increasingly smaller audience segments (from mass medium to niche medium) justify a categorisation of contemporary shifts as TVIV," (2018, pp. 13-14). I agree that the shift to a new era is justified, but it should be noted that Pearson's periodisation only applies to the US television industry.

Jenner suggests that the periods of US television "roughly" match other western television markets even though they "tend to be a few years behind," (2018, p. 10). John Ellis proposes similar periods of time with a focus on British television. He divides television eras into an "era of scarcity", an "era of availability" and an "era of plenty" within roughly corresponding time periods (2000, p. 39). With the penetration of satellite TV and emergence of transnational television networks — especially in Europe — it is evident that western television markets went through similar time periods of development (Chalaby, 2009). Arguably, the rise of the internet TV and wide availability of the most popular SVOD platforms – Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ – results in western television markets going through the same period of television in much more similar periods of time.

As discussed elsewhere, another term used to define the contemporary television era is matrix media. Michael Curtin suggests that throughout the late 2000s, television viewing hours per day were higher than earlier decades and televisual content "was coming from more centres and flowing through more circuits than ever before," (2009, p. 13). He asserts that television "was no longer a broadcast medium or network medium, or even a multichannel medium; television had become a matrix medium, an increasingly flexible and dynamic mode of communication," (2009, p. 13). This notion of television becoming a matrix medium relates to the idea of converging media. As Henry Jenkins put forward, media convergence is the

flow of content across platforms; cooperation between media industries; and movement of media audiences inside the media landscape (2006).

Convergence is a concept that is useful in accounting for the shift in television industry. The shift from the idea of network and post-network television to Lotz's idea of "televisions" (2017) – different televisual media and television technologies co-existing – can be traced back to the convergence of digital TV and the internet (Curtin, 2009; Evans, 2011). Early research on this convergence focuses on audiences' ability to view content on their own, within their own schedules.

When describing various over-the-top (OTT) Video-on-Demand (VOD) platforms Elizabeth Evans uses the term transmedia distribution to define access to television content through what she calls alternative televisual platforms. She argues that "televisual content is not just being transformed into transmedia storytelling; it is also being placed wholesale within digital interfaces," (2011, p. 40). While Evans' idea of transmedia distribution also explains the media landscape clearly, I refrain from using terms like digital media, new media or transmedia in contextualising this era of television. Since the shift in television is contemporary, it is difficult to pinpoint which technological developments and cultural changes are more influential than others. Was it the rise of SVOD platforms or the rise in transmedia storytelling that catalysed the shift? Was it the screen getting smaller and more advanced, or improving streaming speeds that had a bigger impact on this new era? I aim to look at the texts produced in the SVOD environment of Netflix without speculating on these questions.

In early 2010s, alternative televisual platforms were primarily considered to be libraries of television content labelled as 'catch-up TV' (Grainge and Johnson, 2018). As Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson put forward in their case study, "when BBC iPlayer launched in

2007, its marketing tagline, 'making the unmissable unmissable', placed a clear emphasis on iPlayer as a catch-up service" (Grainge and Johnson, 2018, p. 29). They reveal that in the 2010s, promotional campaigns for BBC iPlayer shifted their focus to showcase the new functions of the service. Johnson argues that VOD services that once promoted themselves as catch-up TV have now become "Online TV" (Johnson, 2019).

Moreover, Mareike Jenner points out that the television industry failed to foresee the changes internet television would bring with original programming (2018). Ofcom's 2018 *Media Nations* report reveals that one-third of all viewing undertaken on SVOD services in the UK during the year has been original programming (Ofcom, 2018). The changing nature of SVOD services from catch-up TV to original content providers further emphasises the timeliness of this research.

Within this recent timeline, a new age of television that shifted from TVIII era of digital TV to TVIV era of internet TV may be apparent, but it is difficult to pinpoint an exact time for this shift. There are a few key milestones that have been pointed out by scholars. For instance, Curtin (2009) argues that the shift towards matrix media started in 2007 and continued into 2008. He attributes this firstly to the television writers' strike in United States[6]. Curtin argues that on one hand, the strike resulted in audiences turning towards the internet to get televisual content; on the other hand, content creators started looking for alternative outlets on the internet. At the end of the 2007-2008 TV season, ratings of all major US TV networks had dropped and the regular 23-week television season with autumn premieres and summer reruns shifted into a 52-week schedule that would be constantly updated with the addition of new series (Curtin, 2009, p. 14).

[6] In late 2007, Writers Guild of America (WGA) went on a strike that resulted in disruption in schedules of all major network televisions. The main reason behind the strike was WGA's demand for re-calculated royalties from alternative distribution modes including streaming and downloading. Late night shows and television series had to either end their seasons abruptly or go on mid-season breaks until the strike was over (Blickey, 2018).

While 2007 was disruptive and transformative for the television industry in the United States, it did not impact SVOD services which were still in a state of incubation. The year also coincides with the widespread launch of tablets and smartphones (Lotz, 2018b); but another few years would pass before they became common tools for televisual engagement. In fact, Lotz identifies 2010 as the starting point for the era of internet TV. She argues that by 2010 tablets and smartphones were used by 27 percent of the US market; laptop sales overtook desktop computers and devices such as Xbox and Apple TV, as well as smart TVs – televisions with an internet connection – were introduced to the market; which all led to a "reimagining of viewing". A more important development was Netflix's launch of its streaming-only service. Up until this date, Netflix had been functioning mainly as a DVD rental service. In 2010, the company introduced a $7.99 per month subscription plan for streaming-only content and the number of their subscribers rose by 63%. (Lotz, 2018b, pp. 114-116).

2010 was significant for the rise of SVOD platforms and the shift of television viewing from television sets to other devices; but an even more significant disruption to broadcast television was not yet conceived. Streaming platforms and their libraries still functioned primarily as catch-up TV services. It was in 2012-2013 that Netflix first introduced Netflix Originals and arguably changed the television landscape for both broadcast television networks and SVOD services. In 2012, Netflix acquired rights to exclusively air *Lilyhammer*, a Norwegian series, in the US. In early 2013, the company aired its first original programming, *House of Cards*, followed quickly by *Hemlock Grove* (2013-2015), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019) and the fourth season of *Arrested Development*. As the corpus of this study consists of original programming commissioned by Netflix, it acknowledges 2012-2013 as the crucial turning point in television and picks its case studies from 2013 onwards, starting with *House of Cards*.

The number of SVOD platforms rose significantly in the past years with new platforms from media conglomerates such as Disney and Apple becoming more prominent actors; yet Netflix has so far been at the centre of the growing body of internet TV research (Jenner, 2018). Scholars such as Lotz (2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b), Derek Johnson (2018) and Catherine Johnson (2019) have all cited Netflix's prevalence in their texts on the internet TV landscape. Other scholars such as Lobato (2019) and Jenner (2018) wrote exclusively about Netflix and its impact on the television landscape. Lobato's monograph, *Netflix Nations* explores debates around Netflix and uses the company as a starting point for building a theory about the "relationship between global television and internet distribution," (2019, p. 16). Jenner's monograph, *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television,* has a similar aim as Jenner investigates the reconception of television by exploring Netflix's relation to regimes of control as well as commercial and cultural power (2018, p. 27). To complement these two studies, this thesis explores Netflix in terms of the narrative forms that are germane to the platform.

Since this research is focused on forms of Netflix's original programming, it is noteworthy to identify how Netflix positions its own content in the wider television landscape. The company uses the phrase "Netflix Originals" liberally. Shows that are labelled originals cover a wide spectrum including but not limited to shows that are commissioned directly by Netflix and released exclusively (e.g. *Stranger Things*); shows that air in broadcast networks but co-produced by Netflix to be released on other territories (*e.g. The Good Place* [2016-2020]); and even shows that have been commissioned directly by other SVOD platforms, but licensed by Netflix to be released in select territories (e.g. *Immortals* [2018]).

Netflix Originals can be divided into four categories (Ball, 2018b):

- Developed Originals; developed, produced, and released by the SVOD platform, e.g., *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017-2019)

- Acquired Originals; developed and produced by a third-party but acquired exclusively by the SVOD platform, e.g. *The Crown* (2016-)
- Co-Licensed Originals; initially developed and produced for the SVOD platform but with market rights that are split between other networks before production begins, e.g. *The End of the F***ing World* (2017-)
- Licensed Originals; developed, produced, and aired by other networks or platforms, but licensed exclusively for other territories where it has been bought by the SVOD platform and is promoted as original programming, e.g., *Designated Survivor* (2016-2019) in the UK.

Since the company uses the term "Netflix Originals" to label a wide range of shows, this thesis will distinguish between the different strands of programming. Case studies will predominantly be picked from the first two categories of original programming: developed and acquired originals. A television show that was developed for broadcast TV might have narrative elements in its structure that correspond to the gaps in television schedule (commercial gaps in episodes, weekly gaps between episodes, etc.). The changing nature of gaps in the SVOD environment may result in changes in the narrative form and a comparison between this form and broadcast television serial form may provide interesting insights. Moreover, replayability of individual episodes of TV shows is different between an SVOD platform and broadcast television. Broadcast television relies on syndication – episodes being aired elsewhere (in a different day and time and/or a different television channel) – for repeated viewing. SVOD platform relies on its own library to facilitate this. When access to replayability is different, this can impact how narrative structure is formed.

The Literature Review has attempted to provide a summary of literature relating to narratology, narrative in TV and internet TV. Studies underlined here are not meant to be seen as an exhaustive list of research in their respective fields but as key studies that have informed this thesis. Moreover, each case study chapter uses additional relevant literature that is key in understanding arguments made there, but are not tied to the general questions,

aims and objectives of this thesis. Chapter 4 involves early narrative research about *House of Cards*. Chapter 5 provides a detailed review of TV adaptations. Chapter 6 includes literature on televisual afterlives and sitcom genre to an extent. Chapter 7 reviews some of the key literature on interactivity, hypertexts and supernarration.

Individually, each section of this literature review reinforces the theoretical framework of this study. First and foremost, the research defines itself as a formal analysis of narrative form; hence it borrows key elements and methods from narratology and poetics. Secondly, the narrative form here is televisual, therefore a close inspection of the body of literature on television narratives was provided. Finally, the televisual serial narratives that are produced and distributed by the SVOD platform Netflix, which will generally be called Netflix Originals hereinafter, are noteworthy elements of the current internet TV landscape and should be considered within this wider context.

All taken together, this review has demonstrated shortcomings of research into the structure of this narrative form. This thesis aims to fill this gap and contribute to a narrative theory of internet TV. In order to do that, it proposes a structural analysis model to inspect large bodies of serial televisual narratives.

3 METHODOLOGY

This research asks four central research questions with a focus on narrative structure in televisual serial narratives produced for and distributed by Netflix:

1. What are the characteristics of narrative form in televisual serial narratives released exclusively by the SVOD platform Netflix?
2. What possible variations can the form and structure of televisual serial narratives released exclusively by Netflix have?
3. How do paratextual elements (including, but not limited to: the thumbnails, teasers, promotional texts and interface elements) effect narrative form and structure in Netflix?
4. In what ways can time and temporality in these narratives deviate from televisual serial narratives aimed at broadcast television?

All four research questions focus on the narrative form and the methodology of the research concentrates on a formal analysis. This brings the focus less on examination of various explicit and implicit meanings in text, and more on how meaning emerges from the text. Moreover, the thesis analyses TV Shows as holistic narratives, basing the analysis not on individual episodes but upon all episodes in a season (sometimes all seasons of a show). To provide a holistic study, textual analysis is used in two main ways: formal structural analysis and contextual programme analysis. Data collection is achieved using an analytical model that translates temporal visual texts of TV Shows into diagrams. The model, which I have called the Serialised Televisual Narrative Analysis (STNA) Model, breaks down all narrative elements of each episode and logs them in a linear dimension, from the first second of the first episode to the final second of the final episode. These diagrams are then analysed to examine narrative structure.

In total, three Netflix Original shows have been analysed using the STNA Model. These are *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, where all three seasons and all 25 episodes were analysed; *House of Cards*, where all 13 episodes of its first season were analysed; and *Arrested Development* where Seasons 3, 4 and 5 were analysed, including the recut version of season 4 titled *Arrested Development Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*, for a total of 66 episodes.

Across three shows, eight seasons and 104 episodes, a total of 3587 minutes (59 hours and 47 minutes) of televisual text was analysed using the STNA Model. In addition to that, five interactive specials on Netflix were analysed to examine narrative form. These were *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* (2020), *Cat Burglar* (2022), *Trivia Quest* (2022), and *Battle Kitty* (2022). The next section goes onto detail how the STNA Model was developed.

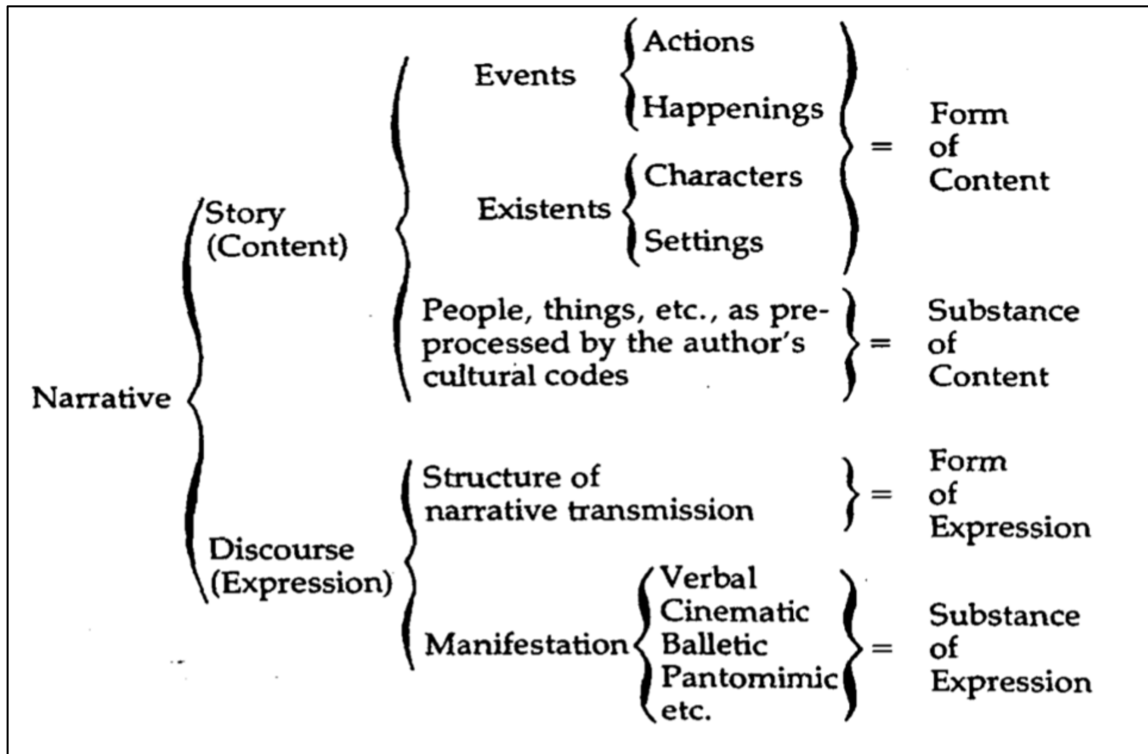
3.1 Serialised Televisual Narrative Analysis Model

A considerable amount of scholarly work that focuses on a close reading of narrative in TV is based on textual analysis. Key scholars analysing television such as John Fiske and John Hartley (1978), Robert C. Allen (1995), Sarah Kozloff (1992), Jason Mittell (2006, 2015) and Michael Newman (2006) have provided various approaches to the close reading of televisual texts.

As discussed in the literature review, this research treats Netflix Originals as texts and therefore uses textual analysis to examine its subject. The thesis is further interested in the morphology of narrative; hence the subject of analysis is the narrative form. It seeks to provide a structural analysis, following works of Barthes (1975), Chatman (1978) and Genette (1980). The formal analysis here uses the same taxonomy of narrative used by Barthes and

Chatman: story and discourse. In breaking down narrative structure into its components, it uses the taxonomy proposed by Seymour Chatman (figure 3.1) (1978, p. 26).

Figure 3.1



Seymour Chatman's taxonomy of narrative, taken from *Story and Discourse* (1978, p. 26).

Chatman breaks story and discourse into further components. This thesis focuses on his categorisation of elements of story (content) rather than discourse (expression). As it aims for a formal analysis, it borrows the narrative elements listed as "form of content" instead of "substance of content" (1978, p. 26). Chatman breaks down story into two: events and existents. Events are made up of actions and happenings. Actions are events that are triggered by what the characters do, and happenings are events that are triggered by what the characters experience. Existents are made up of characters and settings. All together, these four elements comprise the "form of content" of a narrative according to Chatman (1978, p.

22-26). These four elements have been selected to be the core parameters to look for in serialised televisual texts for the STNA Model.

To collect data on narrative components, a tool was needed to decode the episodes (and sometimes whole seasons or multiple seasons) as seen on screen in terms of how the narrative components were present in the text. To achieve this, an analytical model was developed to translate serial televisual texts into diagrams of episodes with their narrative structure broken down to components. The development of the analytical model was informed by various tools previously used by film and television scholars.

Scholars of film studies have used different tools to translate moving image data into measurable data. Barry Salt proposed a system – which he called Cinemetrics – which involved the breakdown of shot lengths to explore visual style of films (1974). He argued that the visual language used in a film could be analysed by how many times any type of shot — close-up, medium shot, long shot, etc., — was used in the film and on average how long the shot was seen for. This approach was developed further in the next decades, most notably through Yuri Tsivian's work into Cinemetrics (2019). In its current form, Cinemetrics is a software that counts and graphs the number of scene cuts in a piece of moving image content. This became the first point of reference in developing my analytical model. Looking at the development of Cinemetrics influenced my decision to develop a tool which prioritised temporality.

The development of the analytical model was also informed by how these tools could be used to visualise datasets of media. One of the objectives of my analytical model was to be able to show multiple episodes as a single dataset. I explored what tools scholars have used to visualise data from films and television. For instance, the Software Studies Initiative led by Manovich et al. carries out visualisation projects under the title Cultural Analytics that

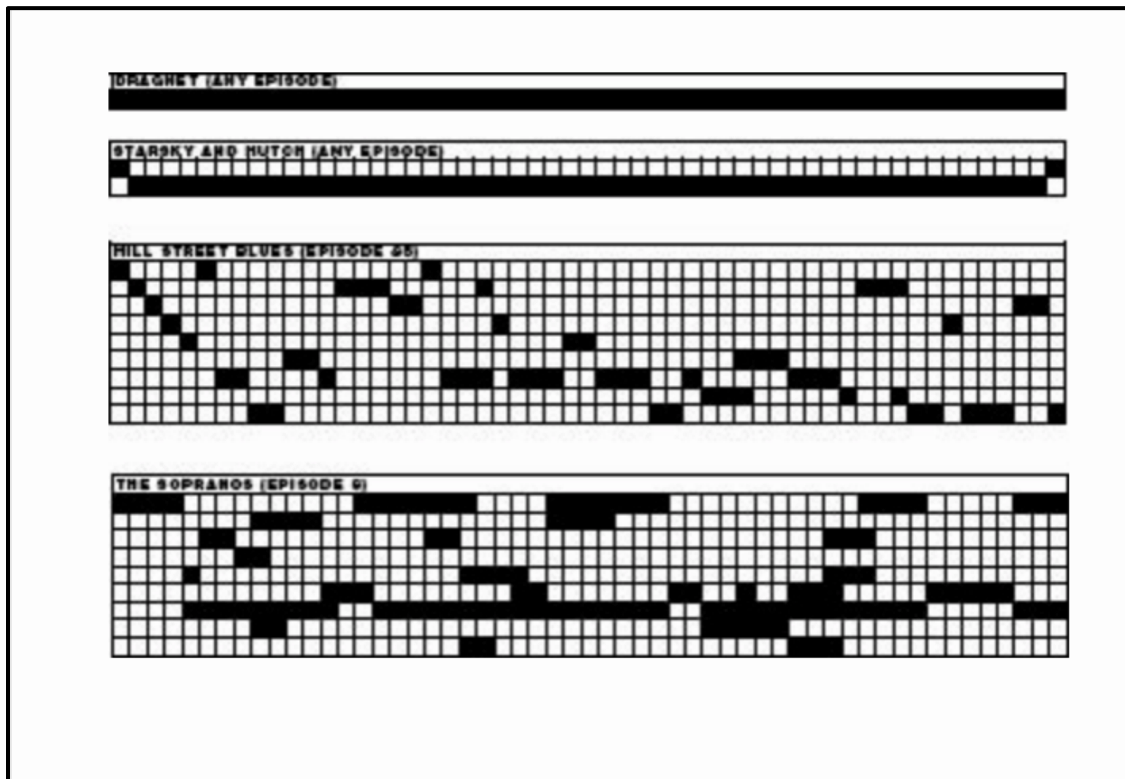
visualise different data sets in films, animations, video games, etc., ranging from shot lengths to colour palettes. Their tools enable the visualisation of an entire video by making a collage of every still frame next to each other, or by putting a strip of colour from each frame of video side by side to reveal colour patterns (Cultural Analytics, 2014). Their work gave insight into how to visualise my analytical model; however, their tools seemed to work best when an individual component in a very large dataset was being analysed. Moreover, their tools often emphasised the visual language rather than the story. Hence, I looked elsewhere for tools that prioritised changes in text rather than changes in visual cues.

The analytical model used here needed to be able to detect changes in text even if they occurred without a difference in the composition of shot. A key dialogue can change the beats of a televisual text. Therefore, I developed a model that focused on narrative elements. A useful way to decode these serial texts in terms of their narrative elements turned out to be data tables. To account for temporality, columns were used on the X axis to identify units of time in the episode. As discussed in the literature review, beats were used as the smallest units of narrative time. Narrative components were listed down on the Y axis and the corresponding columns were completed for each beat when the narrative component was present. Whenever there was a change in the narrative component on screen, a new beat — and a new column — was added. Once full episodes, and then multiple episodes were translated onto the table, a diagram of narrative components throughout the full duration of narrative was rendered visible.

The use of a diagram with time on the horizontal x-axis and narrative elements on the vertical y-axis was influenced by contemporary research into television narratives. Steven B. Johnson used visual diagrams to analyse different plotlines in television series (2006). To support his argument that television shows employed more plots over the decades, he visualised different plot lines in each episode on a data table and filled the diagram for every

minute a plot line moved forward in the episode. This resulted in a visual diagram that reflected patterns in an episode of tv series in terms of plot complexity (see figure 3.2). While the use of a diagram for this thesis was mainly influenced by Johnson's work, the analytical model used here is much more complex in terms of showing multiple episodes together and examining multiple elements of narrative in the same diagram.

Figure 3.2



Steven B. Johnson's plotline graph taken from his book *Everything Bad is Good for You* (Johnson, 2006, p. 70). Each box represents a beat on the episode. Each row is a plotline in the episode. Each filled box shows whether the story on screen contributes to that specific plotline.

There have been several recent studies that used similar tools to analyse television narratives. One example that informed this analytical model was Lynn Kozak's work on recaps as described in the Chapter 2 (2018). Kozak analysed *Stranger Things* and tracked the appearance

of diegetic visual cues that pointed to the monster portrayed in the series. The significance of her analysis for this research is the fact that she used the same diagram structure (x-axis for time, y-axis for narrative element) but analysed all episodes of the second season of *Stranger Things* together. She used similar analytical tools to examine full seasons of series like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *The OA* (2016-2019). While her analysis focused on a single parameter to investigate the texts, Kozak's analysis of full seasons justified the temporal scope of this analytical model.

3.1.1 STNA Model Version 1.0

With these considerations, Version 1.0 of the analytical model was designed, and a pilot analysis was conducted. The list of narrative components that comprise form of content were listed to include settings, characters; actions and happenings, and a further category of plot devices was added to note down any narrative technique that would move the story forward. The aim of this further categorisation was to see if any argument could be made on form of expression[7]. Narrative techniques listed on the model were mainly adopted from Mittell's book *Complex TV* (2015) and were not meant as an exhaustive list.

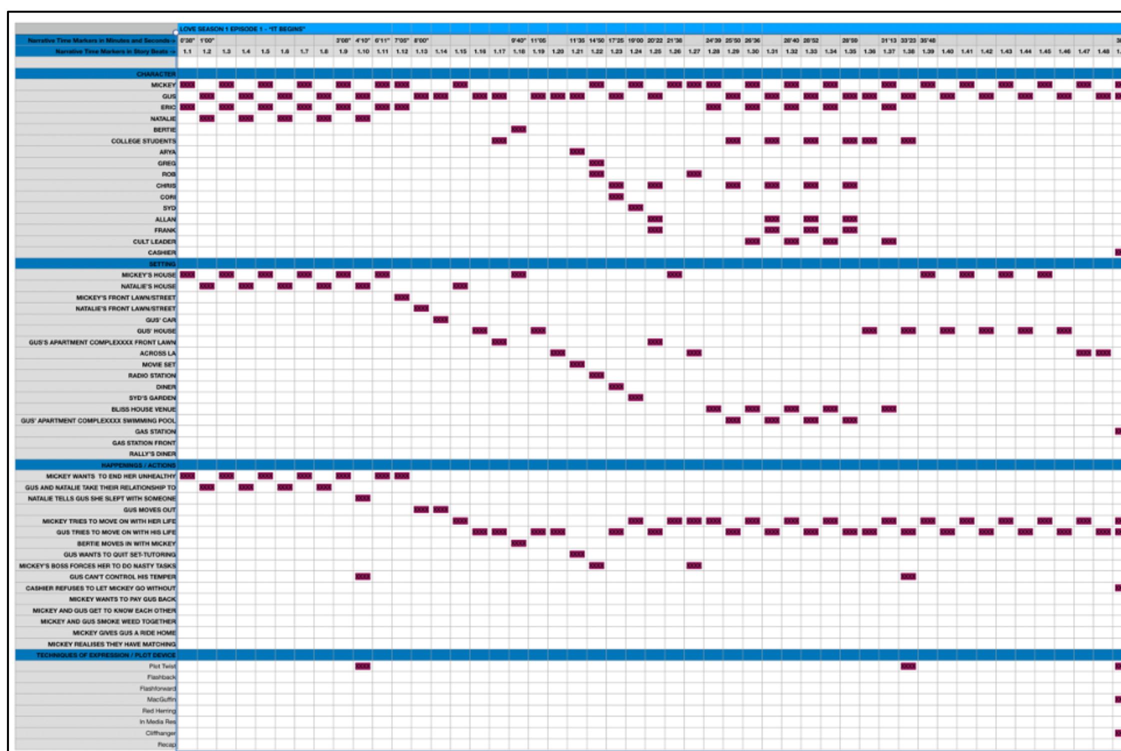
The pilot case study was conducted on the first two episodes of Netflix Original show *Love* (2016-2018), a show that follows characters Mickey (Gillian Jacobs) and Gus (Paul Rust) in their early 30s living in Los Angeles, exploring male and female perspectives on romantic relationships. The show was picked for the pilot study for three reasons. Firstly, I was unfamiliar with the show, have not watched it before and could therefore reduce the risk of bias and making assumptions. Secondly, the scale of the story was relatively small with only two main characters and a small number of recurring roles which would be less challenging during the data collection process. Thirdly, episodes varied in duration between 26 and 45

[7] See Seymour Chatman's diagram above (figure 3.1).

minutes — most Netflix Originals have varying episode lengths — which gave me the opportunity to investigate a more flexible narrative time that changed in each episode.

An initial analysis of the first two episodes gave promising insight towards narrative structure of Netflix Originals. Michael Z. Newman argues that "television acts have strongly punctuated endings, often with a clearly focused question, sometimes with a cliffhanger" (2006, p. 21). The first two episodes of *Love* did not have cliffhangers between acts. In fact, it was hard to pinpoint where one act finished and the other started in the absence of commercial breaks (figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3

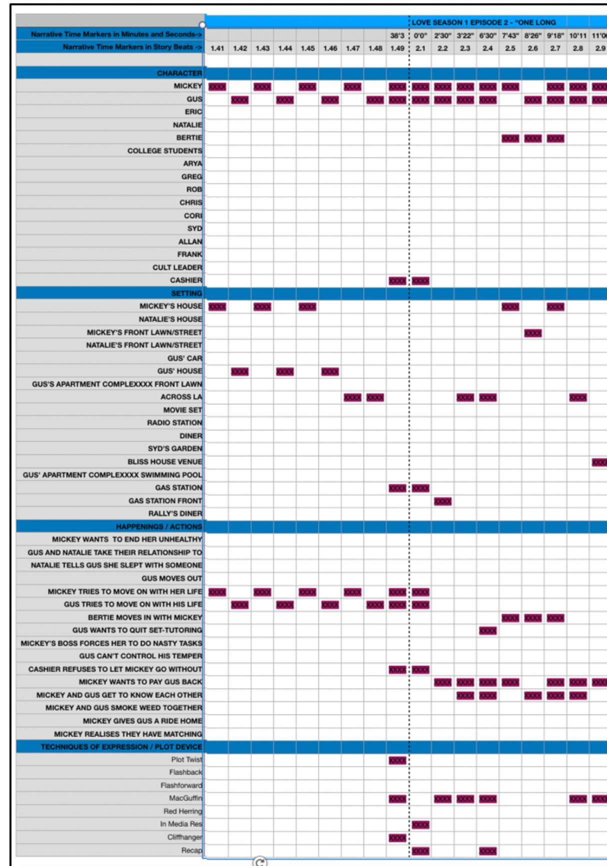


First episode of *Love* as seen on the STNA Model Version 1.0.

The first episode had forty-nine beats, whereas the second episode only had twenty-four, showing a flexible temporality. Story time passing in between the two episodes was virtually

non-existent and the second episode picked up from where the first one left off — actually starting from the middle of the final scene of the first episode (figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4

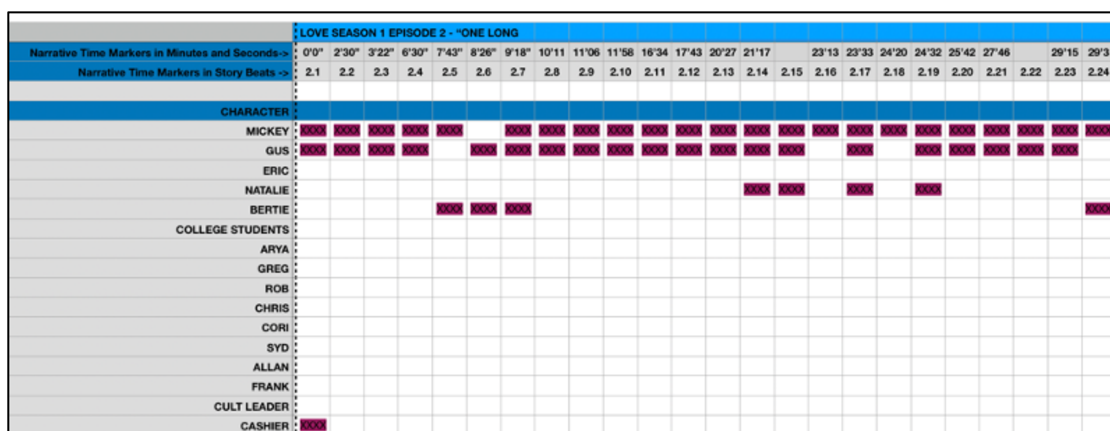


										LOVE SEASON 1 EPISODE 2 - "ONE LONG								
Narrative Time Markers in Minutes and Seconds->									38'3	0'0"	2'30"	3'22"	6'30"	7'43"	8'26"	9'18"	10'11	11'06
Narrative Time Markers in Story Beats ->	1.41	1.42	1.43	1.44	1.45	1.46	1.47	1.48	1.49	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.8	2.9
CHARACTER																		
MICKEY	XXXX		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
GUS		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
ERIC																		
NATALIE																		
BERTIE														XXXX	XXXX	XXXX		
COLLEGE STUDENTS																		
ARYA																		
GREG																		
ROB																		
CHRIS																		
CORI																		
SYD																		
ALLAN																		
FRANK																		
CULT LEADER																		
CASHIER									XXXX	XXXX								
SETTING																		
MICKEY'S HOUSE	XXXX		XXXX		XXXX									XXXX		XXXX		
NATALIE'S HOUSE																		
MICKEY'S FRONT LAWN/STREET															XXXX			
NATALIE'S FRONT LAWN/STREET																		
GUS' CAR																		
GUS' HOUSE		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX												
GUS'S APARTMENT COMPLEXXXX FRONT LAWN																		
ACROSS LA							XXXX	XXXX				XXXX	XXXX				XXXX	
MOVIE SET																		
RADIO STATION																		
DINER																		
SYD'S GARDEN																		
BLISS HOUSE VENUE																		XXXX
GUS' APARTMENT COMPLEXXXX SWIMMING POOL																		
GAS STATION									XXXX	XXXX								
GAS STATION FRONT											XXXX							
RALLY'S DINER																		
HAPPENINGS / ACTIONS																		
MICKEY WANTS TO END HER UNHEALTHY																		
GUS AND NATALIE TAKE THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO																		
NATALIE TELLS GUS SHE SLEPT WITH SOMEONE																		
GUS MOVES OUT																		
MICKEY TRIES TO MOVE ON WITH HER LIFE	XXXX		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX	XXXX								
GUS TRIES TO MOVE ON WITH HIS LIFE		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX								
BERTIE MOVES IN WITH MICKEY														XXXX	XXXX	XXXX		
GUS WANTS TO QUIT SET-TUTORING													XXXX					
MICKEY'S BOSS FORCES HER TO DO NASTY TASKS																		
GUS CAN'T CONTROL HIS TEMPER																		
CASHIER REFUSES TO LET MICKEY GO WITHOUT									XXXX	XXXX								
MICKEY WANTS TO PAY GUS BACK											XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
MICKEY AND GUS GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER												XXXX	XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	
MICKEY AND GUS SMOKE WEED TOGETHER																		
MICKEY GIVES GUS A RIDE HOME																		
MICKEY REALISES THEY HAVE MATCHING																		
TECHNIQUES OF EXPRESSION / PLOT DEVICE																		
Plot Twist									XXXX									
Flashback																		
Flashforward																		
MacGuffin									XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX				XXXX	XXXX
Red Herring																		
In Media Res										XXXX								
Cliffhanger									XXXX									
Recap										XXXX			XXXX					

STNA Model Version 1.0 showing the end of the first episode and the beginning of the second episode of *Love*.

Newman further suggests that the television writer aims to hold the viewer's attention through unpredictable storylines and that writers "work out a system of parcelling the narrative into small pieces in regular alternation, each of which makes a new claim on the audience's interest and aims to intensify its emotional response" (2006, p. 18). In contrast to this, the second episode of *Love* follows the two main characters from start to finish and throughout the episode, only three secondary characters appear (figure 3.5). The plotlines on the diagram also showed that the same plot lines were followed for most of the episode.

Figure 3.5



	LOVE SEASON 1 EPISODE 2 - "ONE LONG																							
Narrative Time Markers in Minutes and Seconds->	0'0"	2'30"	3'22"	6'30"	7'43"	8'26"	9'18"	10'11	11'06	11'58	16'34	17'43	20'27	21'17		23'13	23'33	24'20	24'32	25'42	27'46		29'15	29'3
Narrative Time Markers in Story Beats ->	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.8	2.9	2.10	2.11	2.12	2.13	2.14	2.15	2.16	2.17	2.18	2.19	2.20	2.21	2.22	2.23	2.24
CHARACTER																								
MICKEY	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
GUS	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX		XXXX		XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	
ERIC																								
NATALIE														XXXX	XXXX		XXXX		XXXX					
BERTIE					XXXX	XXXX	XXXX																	XXXX
COLLEGE STUDENTS																								
ARYA																								
GREG																								
ROB																								
CHRIS																								
CORI																								
SYD																								
ALLAN																								
FRANK																								
CULT LEADER																								
CASHIER	XXXX																							

STNA Model Version 1.0 showing the characters in the second episode of *Love*. Only three secondary characters appear throughout the episode.

3.1.2 STNA Model Version 2.0

In the pilot study, the use of Chatman's taxonomy for narrative components and the use of beats for the temporality proved successful; however, the model needed enhancing. The category of narrative techniques and plot devices proved to complicate the functions of the model. Firstly, it was difficult to compile a final list of all narrative techniques that could be justified. If all narrative techniques and plot devices used in storytelling were to be listed, the final category of the Y-Axis would be longer than all other categories, yet it would be the one that is filled the least. Secondly, some of these narrative devices were hard to log into the model. For instance, foreshadowing implies that something happens in one beat that prophesises another thing that will happen in a future beat. In most cases, that means the foreshadowing is only detectable in the future beat. In such case, the researcher needs to go back to the previous beats, find where it was foreshadowed and log it. Thirdly, television shows employ a wide range of plot devices in telling their stories. Some shows lean on particular techniques more than others (e.g., *Lost* and its use of prolepses – flashforwards into the future story time). Finally, the analysed TV shows may have elements to note down that

are not part of the taxonomy in form of content and are not plot devices (e.g., title credits). Because of this, in the final iteration the category of narrative techniques was discarded and a "Notes" section that could track text-specific elements was added for each case study. For instance, in *Arrested Development*, the voice-over narrator was listed here as it was used predominantly in the text.

Another point of improvement was needed in what to record in the STNA datasheet and how to determine beat changes. As I did not have access to the beat-sheets of these shows, I needed to decide when a beat would change, hence a systematic approach was needed to decide when the changes to beats happened. Similarly, a system of elimination was needed for which narrative elements were going to be included in the STNA Model. Not every person seen on screen was put into the model. If a character orders food in a restaurant, does the waiter, who only has two lines of dialogue count as a new character even though he is never seen again? Similarly, if a character eats a hamburger on one beat and eats a pizza on another, should these count as two separate actions?

To answer these questions a system was devised for the second iteration of the model, which was used on analysing *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016) (Can, 2021).

In order to determine which elements seen on screen are going to be put into the STNA Model and to better determine the points in the story where beats change, a set of questions is asked every time a new event or existent emerges:

- Does the event/existent recur?
- Does the event/existent move the story forward and/or develop into any other event?
- Does the event/existent help reveal a character trait or motivation?
- Does the event/existent foreshadow or recap another event/existent?

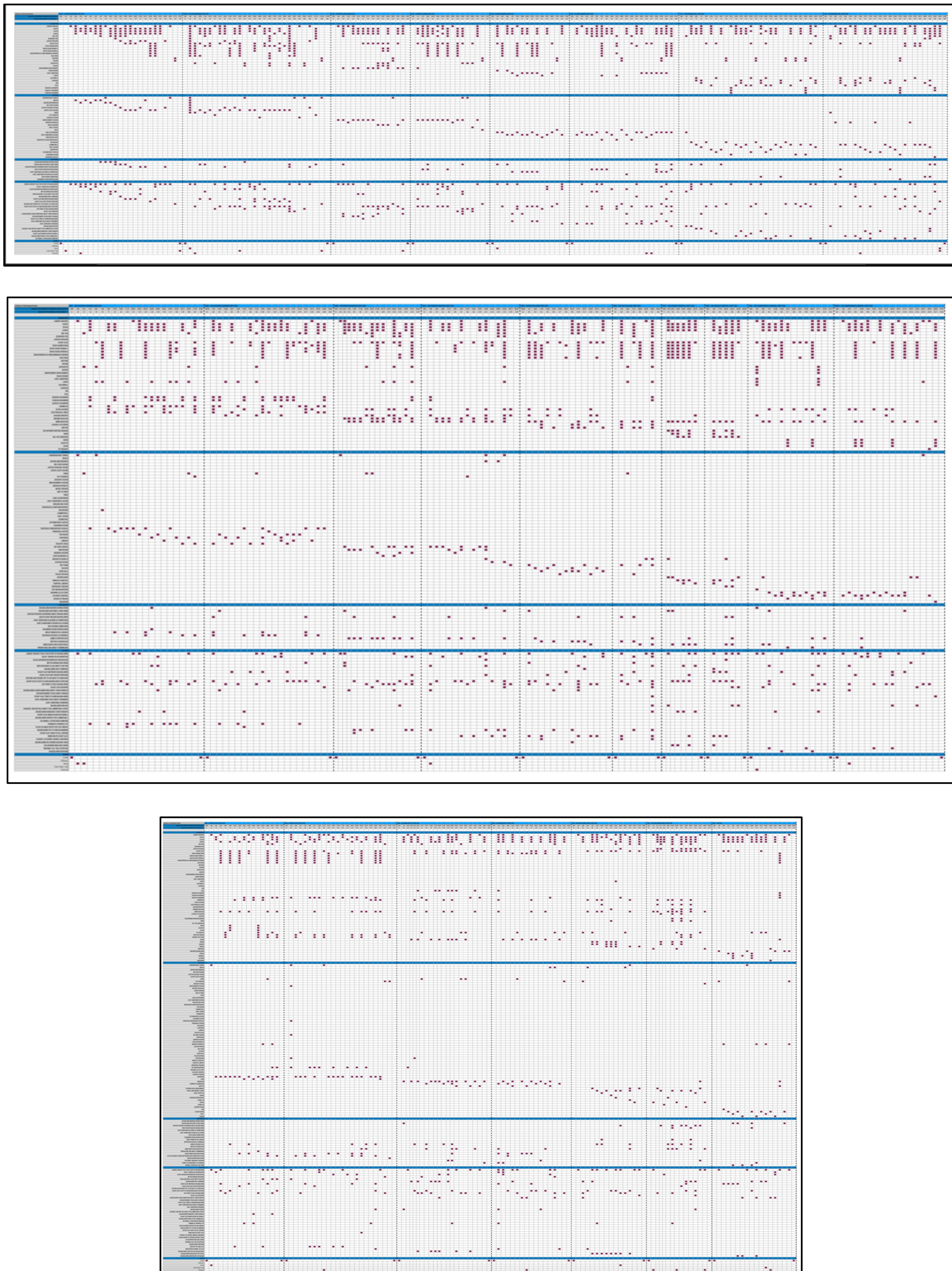
If the answer to any of these questions is ‘yes’, then the event/existent is put into the diagram, and a beat change is noted. All events and existents are listed in descending order of importance. Every event and existent that appears in any beat is marked on the diagram[8].

These four questions were used in all case studies to determine which elements to put down into the STNA Model and to decide when a new beat appeared. For each new beat, the time within the episode was also noted. Beats were coded with numbers along with which episodes they belonged to. For example, on *House of Cards* datasheet (Appendix A provides a link for the online versions of the datasheets), if someone was to look at beat “3.19” that would mean they were looking at Episode 3, Beat 19. On the corresponding STNA Datasheet, it would be clear that the beat starts around 28 minutes and 3 seconds into the episode. The corresponding column and rows indicate that the beat has Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) as the only character, the setting is the “STREETS OF WASHINGTON D.C.” and there is only one action happening where “CLAIRE GOES FOR A RUN”. Ideally, this means the researcher can have information about the narrative just by looking at the STNA Model.

Figures 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8 below show an overall snapshot of each datasheet used for this thesis. All STNA Model data for *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *House of Cards* and *Arrested Development* can be accessed from the dedicated website for this thesis at https://netflixnarratives.wordpress.com. Each case study specific changes in the STNA Model or the approach to their analysis is noted down in the corresponding chapter.

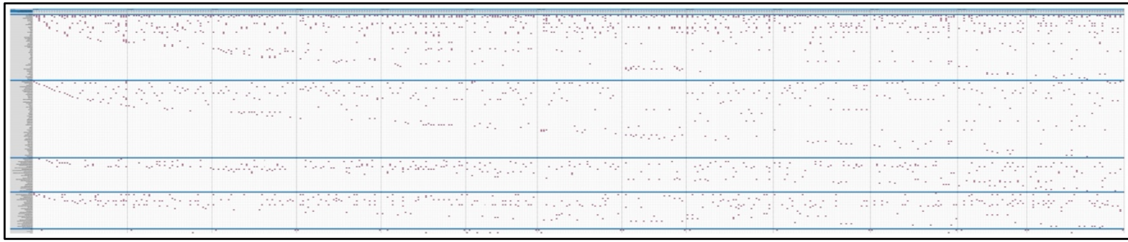
[8] The case study of *Gilmore Girls* and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* was published in the edited collection *Binge-watching and Contemporary Television Studies* (2021). As the system of selecting beats for the model was already devised, a very similar version of this text, explaining the question-asking process appears in the book chapter (Can, 2021, pp. 238-239).

Figure 3.6



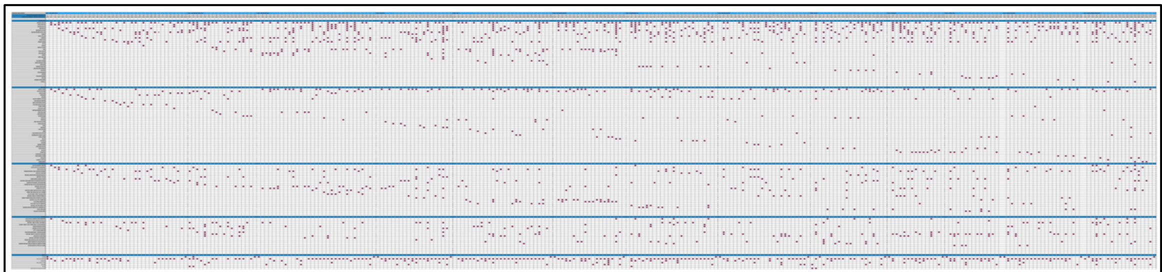
From top to bottom: Datasheets showing *A Series of Unfortunate Events* Seasons 1, 2 and 3.

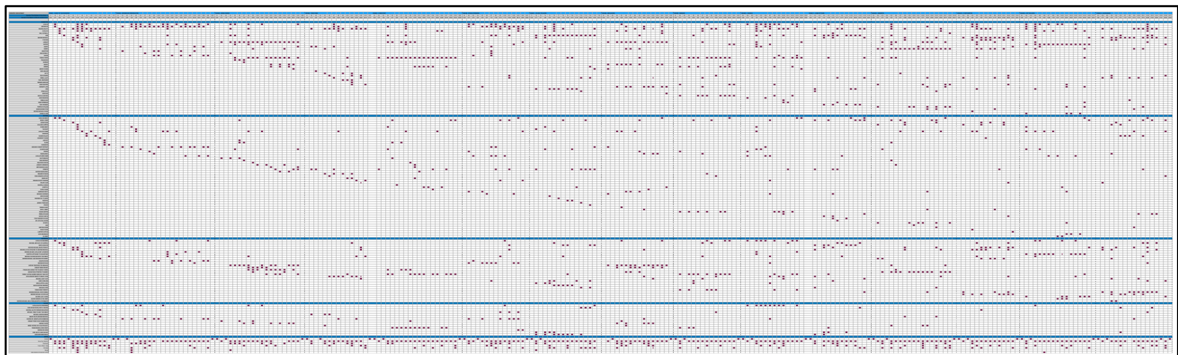
Figure 3.7

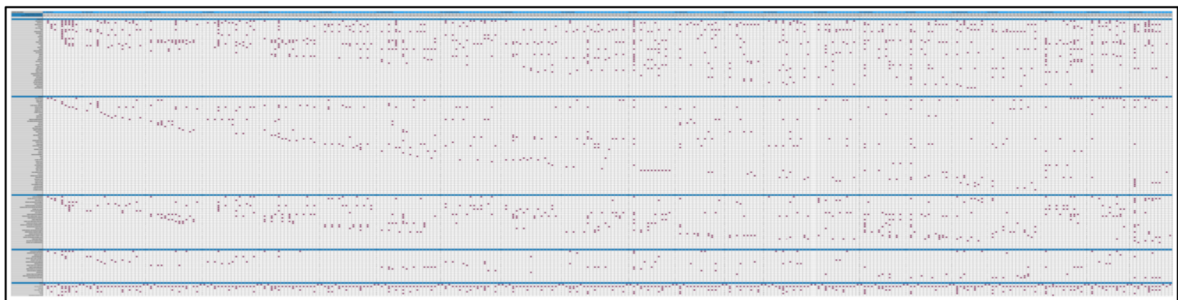


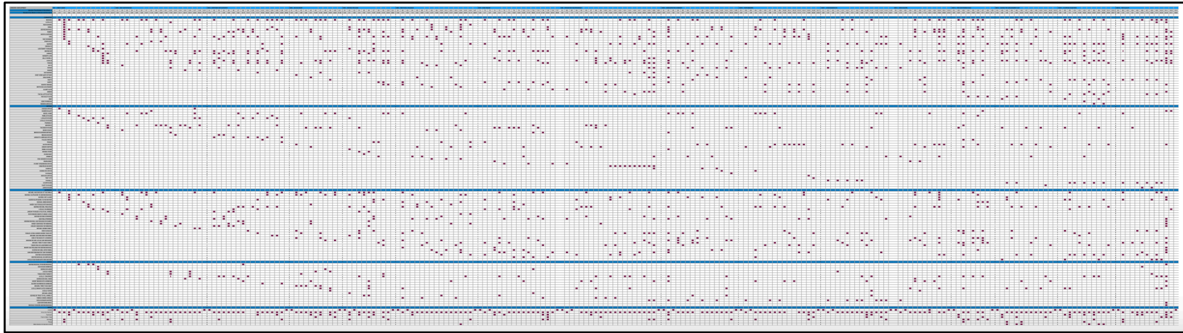
Datasheet showing *House of Cards* Seasons 1.

Figure 3.8









From top to bottom: Datasheets showing *Arrested Developments* Seasons 3, 4, Season 4 Remix and Season 5.

3.1.3 Limitations of the STNA Model

The goal of the STNA Model was to provide a comprehensive textual analysis tool that would enable a close reading of serialised televisual texts both at the innermost layer of a beat and the outermost layer of a full season (or multiple seasons), however like any tool, there are limitations to what can be achieved.

Firstly, the model does not take into account the significance of different actions and happenings in the narrative. In television writing, plotlines will usually be categorised as A, B and C plots, in declining order of narrative significance (Newman, 2006, p. 18). Chatman – whose taxonomy of form of content was borrowed for this model – also categorises different plotlines as kernel and satellite events (1978). Kernels are narrative moments that are "branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths" which will disturb the logic of the plot if they are taken away (1978, p. 53). Satellite events on the other hand are minor plot events that "entail no choice but are solely the workings-out of the choices made at the kernels," (1978. p. 54).

The initial reason for not categorising events was to see if their prevalence in the model would show how dominant they were in the story. However, it turned out that the frequency of

reoccurrence for events did not define their status as kernel or satellite. A good example of this can be seen in *House of Cards*. In the first season of the show, there is an action labelled "FRANK UNDERWOOD KILLS". The action only occurs twice in the season: once at the very beginning when he kills a dog, and one towards the end when he kills another senator through carbon monoxide poisoning by leaving him unconscious in a running car with the exhaust pipe clogged. A quick look at the STNA Model would only show this event mentioned twice in more than 200 beats throughout 13 episodes. However, both scenes are key to the audiences' understanding of Frank Underwood's character and especially the second murder has further ramifications that carry on throughout later episodes.

In the final iteration of the model, it was decided that the prominence of any event should not be presumed while recording the element and should not be a part of the dataset in the STNA Model. This was further reinforced by the fact that the narrative complexity of the case studies would make it very difficult to decide which storylines were A, B and C. These television shows employ "a range of serial techniques, with the underlying assumption that a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode," (Mittell, 2015, p. 18). Hence it is "inappropriate to presume the impact any event will have on the narrative since its cumulative recurrence may change its significance," (Can, 2021, p. 239).

The model further showed limitations in its application to different genres. The events were easier to track down within and between episodes in dramas. However, in sitcoms, there was an abundance of events, and it was more difficult to answer the above questions on which elements were significant enough to be put onto the STNA Model. While this does not mean the model cannot capture sitcoms, it should be noted that *Arrested Development* episodes took a significantly longer time to analyse than others. Further discussion about this is provided in Chapter 6.

While different genres showed different levels of difficulty in filling the datasheet, there were also some cases where the STNA Model could not be used. The interactive specials analysed for this thesis could not be rendered through the model. This was mainly due to the non-linear temporality of interactive narratives and the impossibility of noting down the timecodes of events in these narratives (as Netflix interface does not provide a scrollable video progress bar for interactive specials). Further discussion of why the STNA Model could not be used in interactive specials can be found in Chapter 7. An alternative approach to formal analysis for these texts are also provided in the same chapter with diagrammatised visualisation of narrative structure for each interactive case study.

Lastly, readers who have watched the shows used in this study may disagree with some of the elements put on the STNA Model datasheets. Especially the actions and happenings are my classifications and my interpretations of how what occurs on screen should be translated into the datasheet. The important point here is consistency. As long as the same event is used to designate whenever the occurrence is seen, the STNA Model should still be able to show a pattern within and across episodes. Hence, a personal interpretation of how each event should be recorded on the datasheet should not be noted as a limitation.

A final note should be made about how the model can be used in other research. The STNA Model does not have inherent criteria for what is included in the datasheet and what is left out. It also does not have solid criteria for how to fill in the datasheet. When I asked questions about whether characters that appear momentarily should count, or whether eating two different types of food would be two different actions, the systematic approach I took was for the purposes of this thesis only. The model leaves out specific criteria so that researchers using the model can bring their individual and specific criteria to fit the purpose of their research. Hence, using a set of questions to define how to add new components or new beats, televisual texts can be analysed in varying degrees of specificity.

Reinforced with other textual analysis tools, the STNA Model can provide a close reading of serial televisual texts. This research uses contextual programme analysis to support its close reading. The next section describes how this method is used.

3.2 Contextual Programme Analysis

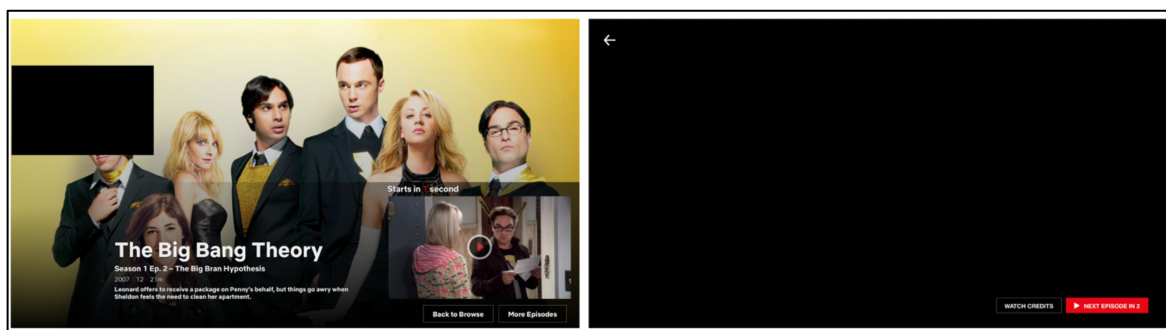
The serial television texts analysed in this study are all Netflix Originals. All texts exist in the domain of Netflix. Whether it is through an app that allows viewers to watch it on TV, a mobile phone, a tablet, or a website that allows the viewer to access content through their internet browsers, these texts are always situated among various paratextual and intertextual elements including thumbnails of other shows, episode lists and playback screens. RQ3 focuses on how paratextual elements contribute to narrative form in Netflix. To fully answer this question, I use a specific textual analysis method named by Gray and Lotz as contextual programme analysis (2018, p. 131).

Raymond Williams suggested that television as a medium should be regarded not as distinct programs but a flow of material (1974). Williams' notion of flow has been widely debated and contested on how effective it is in encapsulating the televisual experience (Evans, 2011; Gray and Lotz, 2018; Johnson, 2018). Gray and Lotz agree that "we always encounter television in a specific setting, next or alongside other programs," and propose the use of contextual programme analysis to account for the paratexts that surround the narrative text (2018, p. 131). Some paratexts like the *Strangers Things* aftershow *Beyond Stranger Things* (2017) are explicit textual companions that provide commentary and expansion to the story being told in the Netflix Original show. Other paratextual elements resonate more closely with Genette's (1997b) original examples of paratexts — title pages, publisher information, foot notes, page numbers. The thumbnails of the shows on the Netflix interface, the individual web pages of

these shows, the "Next Episode In …" screen that appears between their episodes can all be considered as paratexts.

Most of the paratextual elements inside Netflix vary in terms of approach, content, style, and purpose. Their features and attributes change from programme to programme. For instance, the "Next Episode In…" screens[9] can appear differently in various programmes (figure 3.9). An analysis of this screen can provide a deeper understanding of the binge-serial narrative.

Figure 3.9



On the left, 'Next Episode In…' screen of *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) counting down from 10 seconds; on the right, 'Next Episode In…' screen of *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) counting down from 5 seconds (Screengrab taken in 2019).

As Genette suggests, paratexts are at the "threshold of interpretation" and the viewer is introduced to most of the paratexts before encountering the text itself (1997b, p. 2). Furthermore, paratexts can shed light onto how Netflix functions as a supernarrator, having the utmost power of bringing those narratives to viewers. Hence, contextual programme analysis helps reinforce a fuller understanding of narratives derived from a formal analysis. Moreover, as the interactive specials on Netflix rely heavily on the use of Netflix's interface

[9] As of June 2022, Netflix applies a uniform approach to its auto-play functionality, where a small "Next Episode" button on bottom right corner counts down from 5 seconds as the episode's credits start rolling. Figure 3.9 shows screenshots from 2019.

for interaction, contextual programme analysis supports close reading of these interactive texts.

3.3 Conclusion

To draw an anatomy of narrative form in Netflix, this research takes a grounded theory approach. Following the approach laid out by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), I start with an analysis of the text and through the data that I gather, I formulate and refine my hypotheses about this narrative form. Each iteration of my analytical model aims to be more precise on how it considers narrative components.

Because of this approach, the data collection and data analysis stages of this research were intertwined and both processes occurred simultaneously. Furthermore, analytical codes and categories were constantly updated through the data, and the reiteration of the analytical model included potential changes in parameters (Charmaz, 2006). The final iteration of the analytical model should therefore be able to clearly translate the data on screen to a linear diagram that breaks down the narrative into its components.to inform and evolve

I have established the scarcity of formal analysis of narrative structure in contemporary television studies. There are no large-scale studies that look at how televisual narrative form manifests itself in such an environment. There are several studies that look at specific Netflix Originals (Bianchini and de Souza, 2017; Havas & Horeck, 2021; Hemingway, 2021; Kaczyńska, 2018; Klarer, 2014: Kozak, 2018; Kozak & Zeller-Jacques, 2021; Linkis, 2020; McCormick, 2016), but the scope of these studies are relatively small and they emphasise a limited number of narrative components.

I have summarised my methods and the rationale that has led me to adopt them. Through two distinct textual analysis tools I aim to address four research questions on narrative in Netflix Originals. I first explore the elements that comprise the narrative structure of these series. Secondly, I investigate possible variations the form and structure of these shows can have. Thirdly, I shift my focus to paratextual elements and see how paratexts on the platform impact narrative texts. Finally, I analyse time and temporality in these Netflix Originals, investigating how they can deviate from broadcast television shows. Through the STNA Model used in three Netflix Originals, close reading of five interactive specials on Netflix and with the aid of contextual programme analysis, this thesis aims to contribute to a narrative theory of Netflix Originals.

To begin, the next chapter provides a formal analysis of *House of Cards.*

4 *HOUSE OF CARDS*

On February 6, 2012, Netflix released all eight episodes of the first season of *Lilyhammer* (2012-2014) in North America. The show, set in Norway, was the first so-called Netflix Original – specifically, a licensed original – co-licensed with Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). The show aired weekly on NRK while American audiences were able to enjoy all eight episodes later at once. Netflix's strategy was deemed ambitious and game-changing at the time (Wallenstein, 2012; Greene, 2013). While American audiences engaged in Netflix's binge-model for original content for the first time, another show, this time exclusively for Netflix had just begun filming. A year later February 1, 2013, the first 13 episodes of *House of Cards* (2013-2018) would be released in all territories where Netflix was available to wide critical acclaim and an era of increasing numbers of Netflix Originals would begin.

House of Cards follows the story of pragmatic and ruthless American congressman Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) and his equally ambitious wife Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) as they initiate elaborate plans to attain more power in Washington, DC. The show is based on the novel of the same name (1989) and is a loose adaptation of a 1990 BBC miniseries with the same title. *House of Cards* is categorised as an acquired Netflix original, meaning it was developed and produced by a third party but acquired exclusively by the SVOD platform (Ball, 2018b). It was developed by Media Rights Capital and distributed by both Netflix and by Sony Pictures Television to television network in regions where Netflix had not yet started operating at the time[10]. The show was created by Beau Willimon who also led the writing team for all six seasons. Alongside Willimon, David Fincher, the director of

[10] As of 2022, *House of Cards* is available on Netflix in all territories the SVOD platform operates.

the first two episodes and an executive producer for the whole series was portrayed as a creative force behind the series in marketing campaigns (Andreeva 2011a, 2011b; Coyle, 2013). The show ran for six seasons with a total of 73 episodes between 2013 and 2018. Each season had 13 episodes except for the final season which only had eight. For this thesis, the first season was analysed in its entirety. The STNA Model was used in all 13 episodes to map out the narrative structure of the show's first season (Appendix A).

The significance of *House of Cards* as a case study is threefold. Firstly, it was the first television show that Netflix commissioned from the beginning of its development[11]. This is significant, because the showrunners were able to design the narrative with the knowledge that it would be hosted on an SVOD platform and not a scheduled slot on broadcast television for the first time.

Secondly, it was the first Netflix Original show that was developed with a two-season guarantee, meaning Netflix ordered the first 26 episodes (two 13-episode seasons) together (Andreeva, 2011a). In fact, it was one of the few shows that were given guarantee for more than one season in the history of Netflix to this date. The showrunner Beau Willimon and the writing team were able to design the first 26 episodes and the first two seasons of the show together. Moreover, they knew that all 13 episodes would be released simultaneously before they finished production. Hence, it is interesting to investigate how the show's narrative structure was formed. In what ways does this impact the creative team's decisions towards the narrative structure? This case study aims to pinpoint any features in the narrative structure that may have come out from this knowledge, using the STNA Model for its formal analysis.

[11] Lilyhammer was commissioned by the Norwegian television network NRK1, and Netflix licensed it after production ended on its first season.

Thirdly, the case study is historically significant. Early Netflix Originals including *House of Cards* (2013-2018)*, Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013-2019) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019) offer interesting insight into how televisual narratives migrated to an SVOD environment and how they evolved over time. Scholars of internet TV often point to *House of Cards* as the first example of content designed for binge-watching mode of engagement (Klarer, 2014; McCormick, 2016; Sim, 2016; Barker, 2018; Finn 2017; Jenner, 2018). While most of these scholars focus on modes of production and modes of engagement, there was interest in the show's narrative form too.

One of the earliest articles by Mario Klarer focused on narration in *House of Cards,* drawing similarities between the narrative form of the show and novels while also raising questions about filmic narration and embodied narrator (2014). As discussed later in this chapter, Klarer's arguments on Frank Underwood portrayed as a narrator in the show is interesting. On the other hand, Klarer's likening of the show to a novel does not go further than noting the non-linear and unscheduled watching patterns of Netflix shows and is based on anecdotes from the team behind the show in various interviews.

Similarly, David Fincher's remarks on how watching one season of *House of Cards* is like reading a book (Sepinwall, 2013), Willimon's remarks on how the creative process resembles making a film (Leonsis, 2015) and Kevin Spacey's advocacy towards made-to-binge television shows (Barraclough, 2013) provide important insight into the creative process behind Netflix Originals, but by themselves they do not provide any detail as to how these narratives are formed and structured.

A long-running assumption about *House of Cards* is the role of big data and algorithms in its production (Carr, 2013; Finn, 2017). It is known now that one of the key moments in Netflix's decision to greenlight *House of Cards* was their data showing that Netflix users liked Kevin

Spacey's and David Fincher's projects. This insight into Netflix's corporate decision-making process turned into a growing presumption that the algorithms and data were used in the design of the narrative itself. Referring to Netflix's commissioning of *House of Cards,* Timothy Havens argues;

> [M]uch in the way programmers of commercial media have done for decades, Netflix executives took the data available to them and made decisions about what television content to acquire based upon their "gut" feelings examined in this light, it would seem that television programming decisions in the digital age might not be all that different than those in the analog age. (2014, p. 7).

Hence, this chapter does not consider use of data or algorithms in its analysis of narrative form in *House of Cards*. The data may have helped Netflix make decisions on how "bingeable" the show could be, but there is no evidence that it *made* the show more bingeable.

Casey J McCormick, in a chapter on *House of Cards* in the edited collection, *Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, focuses on how "binge-watching" is embedded as an integral part of *House of Cards* and proposes an anatomy of a bingeable show (2016). While McCormick's analysis of the show may not be enough to propose a generalised anatomy, it should be noted down as a starting point for attempts at theorising narrative in Netflix Originals. Furthermore, McCormick's arguments extend to paratextual elements such as the episode names and *House of Cards*' position inside the Netflix interface. McCormick also discusses the temporal elements of the show, exploring where the audience is situated in the narration of the story. McCormick's arguments provide jumping off points for some of the arguments made in this chapter, especially on the use of paratexts and temporal gaps in the narrative.

Informed by earlier literature, this chapter aims to address the three research questions on narrative structure and characteristics of the narrative form (RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3). With the absence of commercial breaks on Netflix, there were no constraints on how many acts there

would be in an episode and where act breaks would be positioned within episodes. There were no scheduled slots, which meant the length of episodes did not have to be uniform. As Netflix ordered 26 episodes over two seasons and as each season was scheduled to be released in its entirety, the showrunners were in uncharted territory in terms of narrative design. They had more liberty in exploring narrative possibilities within the Netflix environment. Through a formal structural analysis of the narrative, and a contextual programme analysis of *House of Cards*' position in the SVOD landscape, this case study provides insight into narrative form in early televisual narratives designed for Netflix.

Through this analysis, I argue that how *House of Cards* is broken down to seasons, the length of episodes and how episodes are broken down into story beats indicate that there are similarities between this Netflix Original and broadcast television dramas. I further argue that in the absence of commercial gaps within episodes and weekly gaps between episodes, *House of Cards* uses its narrative to generate gaps in the discourse, primarily by utilising stand-alone episodes. Looking deeper into the narrative, I argue that the character of Frank Underwood has very limited extra-diegetic agency and that agency is not inherent to himself (shifting to another character in the final season), making it difficult to designate him as the narrator of the story. Looking at the outermost layer of narrative, I discuss how the Netflix interface has similar supernarrative agency to broadcast television schedules in influencing narratives. Finally, I argue that *House of Cards* is deeply embedded into Netflix's identity as a supernarrator.

This chapter will first discuss the findings of the STNA model to provide a formal analysis of the first season of *House of Cards*. Then it will provide a closer look at the season's narrative structure. A discussion of time and temporality will be provided, focusing on seriality and gaps. The chapter will then analyse narration in *House of Cards* with a specific focus on the use

of "asides" as a narrative technique. Finally, Netflix's supernarrative agency will be explored, using contextual programme analysis to position *House of Cards* within Netflix landscape.

4.1 Formal Analysis of *House of Cards* Season One

The STNA Model is used to break down multiple episodes of a TV show in terms of its narrative components (events and existents) and displays them in a linear timeline whenever they appear in the show. As discussed in detail in the methodology section, any narrative component that appears in any given beat is marked on the datasheet. A final category of notes appears at the bottom of the datasheet to make note of any occurrence or recurrence that may not be considered as one of the four elements that comprise form of content but could be of significance for this analysis. For this case study, credits, fades to black and montage sequences were specifically noted (Figure 3.7 shows a snapshot of each season's datasheet). Appendix A provides a list of webpage links for the datasheets in various file types (Microsoft Excel, PDF, Google Sheets).

As this research is more interested in looking at whole seasons and overarching plots that can transcend between episodes, the events — actions and happenings — in the first season of *House of Cards* were generalised in the model whenever possible. For instance, Frank Underwood is seen manipulating other people multiple times in the season. In the first episode, he manipulates another senator, Peter Russo (Corey Stoll) to get him to do his bidding later. In the third episode, he manipulates Marty Spinella (Al Sapienza), the head lobbyist for Teachers Unions in USA to get an education bill passed. In almost every episode, he manipulates a character for one reason or the other. In order to capture his act of manipulation as a constant element in the narrative, all of these acts are listed under one

event, the action: 'FRANK MANIPULATES SOMEONE.' As such, the number of events listed is significantly fewer than the number of existents.

The STNA model revealed that the show had an abundance of existents (Table 4.1), as evidenced by its budget of $100 million for the first two seasons (Greenfield, 2013). This arguably shows that the story is told on a grand scale.

Table 4.1 – Number of Narrative Elements in the first season of *House of Cards.*

House of Cards	Season 1
Number of Episodes	13
Number of Characters	51
Number of Settings	60
Number of Happenings	26
Number of Actions	28
Average Number of Beats per Episode	33
Episode Running Times	47-56 minutes (average = 51 mins)

House of Cards utilised its high number of settings in its narrative form in several different ways. 32 beats across all episodes took place in more than one setting. Whether it was through phone calls, through characters walking or driving from one place to another, or using montage between several locations, these beats utilised multiple settings. Table 4.2 shows individual number of beats per episode.

Table 4.2 – Episode names, durations, and number of beats per episode in the first season of House of Cards.

#	Season 1		
	Title	# Of Beats	Length in mins
1	"Chapter One"	37	56
2	"Chapter Two"	33	49
3	"Chapter Three"	33	51
4	"Chapter Four"	34	49
5	"Chapter Five"	33	52
6	"Chapter Six"	28	50
7	"Chapter Seven"	33	54
8	"Chapter Eight"	25	47
9	"Chapter Nine"	34	51
10	"Chapter Ten"	38	52
11	"Chapter Eleven"	34	54

12	"Chapter Twelve"	27	53
13	"Chapter Thirteen"	38	49
avg		33	51

Despite the high number of settings in *House of Cards*, one of the key settings was absent for a long time in the season. As a political drama that is set in Washington D.C, around Capitol Hill and the White House, the Oval Office is a central setting not just for the first season but also for the subsequent seasons[12]. Yet, the important setting was only introduced in episode seven, after the halfway point of the season. Its introduction was fitting to the narrative. Frank Underwood, ambitious to become the Vice President, passed a critical education bill for the president and was invited to be a part of the televised signing of the bill in the Oval Office (figure 4.1). The setting was in the first beat of the episode and from that point onwards, it became a key setting that was frequently revisited.

[12] Frank Underwood becomes the President of the United States at the end of season two and seasons three to six have Frank and Claire Underwood in presidential office.

Figure 4.1

Screengrab from *House of Cards* episode seven, showing Frank Underwood and President in the Oval Office. The viewers are shown the president's office for the first time.

Just like its settings, the first season shows an abundance of characters: but the appearance and reappearance of these characters are not systematic. There are characters that get ample screen time in one or two episodes and yet are not given dialogue in others, even if the character appears in that episode. Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly), Frank's right-hand man, who is involved multiple threads of the story, appears in only two beats in the eighth episode, and only speaks once, at the very end of that episode.

On the other hand, Peter Russo, who appears in every episode and is portrayed as a key character in multiple plotlines, dies at the end of episode 11 and is never seen again. In fact, another key character of the first season, Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) is killed in the first episode of the second season and like Peter Russo, she does not appear again. Of course, killing off key characters is not novel to Netflix Original shows. Broadcast television shows like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) do this frequently. Yet, Doug Stamper's example provides a more

interesting comparison here both in terms of narrative structure and in terms of modes of production.

Television productions are budgeted and scheduled to minimise expenses and shooting time. If a character does not have a plotline in a specific location in that episode, they are easily cut from the scene to save time and money. Episode eight of *House of Cards* does the opposite. The whole episode takes place outside Washington, D.C. and the STNA Model shows that Doug Stamper has no contribution to any action or happening throughout the episode. His lines, spoken at the very end of the episode could have been provided as a phone call between him and Frank or could have been moved to the next episode. Yet, as Frank's trusted aide, he is by his side when his name is given to a library building in his alma mater (figure 4.2). This provides a glimpse into the production process of *House of Cards*.

As the whole season was produced together, this production practice allows a character that becomes more and more prominent throughout the show to be seen in more beats, making it easier for the viewer to be convinced that the character is an integral part of the narrative world of the show. Indeed, Doug Stamper continues to be an important character in the world of *House of Cards* all the way to the finale of the show.

Figure 4.2

Screengrab from the eighth episode of *House of* Cards Season One. Doug Stamper (on the right) is only seen towards the end of the episode and does not contribute to the narrative of the episode.

The show uses this tactic with other characters like Nancy Kaufberger (Elizabeth Normant) and Edward Meechum (Nathan Darrow). The former is present throughout the season as Frank's assistant and the latter is present in many beats as Frank's security detail/driver. Through actions and happenings, both characters contribute to the narrative, yet even when they do not have active participation in the narrative, they are still portrayed on screen. The space they occupy inside the narrative of *House of Cards* is bigger than what would be seen in their actions and happenings.

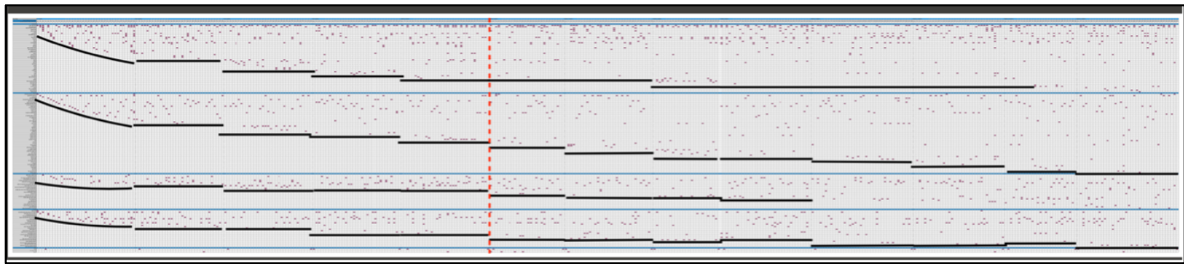
Casey J. McCormick argues that *House of Cards* uses these figures as surrogate characters that "stand in for the viewer" so that viewers can be more immersed with the narrative (2016, p. 107). She posits that throughout the show's first three seasons, several characters take the place of primary surrogates for the viewer.

> [A] single surrogate character emerges as the apparent embodiment of the ideal viewer: Edward Meechum, the Underwoods' personal security guard… after failing to protect the Underwoods' home in "Chapter 6" (a mistake that was actually orchestrated by Frank), Meechum begs for a second chance. Frank concedes to rehiring Meechum but issues the following caveat: "I want you to listen very closely to what I'm about to say. From this moment on, you are a rock. You absorb nothing, you say nothing. And nothing breaks you. Is that clear?" This warning to Meechum and the viewer seems harsh, but it's perfectly in line with the viewer-training motif. Frank is strict with Meechum to prepare him for the challenge, and he eventually rewards Meechum for his attentive dedication… So, if Meechum is being rewarded with this intimate connection to the Underwoods, the viewer is simultaneously rewarded for her own viewing dedication. (2016, p. 110)

I agree that as these characters constantly occupy space in the narrative world of *House of Cards*, they provide the viewer with a sense of scope and environment in the fictional Washington, D.C. that is portrayed in the show. The STNA Model shows that in many beats the "CHARACTERS" tab is filled with multiple entries. While not all actions and happenings concern all of these characters in that setting, it certainly helps convey that this narrative world is filled with numerous characters that do not always participate in what is going on and sometimes merely spectate, just like the viewer.

While there is an abundance of characters and settings in *House of Cards*, the STNA model also shows a stair-like pattern in the datasheet as new components are introduced. New events and existents are added as new rows resulting with the markers stacking down in a stair-like form (figure 4.3). As new beats and new episodes appear, the number of new events and existents decrease significantly. For instance, while episode two introduces four new characters, four new settings, one new happening and two new actions: episode nine only introduces one new character and one new happening.

Figure 4.3



The STNA Model of the first season of *House of Cards.* Datasheet has been marked to show the number of new components on every episode. The red dash points to the end of the fifth episode.

To continue with the analogy to a staircase, the narrative stairway eventually leads to a narrative clearing where elements that comprise the form of content reach a state of equilibrium. Sean O'Sullivan argues that this usually occurs around the fifth episode of American prime-time television shows:

> [F]ifth episodes often represent moments when serial television programmes find a recurrent set of variables and coordinates that shape the show for the rest of its run. In other words, the distance between the pilot and the fifth episode frequently traces the transformation of a narrative world and its accompanying narrative discourse into something closer to what the show is later perceived as being. (2018, p. 256)

Looking at the whole season with the STNA model, the fifth episode of *House of Cards* appears to have come to a point of recurrent set of variables and coordinates. 41 out of 51 characters have already been introduced by that point. More than half of the settings (35 in 60) have also been seen at least once by then. 19 out of 28 actions were present in the first five episodes. The only continual development seems to have been in happenings. By the fifth episode, 12 out of 26 items on the list of happenings were noted down in the datasheet. Taken in isolation, these numbers cannot be interpreted as pointing towards a narrative structure like prime-time dramas, but it is significant to see that even though the *House of Cards* was designed

to be released simultaneously, the rate of introduction and exposition is similar to conventions of serial broadcast narratives.

As pointed out earlier, American prime-time serials employ 20 to 40 beats for an hour-long drama, with each beat running under two minutes (Newman, 2006)[13]. *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), a broadcast television show has an average of 23 beats per episode. *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016) the four 90-minute episodes on Netflix has 31 beats per episode on average – meaning they have a maximum of 15 beats per duration of an hour-long drama – with much longer beats than its predecessor (Can, 2021). As the first show to be exclusively designed for an SVOD environment, *House of Cards* uses beats similarly to what would be expected from a prime-time serial drama. Average number of beats is 33 across the season and apart from a few exceptions, beats rarely last longer than two minutes. The episode with the lowest number of beats is the eighth episode with 25 beats and the longest duration for a single beat across the whole season is on episode seven, which has a beat that lasts for six minutes as the concluding narrative segment.

Just like beat lengths, episode lengths are also interesting to note in *House of Cards*. The first season of the show has episodes that range between 47 minutes to 56 minutes in duration. Episode lengths are peculiarly uniform for a Netflix Original Show. *A Series of Unfortunate Events*' episode lengths vary between 36-64 minutes. *Arrested Development* varies between 21-47 minutes. Elsewhere on Netflix, *The OA* (2016-2019) has episodes ranging between 31-71 minutes. Overall, in the entire six seasons of *House of Cards*, the range between episode lengths is 42 minutes to 59 minutes averaging to 51 minutes per episode (as is the average for season one).

[13] The 'hour-long drama' can be anywhere between 41 minutes to 60 minutes, depending on the existence and frequency of commercial breaks. The Sopranos (1999-2007), an HBO show was written with a template of around 35 beats for a 55-minute episode (O'Sullivan, 2010, p. 63).

It can be argued that *House of Cards* does not utilise the temporal flexibility afforded by the absence of network schedules to the fullest. However, it should be noted that Netflix had not yet expanded globally in the earlier years of *House of Cards*. Keeping episode lengths close to broadcast specificities is a rational move to be able to broadcast the show on network television in some territories. As Michael Z. Newman suggests, aesthetic strategies appear out of industrial constraints of television (2006, p.18). As such, this might explain why the show never experimented with shorter or longer episodes in the latter seasons when it was exclusively released on Netflix. Once the aesthetic choice of episode lengths was made, later seasons released on Netflix may have abided by the earlier set conventions of storytelling.

No matter the reason, it is interesting to see episode lengths being closer to broadcast television. The next section discusses another broadcast television convention that *House of Cards* tries to emulate: the gaps.

4.2 Between the Gaps in *House of Cards*

Lengths of episodes in *House of Cards* may be within limits of broadcast television slots but temporality within and between episodes is vastly different from network television. *House of Cards* does not employ gaps between acts in an episode. As all episodes are released together, the only gap in the narrative structure is between seasons. There are no scheduled gaps in the discourse time within or between episodes. All other gaps within the season are either at the diegetic level where the story moves forward in a time jump and the viewer is notified, or they are artificial gaps between episodes, produced by the viewing patterns of Netflix users.

These gaps between different temporal units of the narrative can be analysed in terms of the "between". Sean O'Sullivan describes "betweenness" as the state between old knowledge and

new knowledge in serial narratives and argues that gaps in the narrative between old and new knowledge are fundamental features of serialised narratives (2006, pp. 117-122). Whether it is the space of a commercial break, the space between two episodes or the space between two seasons, the viewer is always between the old knowledge they got from the most recent instalment of the narrative and the new knowledge that will come in future instalments. O'Sullivan argues that betweenness has a more complicated role in a narrative that unfolds in a shorter amount of time (2006, p. 122) So, a 13-episode season that unfolds in three months, means there is a 9-month waiting period until the next season. In the case of *House of Cards*, the narrative progresses much quicker than that as the whole season unfolds in as little as 11 hours, depending on how fast the viewers watch it.

The absence of gaps in the discourse time brings a momentum to the narrative structure in *House of Cards*. As McCormick argues, "there is a distinct forward momentum in the narrative, with various increments of time passing between episodes, no flashbacks, or flashforwards (also: no 'previously on'), and every season amounts to about a calendar year" (2016, pp. 104-105). Characters refer to the time passed but the viewer needs to catch these references within the diegesis. The space between the episodes is filled with ellipses where "discourse halts, though time continues to pass in the story" (Chatman, 1978, p. 70) and as McCormick points out, whether these ellipses are explicit or implicit, it is up to the viewer to connect the dots (2016).

I argue that these ellipses generate an artificial betweenness, created by the viewer between each episode. To continue making sense of the story, the viewer must form a bridge between two episodes when in reality, the actual time passing between the discourse of both episodes can be as short as five seconds that passes as the auto-play function skips automatically to the next episode.

The compression of time further complicates the role of the "between" in the narrative. McCormick explains that the viewer is only given subtle clues about the amount of time that has passed between episodes of *House of Cards* and what may have occurred during that time. She argues that the "temporal momentum of *House of Cards* creates story gaps that require negotiation through attentive viewing" (2016, p. 105). With its abundance of events and existents, with no built-in recap, no promotional trailers that would appear before each episode and no mention of passing of time outside of diegesis, the viewer's self-imposed betweenness within the season requires more interest (and perhaps investment) from the viewer.

Christine Geraghty states that characters "pursue an 'unrecorded existence'" between episodes (1981, p. 10). Tom Hemingway argues that this "storytelling device has become increasingly difficult to maintain in the move towards streaming" as viewers can extend and skip the time between two episodes according to their own schedules (2021, p. 231). Then the viewer's self-imposed betweenness becomes a tool of experiencing the unrecorded existence of characters, helped by the characters' (usually Frank's) diegetic comments on the passing of time.

The gap between seasons is a significant time period in *House of Cards* and most Netflix Originals. A common practice in weekly broadcasted television series would be to have the next season start approximately one year after the first episode of the current season. Depending on how many episodes are in the season and whether there were mid-season breaks, broadcast television shows can have anywhere between several weeks to several months where the viewer is between old knowledge of the past season and new knowledge that will come with the new season. On Netflix, the shows have a more sporadic release pattern. Table 4.3 shows the release dates of each season of *House of Cards*. It shows that the gap between seasons grow significantly. For the first three subsequent seasons, the gap

between seasons is one year plus one or two weeks. The two latter seasons leave a longer gap with the final season being released one and a half year after season five[14].

Table 4.3. Release dates of each season of *House of Cards.*	
House of Cards Season	Release Date
Season 1	01.02.2013
Season 2	14.02.2014
Season 3	27.02.2015
Season 4	04.03.2016
Season 5	30.05.2017
Season 6	02.11.2018

A viewer following a broadcast television show can get an instinctive knowledge of the gap between seasons. They might know that once the season ends in the month of May, the next episode will come in the month of October. As Netflix does not use traditional release slates that network television would have — e.g., a fall slate that starts at the end of September — looking at three specific dates can help make sense of these gaps: the date of the previous season, the date of the next season, and the date of announcement for the release date of the next season[15]. As Table 4.4 shows, the announcements for the new seasons of *House of Cards* are made 72-88 days before the release dates of the seasons except for the fifth season[16].

[14] It should be noted that the final season of the show was rewritten after sexual assault allegations against Kevin Spacey led to his dismissal from the show, hence the production was delayed.
[15] See Chapter 8 for more discussion on how release slates in broadcast television have also changed.
[16] While this research found no specific reason for the much earlier announcement date for season five, I speculate that this may be an experiment by Netflix with different promotion timelines.

Usually accompanied by trailers and recap montages from the previous seasons, these announcements serve to restart or kickstart interest, to bring the viewer back into an active state of betweenness.

Table 4.4. A comparison of announcement and release dates of *House of Cards* seasons.

House of Cards Season Number	Announcement of Release Date	Release Date	Time Between the Announcement and Release
Season 2	04.12.2013	14.02.2014	72 days
Season 3	01.12.2014	27.02.2015	88 days
Season 4	16.12.2015	04.03.2016	79 days
Season 5	20.01.2017	30.05.2017	131 days
Season 6	07.08.2018	02.11.2018	87 days

It is important to note that the number of days between announcement to release is similar to the amount of time a prime-time drama that runs for 20-25 episodes would have in its summer break. With the renewed interest that comes with promotional materials on announcement, viewers might have a similar sense of betweenness between seasons. Lastly, it should be noted that these gaps are facilitated by Netflix at the outermost temporal layer of narratives. Release and promotion schedules help fill the gaps in the narrative. As discussed later in this chapter, this is an example of Netflix using supernarrative agency to influence narrative. While the SVOD service does not operate a daily schedule with timeslots, they can alter release schedules throughout a year to position texts.

While the overall narrative world that *House of Cards* builds requires immersion from the viewer, the show itself steers away from the narrative in one particular episode. In the absence of story gaps that are facilitated by limitations of scheduled linear television, the show creates its own gap by shifting the focus of the story for one episode. This is the case with episode eight which takes place in two locations outside Washington, D.C, the main setting for the show. The episode focuses on Frank being honoured by his alma mater and his name being given to a new library building. Frank spends the night with his old college mates in his alma meter. Peter Russo on the other hand is in Philadelphia during the entire episode, trying to win the support of the community as he is running for governor. With two new settings, new characters, and with actions and happenings that do not connect to the ongoing plotlines in Washington, D.C., the STNA model clearly shows that this is a stand-alone episode.

The stand-alone episodes have been used in television dramas long before Netflix. O'Sullivan gives the example of *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), season five, episode four as an example of breaking the narrative and telling a different story (2010, p. 66). *Supernatural* (2005-2020), which ran for 15 seasons is famous for its stand-alone episodes that take place in alternative realities (a parallel universe where characters are actors playing themselves, a universe where they are investment bankers, or a universe where they exist in an episode of *Scooby-Doo* [1969-1970]) pausing their season-long story arcs (Turchiano, 2018).

Kathryn VanArendonk (2019) and later, Lynn Kozak and Martin Zeller-Jacques argue that the stand-alone episodes in Netflix Originals "draw on pre-bingeing forms of television narrative in order to re-inscribe a form of structured flow within the text," (2021, p. 212). Kozak and Zeller-Jacques give the example of *Stranger Things*, season two, episode seven. Just one episode away from the finale, the episode carries the narrative away from the main story arc to give the betweenness before a final showdown between the main characters and supernatural forces occur.

I argue that *House of Cards* uses the stand-alone episode to provide a gap in the story as the medium it is viewed on does not provide gaps between episodes. In the absence of real-time gaps between two episodes, showrunners use different plotlines that steer away from the main story arcs to create this gap. Kozak and Zeller-Jacques posit that Netflix Original shows employ stand-alone episodes for three purposes; to break the plot-centric flow of series, to draw attention to the way their stories are told, and to "create a sense of structure within the overarching season narrative, creating natural act-breaks which help to guide the viewers in how to approach the text," (2021, p. 212). Episode eight of *House of Cards* breaks the flow of the story just when Frank achieves a major victory — the education bill. Episode nine and onwards focus heavily on Frank's manipulation of Peter Russo which leads up to the climax of the season.

The break in the narrative is deliberate as evidenced by dialogue in the first beat of the episode. Frank Underwood says to Remy Danton (Mahershala Ali), a lobbyist, that congress is in recess and that "This weekend is not about work," (figure 4.4) (House of Cards, Chapter Eight, 00:04:19-00:04:25). The warning is addressed at Remy Danton, but it also serves as a warning to the viewers[17], not to expect a continuation of the ongoing story arc and to enjoy this new set of existents and events for a limited time — a weekend of story time and fifty minutes of discourse time. Hence, episode eight provides a break from the continuously raising stakes after the halfway point in the show to provide viewers with the gap, the state of between that they can use to immerse themselves more in this serialised narrative. The show utilises its stand-alone episode to emulate the betweenness.

[17] Remy Danton might be seen as a surrogate character for the viewers here, wanting to move his own agenda forward only to be warned by Frank Underwood to take a break. Just like lobbyist Danton's agenda is to finalise deals, the viewer's agenda is to finalise the narrative, getting to the end of major plotlines.

Figure 4.4

Screengrabs from the beginning of *House of Cards* episode eight, showing Frank Underwood refusing to talk about work.

4.3 Narrating *House of Cards*

As we established at the beginning of this chapter, early scholarship on narrative form in *House of Cards* draws comparisons with films and novels (Klarer, 2014). The promotional language used by Kevin Spacey, David Fincher and others at the time of the show's release made frequent references to these comparisons with the show likened to a "13-hour movie"

and deemed “more like a novel” (Sepinwall, 2013). This focus brings questions on narration in the show. As Frank Underwood speaks directly to the camera in a way that does not seem to affect the diegetic time, he is often evaluated as a narrator, even the implied author of the story (Klarer, 2014). Below, I use examples from the first season of *House of Cards* to argue that while the show utilises Underwood’s monologues for diegetic and extradiegetic purposes, he cannot be considered as the narrator of the story.

House of Cards uses a narrative technique called “aside”, a monologue from a character that can only be witnessed by the audience. Frank Underwood addressing the camera functions as an aside (Klarer 2013; McCormick, 2016). Looking at the STNA model, two things are obvious. Firstly, Frank Underwood’s asides, recorded as the action, ‘FRANK EXPLAINS SOMETHING TO THE AUDIENCE,’ are one of the two narrative elements that are encountered at the beginning of the show. Secondly, it is one of the most frequently seen events throughout the season. His asides are one of the two events recorded in the STNA model in the first beat of the first episode along with the action, “FRANK KILLS” These two events are significant because arguably they shape the overall narrative of *House of Cards* more so than others. “FRANK KILLS” foreshadows the end of the season when Frank kills Peter Russo. The event is only seen on the first beat of the first episode and once again in Episode 11. On the other hand, “FRANK EXPLAINS SOMETHING TO THE AUDIENCE” keeps appearing throughout the season. In fact, it is one of the only two actions that appear in every episode[18]. From the first beat of the first episode to the end of the season, Frank delivers at least one aside each episode, usually starting from the first beat of each episode.

Frank’s asides bring two types of diegetic commentary: commentary on what is happening around the character (e.g., the first beat of episode eight where he explains why he is being

[18] The only other action that recurs every episode is ‘FRANK CONSPIRES,’ followed by the action ‘FRANK MANIPULATES SOMEONE,’ that is present in all but one episode.

honoured by his alma mater) and commentary on his actions (e.g., the first beat of episode one where he explains why he is killing the dog). Very rarely, his asides also provide metamedial commentary that takes on a different meaning when examined extra-diegetically. For instance, at the very end of the first episode of *House of Cards*, Frank Underwood contemplates ordering another plate of his favourite food, and in a very short aside, he says: "I am feeling hungry today," (figure 4.5) (House of Cards, Chapter One, 00:53:23-00:53:26).

While the last aside of the episode lines up with the ideas of ambition and hunger for power, the commentary also works as a reference to bingeing, Netflix's preferred mode of engagement with content (McCormick, 2016 p. 106). Much like Frank ordering one more plate, the viewers are encouraged to watch one more episode as the first episode ends, credits roll, and the built-in auto-play functionality of Netflix starts the countdown.

Figure 4.5

Screengrab from the first episode of *House of Cards*. Frank orders another plate of food and makes a reference to binge-eating in his final aside of the first episode.

The diegetic commentary that Underwood's asides provide is useful in introducing new settings, characters, and plotlines to the viewers. In the first episode, Frank spends ample time

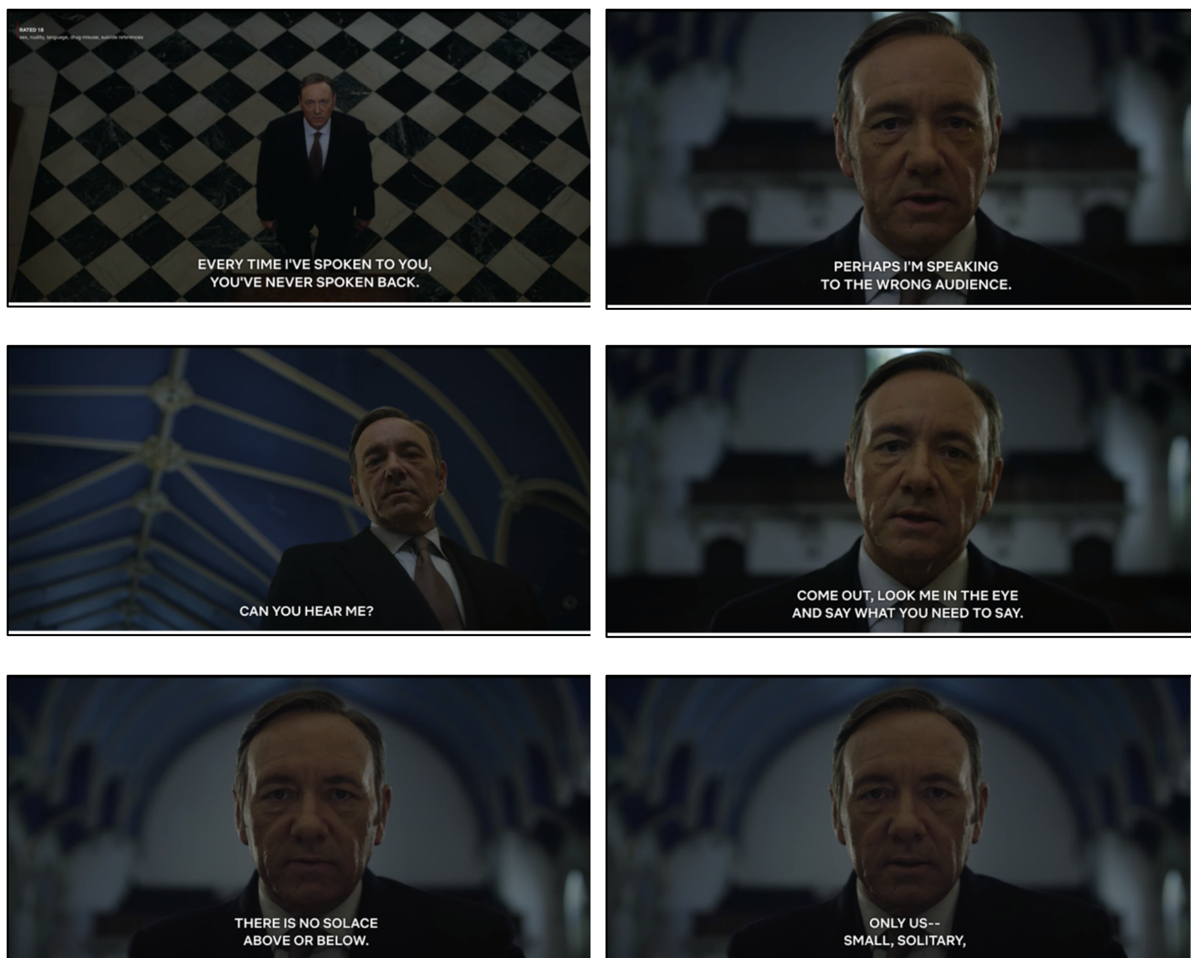
talking to the camera and introducing key political figures to the viewer such as the President, Vice President, and Chief of Staff. Moreover, asides are used to signal the change of time too. As discussed earlier, the events of one season of *House of Cards* usually span around one year but the show do not explicitly mention the passage of time and the time jump between events — sometimes a few months at a time — occurs between episodes, not within them. Often, Frank Underwood makes a mention of how long something has taken to do or how long he was waiting for something which gives an implicit reference to the passage of time.

Outside of the story, these asides provide a screen intimacy between the viewer and the character. McCormick likens this to video conferencing. She argues that as a substantial amount of Netflix viewing is through small screens like computers, tablets and phones, the viewer is physically closer to the screen. The screens used for viewing are the same screens that are used for personal communication. Hence, when Frank Underwood speaks to the camera the viewer is "video-conferencing with the narrative," (2016, p.106). She further posits that this provides a sense of faux narrative interactivity in the viewers.

One particular scene in the final episode of the first season reinforces the idea that the asides aim to provoke a sense of narrative interaction between the audience and the character. Visiting a church, Frank Underwood looks up to the camera for his aside and says, "Every time I've spoken to you, you've never spoken back." The shot moves down to his level and on a medium shot, still looking up, Underwood keeps talking. Then, after only a couple of sentences, he turns his gaze down to the camera again: "Perhaps, I'm speaking to the wrong audience." He shifts his gaze once again, looking down, asking, "Can you hear me?" The next shot is shot from the floor looking up at Frank Underwood. As he continues talking, once again the viewer has eye contact with Frank. A thud interrupts Underwood's train of thought. He looks around, asking "Peter, is that you?", referring to the senator he killed and framed as suicide two episodes ago. He looks around, trying to find the ghost of Peter, urging the ghost

to stop hiding. His gaze locks on the camera once again: "Come out, look me in the eye and say what you need to say." He mistakes another thud coming from the church as interaction with whoever is behind the camera and as he recognises that he will not get an answer from any entity this side of the screen, he looks at the viewer one last time to say, "There is no solace above or below. Only us…" (figure 4.6) (House of Cards, Chapter 13, 00:21:43-00:22:55).

Figure 4.6



Screenshots from episode 13 of the first season of *House of Cards.* Frank tries to get a response from behind the screen during one of his asides.

This aside gives the viewer a clue about the extradiegetic agency of Frank Underwood. Firstly, it shows Frank trying to find who is behind the camera. Is it a theological being up above or down below? Who is the "audience" he has been talking to for thirteen episodes? As he begins hearing sounds, he even considers if Peter is there, on the other side of this video conference. The aside shows that Frank Underwood cannot get a reply from the viewers on the other side of the screen, but it also shows that he is aware — or suspicious — of entities that are outside of the diegesis.

Secondly, the aside shows that the viewer is not individual and solitary on the other side of the screen. This side of the screen seems to be a shared space consisting of anything and everything that is not physically present in the narrative world of *House of Cards*, including the viewers and Peter Russo, a character who is now dead in the show.

Thirdly, it shows that Frank Underwood does not have the agency to shape the narrative extradiegetically. His asides, no matter how revealing they are in terms of the plot, do not have direct impact on the narrative. Other characters seem unaffected by what is being said during the aside and even if they are in the middle of a conversation with Frank when he turns aside, they do not seem to notice that Frank is addressing someone else now. Once the narrative space and time of *House of Cards* pause, Frank's actions during the aside cannot affect others. In the final episode, we see evidence of his lack of extradiegetic powers as he cannot get a reply from the people behind the screen even when he directly asks for it.

On top of Frank's lack of metadiegetic powers, he is also not the only that narrates in the show. Season five ends with the shot of Claire Underwood having sent Frank away and ready to act as the President of the United States. For the first time, she looks directly at the camera and says, "My turn," (figure 4.7) (House of Cards, Chapter 65, 00:53:15-00:53:20). From that

point onwards she begins using asides. The narrative technique that facilitates screen intimacy is passed from one character to the other.

Figure 4.7

Screenshot from episode 13 of *House of Cards* season five. Claire Underwood looks directly at the camera for the first time.

All these considered, it is difficult to frame Frank Underwood as the narrator of the story. It would be more accurate to say that the show uses narration and asides as narrative tools. As this section covered narration in *House of Cards,* the next section focuses on supernarration.

4.4 Supernarrating *House of Cards*

So far, the formal analysis of narrative in *House of Cards* followed the dual narrative structure set out by narrative theorists like Genette and Chatman: story and discourse. Moreover, the analysis borrowed from the tools and techniques used in literary and filmic texts. Indeed, narrative theory of television texts came to prominence in the late 1980s, primarily starting

with Sarah Kozloff's piece, Narrative Theory and Television in 1987[19]. Kozloff's text is crucial to this research for two reasons. Firstly, it provides a new layer to televisual texts above story and discourse: the layer of television schedule (1992). Secondly, it positions television networks as agents in telling televisual stories, arguing that they inform and influence televisual texts at the outermost layer as supernarrators (p. 94). Kozloff argued that the main supernarrative power that television networks had was their control over how the schedule works. This section explores how such supernarrative powers might manifest themselves in an SVOD environment where there is no linear schedule.

To explore supernarration between Netflix and *House of Cards*, this thesis utilises contextual programme analysis, looking at *House of Cards* in relation to how it is positioned inside the Netflix environment (Gray and Lotz, 2011). Early academic work on the show was quick to notice the use of chapters instead of episodes on the Netflix interface (Klarer 2014; McCormick, 2016). Klarer notes that the use of chapters provides a connection to novels, but he does not acknowledge the omission of term "episodes" (p. 215). Later, McCormick posits that the use of chapters instead of episodes "separates it from the dominant way of organising TV" (p. 106). Here, we see an initial supernarrative element in paratexts. The Netflix interface shows *House of Cards* in continuous chapters - season two starts with Chapter 14 - spread across seasons. Apart from the chapter numbers, no other episode title is given.

It is interesting to see that Netflix chose not to omit the word season like it did with episodes as season denotes the dominant release schedule of American prime-time television. Netflix uses various terms for its instalments. For instance, *Stranger Things* is named as One, Two, Three, Four and Five like a movie franchise. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020) calls each of its batch of episodes, "parts". Culinary show *Chef's Table* (2015-) uses the term

[19] This thesis references the second edition of the text published in 1992.

"volume". Part of the reason for using the term season in *House of Cards* might be release schedules. Another reason may be that as an earlier Netflix Original, *House of Cards* abided by some of the conventions of broadcast television. As discussed earlier in this chapter, many seasons of *House of Cards* were released around the same time of year. While the Netflix Original show might not have conformed to weekly schedule norms of broadcast television, they have remained more faithful to yearly schedules.

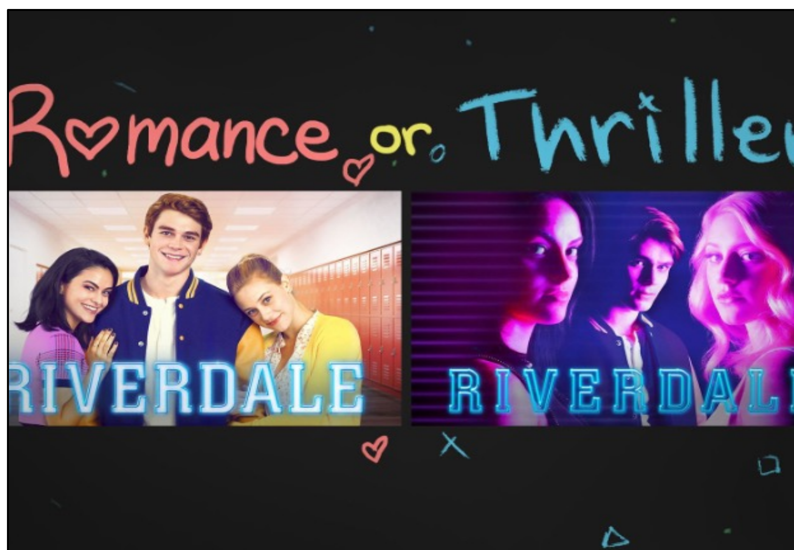
Kozloff argues that schedules make television narratives unique in the sense that these texts are embedded in the metadiscourse of the station's schedule. She suggests that as supernarrators, television stations are "outside and above all embedded narratives, unaffected by them. And it is through their sufferance that all other texts are brought to us: they can interrupt, delay, or preempt the other texts at will," (1992, p. 94). I argue that similarly, all Netflix Original texts are embedded within the metadiscourse of the Netflix interface. Netflix can interrupt, delay and preempt any text it contains within its library. The interface and the functionalities it provides allow Netflix to use supernarrative agency in the absence of a schedule[20].

For instance, the recommendation algorithms decide which texts are presented to a viewer at any given time. Looking at the example of *House of Cards,* the viewer is greeted with supernarrative decisions from the first moment they open the Netflix interface. First of all, do they see *House of Cards* on their home screen, or do they need to search for it? Netflix shows its originals more prominently on the interface, but every Netflix user has a different page. They are given different categories and different content to choose from. That means, even before the viewer is engaged with *House of Cards,* Netflix decides the viewer's proximity to the text. How close will the show's thumbnail be to the viewer in relation to all the other thumbnails.

[20] Chapters 6 and 7 provide more discussion of how Netflix uses its supernarrative agency.

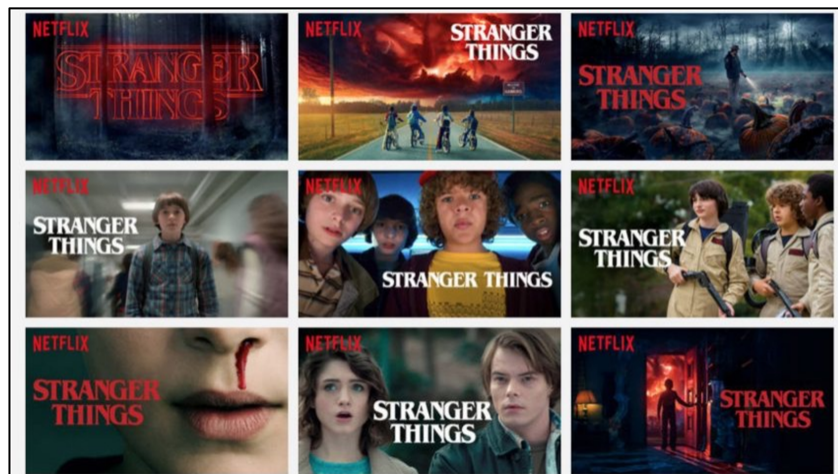
If or when audiences see the show on their homepage, what does the thumbnail show? As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, Netflix uses different thumbnails for its content based on viewer criteria like what other genres they are watching or which actors they have seen before (Sottek, 2016; Yalcinkaya, 2017; Barton, 2018). Gina Barton gives the example of Netflix Original, *Riverdale* (2017-). She points out that depending on the genres that the user watched before, the thumbnail for Riverdale can suggest that it is a romance or a thriller (figure 4.8, figure 4.9).

Figure 4.8



Two different thumbnails for *Riverdale*, targeting different users that enjoy watching romance or thriller.

Figure 4.9



Different thumbnails Netflix uses for *Stranger Things*.

The same applies for the categories that Netflix assigns *House of Cards* into. The first paratext of *House of Cards* seen by the viewer is a supernarrative decision, a decision that has an impact on the discourse of the show as it frames the text. Based on more than 2000 "taste communities" – the categories Netflix uses for its content – one viewer may find the show under "TV thrillers" while another may find it under "strong female characters" (Nguyen, 2018). The interface frames the show accordingly for each of these viewers. When the show was first released, Netflix showed ten different and highly targeted trailers to users. Users who have watched a film with a strong female lead would see a trailer that focused on Robin Wright, Kevin Spacey fans would see a trailer that had Spacey at the centre, users who liked Fincher's films would get more artful shots in their trailers (Finn, 2017, pp. 98-99).

Between thumbnails, taste communities and categories, it is important to note that anything the user sees on Netflix is a recommendation. The viewer never sees the Netflix library in full. What the user sees is more like a rotating shelf. Only an amount of the content is visible at any given time and the visible content is never static, always being shaped by the user's previous activities. Even in the two sections on Netflix homepage where the user has agency -

"My List" and "Continue Watching" – the items are put in order of what the viewer is most likely to watch next. On broadcast television networks, recommendations of what to watch next with their schedule, through the use of timeslots and sequencing television texts one after the other. I argue that the Netflix interface possesses a supernarrative agency that is equivalent to TV schedules.

Netflix uses supernarrative agency on the discourse level too, informing the narrative by negotiating the gaps. The gaps between seasons are decided by production and release schedules but the primary decisionmaker is Netflix. The gap between episodes is decided by the viewer as they can stop at any time. However, the minimum gap between episodes is a supernarrative decision made with the auto-play functionality. The auto-play can start its countdown any time after the credits start rolling and it can take as little as five seconds between episodes. Finally, the gaps within the episodes are eliminated supernarratively, as Netflix does not show commercial breaks.

House of Cards shows a clear example of how much supernarrative power Netflix exercises. When Kevin Spacey was fired from the show before season six was released in response to the accusations of sexual assault, the character was written off from the show. Season six focuses on Claire Underwood as the President of United States. The character Frank Underwood and the actor Kevin Spacey were also removed from the paratexts. The promotional photos of *House of Cards* – including the thumbnails – no longer show his face. His name does not even appear among the main cast unless the user clicks a button to show a full cast list[21].

[21] It is also interesting to note that following the accusations, Kevin Spacey removed himself from public life until 24 December 2018 when he uploaded a short video on his personal YouTube channel with the title "Let me Be Frank" (2018). In the video, he talks to the audience in the same way he delivers Frank Underwood's asides in the show, using the mannerisms and the voice of the character. The monologue is spoken in a dual register where he seems to be addressing the real-life accusations against Kevin Spacey, as Frank Underwood. The second video, titled KTWK to stand for "Kill them with kindness" also shows Spacey in character (2019). The third video, titled "1-800-XMAS" starts with him in character but in the first few second, Spacey breaks character, holds the camera and starts talking about suicide prevention (2020). This shows an extradiegetic conflict between the supernarrator and a character in the story. While Underwood was written out of

While Netflix influenced *House of Cards* on a supernarrative level, the show influenced Netflix's identity as a supernarrator in return. Kozloff explains that "supernarrators are personified and individualised by three primary means: logos (the NBC peacock, the CBS eye); signature music; and voice-over narrators who speak for the station or network as a whole," (1992, p. 94). Corresponding to these three elements that individualise and personify supernarrators, first comes the Netflix logo. With its red ribbon-like N-letter, the logo is unique and summons the image of Netflix.

Voice-over narration is not used on the platform to create platform identity. While broadcast television networks no longer use voice-over to the extent that they did in 1980s and 1990s, Netflix does not have a disembodied voice that narrates its promotional texts. In the absence of voice-over, I argue that the header of the homepage functions as a promotion space for shows and films. The auto-play functionality and the screen that shows up after one content is finished – recommending and showing trailers for new content – further serve the function of a "Coming Up Next" segment. The visual cues of promotion replace the audio cues of voice-over narration.

The third element of individualisation and personification ties directly to *House of Cards*. The signature music of Netflix is well-known. For the first two years, Netflix Original shows, including *House of Cards* only showed the Netflix logo at the beginning without an audio cue. Referred to internally as "Ta-Dum," the sound debuted in 2015 (Taylor, 2020). As the sound designers of the audio cue, Lon Bender and Charlie Campagna explain on the podcast *Twenty Thousand Hertz*, the signature Ta-Dum consists of two sounds. Knuckles with a wedding ring that knock on a table twice and a guitar chord played backwards:

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texts and removed from paratexts of the show, he still found existence elsewhere, on a different platform — YouTube. In a way, the supernarrator and the actor are in conflict over who controls the character.

> It's a combination of music and of the sound effects of these knocks, which were my wedding ring that I'm wearing knocking on the side of our cabinet in our bedroom *[SFX: ring knocking on wood]*. And in order to add different qualities to it I sweetened it with other things, which is normal for us in the film sound industry. […] One of the most important elements of this was the guitar material that Charlie came up with, because I wanted it to have a musical component, but any instrument that was played straight up, it was too specific because someone would instantly recognize it as that instrument. […] One particular sound stood out at that time, which is the blossom sound that's used. And it's about a 30-second phrase of guitar playing that has been reversed and processed through that DigiTech, and I always had it because it's so beautiful, but I never was able to use it. […] It ended up being directly put in there without any extra sound design. It's literally just the reverse guitar doing its thing. (Taylor, 2020)

Using knuckles to knock on a table twice is something Frank Underwood frequently does in *House of Cards* whenever the character stands up from a table to leave. In fact, in the twelfth episode, a character asks Frank why he keeps knocking on the table, to which he answers:

> Something my father taught me. It's meant to harden your knuckles, so you don't break them if you get into a fight. It also has the added benefit of knocking on wood. My father believed that success is a mixture of preparation and luck. Tapping the table kills both birds with one stone. (House of Cards, Chapter 12, 00:19:45-00:20:03)

At the end of Season two Frank Underwood becomes the President of the United States. The very last shot of the season shows him repeat the habit by knocking the presidential desk at the Oval Office twice as credits roll and auto-play functionality starts the countdown. As the new season begins five seconds later, the first episode starts with Netflix's signature music, emulating the double knock and adding the guitar. *House of Cards*, the first acquired Netflix Original is forever embedded to the metadiscourse of Netflix. Any time a new Netflix Original begins, it is Frank Underwood's knuckles that the viewer hears first.

4.5 CONCLUSION

As stated in Chapter 2, this thesis proposes the release of *House of Cards* as a key turning point in the timeline of internet television. Starting with *Lilyhammer* in 2012 and continuing with

House of Cards, Orange is the New Black and *Arrested Development* in 2013, the SVOD platform now releases hundreds of Netflix Originals every year. More and more original content is acquired or developed directly and exclusively by Netflix.

In a time of such massive shift, exploring the initial examples of original content on Netflix is crucial to make sense of narrative possibilities that the SVOD platform provides. *House of Cards* provides an excellent opportunity for this exploration. Using the STNA Model and contextual programme analysis, this research was able to map out the first season of the show and analyse the narrative form across its first 13 episodes.

The analysis showed that the length of episodes and the use of beats in the episodes were similar to expected conventions of prime-time dramas on US broadcast television. Moreover, gaps between yearly releases showed similarities with yearly schedules of broadcast television networks. However, gaps between episodes and within episodes are not copied in the Netflix Original text. In the absence of commercial gaps within episodes and weekly gaps between episodes, *House of Cards* uses its narrative to generate gaps in its discourse by utilising stand-alone episodes. Viewers then create their own gaps with personal schedules around their binge-watching activities.

In the STNA Model, a closer look at events showed Frank addressing the audience frequently. A closer look on the show's utilisation of asides revealed that the character of Frank Underwood has very limited extra-diegetic agency and that agency is not inherent to himself, shifting to another character in the final season.

Looking at the outermost layer of narrative, contextual programme analysis showed that the Netflix interface has similar supernarrative agency to broadcast television schedules in influencing narratives. Finally, *House of Cards* is embedded deep into Netflix's identity as a

supernarrator as the signature music used by the platform developed directly from an element of the show.

It is surprising to see that one of the first Netflix Originals – and first one to receive global attention showed less experimentation with the narrative possibilities of the Netflix environment compared to other case studies in this thesis. As discussed before, a reason for that may be Netflix's limited geographic reach at the time. While Netflix operates in more than 190 countries in 2022, in 2014, the service was available in less than 50 countries (Kelion, 2014). It is plausible that, to promote and distribute the show in other markets with traditional broadcast television structures, the Netflix Original abided by conventions of prime-time dramas more rigidly.

5 A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

A Series of Unfortunate Events (2017-2019) is an American Netflix Original show that ran over three seasons. Based on the young adult book series of the same name by Daniel Handler (using the pseudonym of Lemony Snicket), the 25-episode show is an adaptation of all 13 novels published between 1999 and 2006. The story has formerly been adapted to big screen with the name *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2004), covering the events of the first three books. While the film was a financial success and the plan was to adapt all books into a movie franchise, a sequel never went into production and the second film was cancelled in the development phase (Shepherd, 2016). Hence, as of 2022, the Netflix show is the only full retelling of the story in the books. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* can be categorised as a developed original show[22], because it was developed and produced through Netflix's partnership with Paramount Television and distributed globally by Netflix.

The show tells the story of the "Baudelaire orphans", Violet (Malina Weissman), Klaus (Louis Hynes) and Sunny (Presley Smith), as they are swung around between guardians after their parents perish in a house fire. Their first guardian, the vile and villainous Count Olaf (Neil Patrick Harris) tries everything he can do to get his hands on their parents' fortune — which cannot be released until the eldest sibling, Violet turns 18 years old. His evil acts include trying — and frequently succeeding — to murder the Baudelaires' guardians, putting the children's life in danger and mistreating them. At the end of three seasons, 25 episodes and numerous guardians, Count Olaf dies, and the Baudelaire siblings vanish, deciding it is best

[22] See Chapter 2 for further information on different types of Netflix Original shows.

to take care of themselves instead of putting their trust in adults who fail to listen to them and fall victim to Count Olaf's scams over and over again.

This chapter analyses all three seasons and all 25 episodes of *A Series of Unfortunate Events,* primarily using the STNA model to provide a formal analysis. In doing so, it aims to explore RQ1, looking at characteristics of narrative form in televisual serial narratives released exclusively by the SVOD platform Netflix. It further explores RQ2 and RQ4 on the possible variations of form and structure in Netflix Originals and how time and temporality can deviate from television shows aimed for broadcast television.

The show presents an interesting case study for three reasons. Firstly, with Netflix commissioning the second and third seasons together and the source text having been written, the narrative of the show was designed with the knowledge of when and how the show would end (Snetiker, 2017). The producers knew from the beginning that 13 books would be adapted over the course of three seasons with each book covered in two-episode story arcs[23]. After the first season was released, Netflix commissioned the scripts for the second and third seasons together, providing a chance for the creators of the show to end the story on their own terms. As this research aims to explore narrative possibilities in Netflix Original shows, the Serialised Televisual Narrative Analysis (STNA) model can reveal how this knowledge of the show's finite length reflects on its narrative structure over three seasons.

Secondly, the show's position as an adaptation is interesting because it has previously been adapted into a film and both the author Daniel Handler and the showrunner of Netflix Original show Barry Sonnenfeld were involved with the development of both iterations. Handler himself admits that the book series was heavily influenced by serialised melodramas

[23] The 13th and final book, *The End* (2006) was adapted into a single episode.

in how they tell the story (Lucero II, 2017). Marcia Landy's summary of melodramatic narratives show how prevalent this influence has been:

> Melodramatic narratives are driven by the experience of one crisis after another, crises involving severed familial ties, separation and loss, misrecognition of one's place, person and propriety. Seduction, betrayal, abandonment, extortion, murder, suicide, revenge, jealousy, incurable illness, obsession, and compulsion – these are part of the familiar terrain of melodrama. The victims are most often females threatened in their sexuality, their property, their very identity. Often orphaned, subjected to cruel and arbitrary treatment at the hands of domineering paternal and maternal figures or their surrogates, they experience a number of trials [...] the presence of physicians, psychiatrists, and representatives of the law is a commonplace. These figures serve a contradictory role in the narrative. (Landy, 1991, pp. 14-15)

It is interesting to see how *A Series of Unfortunate Events* plays with many of the common tropes that Landy mentions. Some tropes, like the cruelty of surrogate figures that are after the victim's possessions can be seen directly in Daniel Handler's story. Others, like the promise of a happy ending, usually with a romantic partnership is repeatedly overruled throughout the books and the show. It is also interesting to see how these tropes play out between the books and the Netflix Original. The adaptation is not merely a television adaptation, but specifically was made for streaming television. This makes it possible to explore questions around mediality of Netflix, using the STNA Model.

Thirdly, the book series is an example of metafiction — the text showing awareness of itself as an artefact to "pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, 1984, p. 2). The books claim that the author of the series is Lemony Snicket, a pseudonym that Daniel Handler uses. Snicket's persona is never revealed in the books, and he appears either as a silhouette, or a man whose face is covered by something else in the drawings inside the books. In real life, whenever Daniel Handler attended a book signing or other public gathering, he introduced himself as Lemony Snicket's agent, usually claiming Snicket could not attend because he had been bitten by a giant insect (Kirtley, 2013). Snicket occasionally mentions his friends and family while he tells the story of the Baudelaires, setting up

connections between himself and the orphans, yet as a character he is not involved with the story of the Baudelaires, never meeting them. The 2004 film follows a similar formula to the books in how it represents Lemony Snicket, only showing him (Jude Law) in the shadows, in a workspace, working on the story, never interacting with the Baudelaires.

The show on the other hand, chooses to demystify the image of Lemony Snicket (Patrick Warburton) by using the character as an on-screen narrator. Snicket is the only character that talks directly to the camera and has an omnipresence throughout the show, appearing in different settings and scenes on different diegetic levels. The narrator transforms from an author to a character. Arguably, the Netflix Original show is as much the story of Snicket retelling the story of the Baudelaires as it is the story of the Baudelaires. Moreover, as the narrative is reconceptualised to a serial narrative for television, the metafictional mode expands into a metamedial mode — the text drawing attention to how it is engaged with through a specific medium (Kaczyńska, 2018; Hunter, 2019).

A well-known example of this expansion of metafictional narrative to a metamedial one is *A Cock and Bull Story* (2005). Adapted from Laurence Sterne's metafictional novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1758), the film both tells the story of Tristram Shandy and the story of how a film about this novel can be made. Explaining why *A Cock and Bull Story* is important in understanding literary adaptations, Eckart Voigts-Virchow argues that the film is worth studying "because it lays bare the specific mediality not only of literature and film, but also of the in-between process of adaptation," (2009, p. 140). Similarly, it can be argued that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is worth studying not only because of its qualities as a book, as a film or as a television show, but because of how the story is reconceptualised between these three forms.

Yvonne Griggs argues that serialised TV adaptations invite us to "take into account both the impact of media-specific industrial production contexts, and of sociocultural influences at play in the reconfiguration of pre-loved stories," (2018 p. 2). The analysis and discussion here aim to contribute to a greater debate on mediality of SVOD platforms.

The narrative environment of Netflix is constituted by an abundance of serialised TV adaptations. Other case studies of this thesis are reconceptualisations of earlier texts too. *House of Cards* is a loose adaptation of a British broadcast television series of the same name (1990) as well as the novel by Michael Dobbs (1989). *Arrested Development* had two televisual lives – one on broadcast television and one on Netflix. In each of these cases, close reading of texts can provide insight to the mediality of Netflix. More specifically, an analysis of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* contributes to the understanding of intermediality within Netflix.

Informed by these three features of the show – its three-season-design, its status as an intermedial adaptation, and its metamediality – I argue that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* displays a distinct narrative form throughout its seasons. I further argue that the show uses beats different in each season. Finally, I posit that the Netflix adaptation utilises the narrator differently than both the literary and film versions of the text. The metafictional author of the literary text becomes a narrator confined within the space of the story but gains more agency than the other characters in the story.

To make these arguments, this chapter first introduces key terminology that will lay the theoretical framework. Then it provides a formal structural analysis of all three seasons of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* using the STNA Model. The discussion then focuses specifically on the use of beats in each season. Then, temporality in the text is discussed. The final discussion focuses on the changes to the metafictional author in the Netflix adaptation before the chapter concludes its arguments.

5.1 Key Terminology

There are specific terms that this chapter uses to refer to specific textual characteristics of *A Series of Unfortunate Events.* It is useful to inspect how each of these terms are used before continuing with the analysis and discussion.

The Netflix Original show, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is an adaptation. Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn point out three aspects of adaptations. It is acknowledged as a transposition of other works, it is a creative and an interpretive appropriation of those works, and it intertextually engages with the source works (2006, p. 8). Hutcheon and O'Flynn argue that adaptation texts are both primary texts in themselves and connected to other primary texts at the same time (2006, p. 9).

A Series of Unfortunate Events acknowledges its transposition by using the same title as the books and using the titles of each individual book as episode titles. It further utilises a title card at the beginning of every episode that states the show is based on the book series by Lemony Snicket. Throughout the show, most characters and settings (except for characters that are newly introduced in the show) are the same as they were in the books. It is creative and interpretive in its appropriation as elements of story in the books are often utilised and portrayed differently in the show. An example for this is the character of Lemony Snicket whose increased agency in the narrative of the show is further discussed below. Finally, the show's intertextual engagement with the book series is apparent in how the narrative is formed and includes instances of direct connections between the primary text and the televisual text. One example for this is the verbatim use of key dialogue from the book series.

The term intertextuality was first used by Julia Kristeva when she proposed that any text is a permutation of other texts and therefore always intertextual (1980, p. 36). Genette proposes

the umbrella term, transtextuality to refer to all textual relationships between texts and defines an intertextual engagement as a subcategory of transtextuality, a copresence of two texts; typically, one text within another (1997a, pp. 1-2). In its simplest form, this co-present relationship can be manifested as quotation, plagiarism, and allusion. *A Series of Unfortunate Events'* intertextuality is significant in analysing its narrative form. In order to provide an accurate close reading of an intertextual text like *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, the source text should be acknowledged as much as possible (Martinez Alfaro, 1996, p. 284).

The Netflix adaptation is not only intertextual but also has intermedial connections with the source text, the film text and other texts from various media. Intermediality here broadly refers to "relations between media, medial interactions and interferences," (Rajewsky, 2010, p. 51). As Voigts-Virchow argues, at the core of intermediality is the concept of mediality, which "can be thought of as a set of characteristics that define a medium, i.e., the specific technical, textual, but also cultural conditions of various media," (2009, p.140). Mediality and intermediality are significant in analysis of *A Series of Unfortunate Events.* The analysis in this chapter shows that there are some elements of the narrative in the show that display television mediality, yet other elements also point towards a mediality of internet TV.

As *A Series of Unfortunate Events* exists in three different media, a discussion of the intellectual property's Transmediality may also be appropriate. As described by Henry Jenkins;

> Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (2007)

Sara Tanderup Linkis argues that the Netflix adaptation is built towards a transmedialisation of the source material, providing additional characters, and closure to plot points (2020). However, I argue that the added materials (exemplified in later sections) do not constitute a

unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. Rather, they provide new plotlines that happen concurrently with the events of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* without having an impact on the story told in the source text.

There are two further terms that are connected to the narrative form in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* that require clarification. The first one is metalepsis which can be defined as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.)," (Genette, 1980, pp. 234-235). The book, the television show and the film all feature many instances of metalepses. In fact, one of the most significant instances of metalepsis is at the beginning of all three conceptualisations of the story when Lemony Snicket – the narrator of the story – announces that it is his sad duty to tell the story of the Baudelaires.

Genette argues that the most troubling aspect of metalepsis is the possibility that anything extradiegetic is always diegetic, always a part of the narrative. The asides in *House of Cards* as discussed in Chapter 4 is an example of this. Frank Underwood's addresses to the audience resemble a shift in diegetic level but in fact as we see from his lack of extradiegetic agency, they are a part of the diegesis.

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events,* the metalepses work different. Elaborating on them, Genette proposes a reduced meta-diegetic or pseudo-diegetic level of narrative: "telling as if it were diegetic (as if it were at the same narrative level as its context) something that has nevertheless been presented as (or can easily be guessed to be) metadiegetic," (1980, p. 236). In such a case of pseudo-diegesis, a story is told by a narrator (that might be a character in the story), and the reader knows that the story is being narrated by someone; however, on a metadiegetic level, the text does not repeatedly address this. Hence, the metadiegetic level of telling the story is reduced to the level of diegesis. As the reader is not reminded that the story being told

in the present is an account from a diegetic source, the present story becomes its own pseudo-diegesis. As discussed later in the chapter, Lemony Snicket in the book series, in the film and in the Netflix original show all have different levels of pseudo-diegetic agencies as he narrates, acts, and interacts at different levels of diegesis.

With these considerations of terminology in mind, the next section provides a formal analysis of the Netflix Original.

5.2 A Formal Analysis of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

In *A Series of Unfortunate Events* each season of the show was put into a separate datasheet, resulting in three datasets for three seasons. The horizontal X-axis showed temporal data, breaking down to seasons into episodes, then to beats. Each beat's timecode was also noted for easy navigation with the visual text. On the vertical Y-axis, the elements that comprise form of content – existents and events – were listed in order of characters, settings, happenings, and actions. The "notes" category was utilised to record title credits, flashbacks, recaps, cliff-hangers, and fades to black (Figure 3.6 shows a snapshot of each season's datasheet). Appendix A provides a list of webpage links for the datasheets in various file types (Microsoft Excel, PDF, Google Sheets).

The STNA Model examined each season separately but as each season used the previous season's datasheet - any character, setting, action or happening that was noted down at any point, including notes - remained visible for later seasons. While some of these elements were never seen again in other beats, there were elements that came up in all three seasons, as well as elements that reappeared from time to time. For instance, the penthouse of Jerome and Esme Squalor (Tony Hale and Lucy Punch) appears only in the third and fourth episodes of

season two; however, its inhabitants, the characters of Esme and Jerome reappear in later episodes in different moments. Esme joins Count Olaf as a villain and appears in every episode afterwards until the penultimate episode of the series. Jerome does not appear again for the remainder of the season but comes back for two more episodes towards the end of the final season. Because it is difficult to estimate if any event or existent will be relevant again, it was crucial to keep every component in the datasheet until the whole narrative of the show came to an end.

Analysis of the data from the STNA model reveals that the three seasons of the show demonstrate distinct features in narrative structure that remain similar in their own sets of episodes (Table 5.1). Specifically, the number and timing of story beats - the smallest temporal units of television storytelling (Newman, 2006, p. 17) - change across seasons. The second season uses the smallest number of beats. The average number of beats per episode increases again for the final season. While the reasons for the change in narrative structure across seasons can only be speculated, it is noteworthy to inspect these changes alongside other Netflix Originals that have changed narrative structure across seasons like *Arrested Development*.

Table 5.1 – Number of Narrative Elements for each season of *A Series of Unfortunate Events.*

A Series of Unfortunate Events	Season 1	Season 2	Season 3
Number of Episodes	8	10	7
Number of Characters	28	36	40
Number of Settings	25	30	29

Number of Happenings	8	10	13
Number of Actions	23	22	21
Average Number of Beats per Episode	22	14	18
Episode Running Times	43-64 minutes (average = 49 mins)	41-52 minutes (average = 45)	36-55 minutes (average = 47 mins)

As the story continues and the narrative world expands, a greater number of events and existents are recorded in each consecutive season of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (Table 5.1). The only exceptions where the numbers did not increase over seasons were between the second and third seasons when the number of settings dropped by one, and each season having one less action element than the previous one. The minimal change in the overall number of narrative components indicate that the form of content did not change significantly between seasons.

As the show covers each book in two episodes, the story arcs of each two episodes are clearly visible in patterns that the STNA model reveals in the narrative structure of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Much like the books, every two episodes, or every story arc is primarily set in one setting. The first two episodes, *The Bad Beginning: Part One* (2017) and *The Bad Beginning: Part Two* (2017) take place in Count Olaf's house. The second two episodes, *The Reptile Room: Part One* (2017) and *The Reptile Room: Part Two* (2017) have Montgomery Montgomery's (Aasif Mandvi) house as the central setting (see Table 5.2 for a list of episodes). This pattern goes on until the final episode of the final season. The STNA model clearly shows the stair-like

pattern in its settings section as the majority of filled cells in every episode go down every two episodes. The stair-like pattern shows the differences between the episodes on the STNA Model.

Table 5.2 – Episode names, durations, and number of beats per episode in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* Seasons One, Two and Three.

#	Season 1			Season 2			Season 3		
	Title	# Of Beats	Length in mins	Title	# Of Beats	Length in mins	Title	# Of Beats	Length in mins
1	"The Bad Beginning: Part One"	25	49	"The Austere Academy: Part One"	22	46	"The Slippery Slope: Part One"	17	43
2	"The Bad Beginning: Part Two"	29	64	"The Austere Academy: Part Two"	21	52	"The Slippery Slope: Part Two"	24	44
3	"The Reptile Room: Part One"	16	48	"The Ersatz Elevator: Part One"	16	52	"The Grim Grotto: Part One"	22	44

4	"The Reptile Room: Part Two"	16	43	"The Ersatz Elevator: Part Two"	16	41	"The Grim Grotto: Part Two"	17	36
5	"The Wide Window: Part One"	16	43	"The Vile Village: Part One"	15	58	"The Penultimate Peril: Part One"	16	55
6	"The Wide Window: Part Two"	22	53	"The Vile Village: Part Two"	8	41	"The Penultimate Peril: Part Two"	15	52
7	"The Miserable Mill: Part One"	30	44	"The Hostile Hospital: Part One"	8	44	"The End"	18	52
8	"The Miserable Mill: Part Two"	25	47	"The Hostile Hospital: Part Two"	7	40			

9				"The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One"	14	46			
10				"The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two"	18	43			
avg		22	49		14	45		18	47

Table 2: List of all episodes in *A Series of Unfortunate Events.*

The "two-episode per book" structure is remarkable for televisual storytelling and can be interpreted as being facilitated by Netflix. Two-hour specials and multi-episode arcs are often seen in broadcast television. Especially in UK there are also television shows that have a small number of episodes per season (e.g., *Sherlock* [2010-2017] with each season containing 3-4 episodes). There are also anthology series that tell multiple stories in single or multiple episodes throughout their run. However, a systematic two-episode breakdown, each consisting of a single story that also contributes to an overall story arc of the show, spread across all seasons is rare in broadcast television. As discussed in Chapter 2, television narratives negotiate between old knowledge gathered from the previous episodes and new knowledge that is being displayed in the current episode (O'Sullivan, 2006). In a broadcast television environment, in a television show with a structure of two-episode arcs, whenever the audience miss the first episode of a story arc, they would be denied the old knowledge that is necessary to understand the current episode. They can catch up with the missing episode

using streaming services or tuning into a scheduled rerun, but in the regular flow of the television schedule, their engagement with the story will be stunted.

It may be more difficult to apply this narrative structure in broadcast television as aesthetic goals of television writers and economic goals of television networks don't always align. On the other hand, Netflix facilitates this narrative structure with the availability of all episodes and the auto-play functionality between episodes. Not only can viewers make sure they watch both parts of the story arc, but they can pick any two-episode arc to watch at will. As Tanya Horeck, Mareike Jenner and Tina Kendall propose, binge-watching becomes Netflix's schedule (2018, pp. 499-500) and the two-episode story arc structure becomes viable through this particular type of schedule.

Along with the two-episode story arcs, the STNA Model also displays a contained structure in the narrative. As mentioned earlier, teleplays for the second and third season of the show were written together. Daniel Handler talks about the contained nature of the story in an interview with *The Observer:*

> The hesitation I had was on like a bunch of TV shows where you set something up and then if you're the creator you might do a few things at the beginning and then you let a bunch of people go to town. This was going to be an adaptation of something very specific and very contained… It took some figuring out of exactly what would work but I think we figured it out. (Handler in Schwartz, 2017)

VanArendonk's arguments on episode can here be applied to Handler's statement (2019). VanArendonk suggested that due to the nature of television shows where multiple writers, producers, directors, and showrunners are involved throughout seasons, the overall television shows are not equivalent to the sum of each episode (2019, p. 74). She argues that with different writers, directors and even showrunners, episodes of television shows can be vastly different from each other in terms of their contribution to the overall story.

Handler's comments seem to suggest an intention to bring the cohesiveness of an individual storyteller helming all episodes[24]. Neil Patrick Harris, who plays Count Olaf in the show, also points out in an interview with *IndieWire* that knowing the show was "finite" allowed everyone on the team to pace themselves (Miller, 2018). A birds-eye view of the datasheets from all three seasons shows evidence of the contained storytelling that Handler refers to as well as the pacing that Harris talks about. The patterns formed by the filled cells resemble each other across all seasons. As can be seen in the datasheets - similar sets of characters, settings, actions, and happenings have been used throughout.

The contained structure also reveals itself in how episodes begin. As the STNA Model shows, half of the first season, all but one episode of the third season and each episode in the second season opens with Lemony Snicket addressing the audience. This is in line with the book series, as each instalment in the series also opens with Snicket's cautionary remarks towards the reader. Apart from the intro, it is also noteworthy that the episodes pick up the story from where it was left off at the end of the previous episode. The unrecorded existence of characters (Geraghty, 1981) is once again minimised as binge-watching enables virtually seamless transition between episodes.

This contained structure of the story also makes any additions or deviations from the source text more visible in the STNA model. While the creative team behind the show knew about the boundaries of the story, new characters, settings, actions, and happenings were added for the show and some narrative elements were utilised more centrally in the Netflix adaptation. As the show's first season was going to cover the first four books, and as the 2004 film also covered the first three books, Barry Sonnenfeld notes that Netflix was adamant about

[24] While Daniel Handler is credited as "teleplay by" in each episode, the writing credits are shared with others, including Joshua Conkel in three episodes, Emily Fox in one episode, Sigrid Gilmer in three episodes, Tatiana Suarez-Pico in one episode and Joe Tracz in 14 episodes.

including “additional subplots and additional intrigue and mystery,” (McHenry, 2017). As a result, a big plotline featuring the characters of “MOTHER” and “FATHER” runs through the first season. If one follows the action item “MOTHER AND FATHER TRY TO GO BACK TO THEIR KIDS” throughout season one in the STNA Model datasheet they will see that the action happens towards the end of every episode and the characters “MOTHER” and “FATHER” are present at the end of every episode until the penultimate episode of the season where the resolution to the plot is given. The plotline is frequent and important in the show but is completely absent in the books and the film. The STNA Model clearly shows that the events and existents surrounding this plotline form an essential part of the narrative structure of the first season.

The model also revealed that the show repeats its narrative components frequently. For instance, in every season, we see Lemony Snicket escaping from a hotel room at least once. Every season has at least one metamedial reference about the show being streamed (discussed further below). One episode in each season includes a storyline where one of Count Olaf’s henchpeople, Hooky (Usman Ally) lets or helps Sunny Baudelaire escape from Count Olaf, contributing to an ever-growing fondness between the two. One possible reason for the repetitiveness of components is the assumption made by the authors of televisual narratives that viewers don’t watch everything and need to be reminded about important information frequently to sustain engagement (Newman, 2006, p. 18).

Another potential reason is because the source material uses repetition both diegetically and metadiegetically in connection to the text’s metafictional characteristics. The abundance of repetition starts from the titles of the books where each title contains an alliteration with all words starting with the same letters (e.g., *The Grim Grotto, The Reptile Room,* and *The Carnivorous Carnival*). As discussed in the following sections, the STNA model suggests that the show uses repetition to serve both purposes. Considered with the repetitive nature binge-watching can

take (e.g., when viewers rewatch favourite episodes), these repetitions can also be interpreted as another indirect metamedial reference to SVOD services.

The formal characteristics of the narrative of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* reveal a contained narrative structure that follows similar patterns across all seasons. However, the temporal characteristics of the structure differ from season to season. The next section analyses the temporal structure of narrative form in *A Series of Unfortunate Events.*

5.3 Story Beats in A Series of Unfortunate Events

To make the argument that the temporal structure of the narrative differs across seasons - it is first important to explore how temporality is examined using narrative beats in the STNA Model. In his article, *From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative*, Michael Z. Newman contends that the television writers of American prime-time dramas on network television need to be mindful of beats to encourage viewer engagement with the show (2006). Newman argues that television's "most basic aesthetic and economic goals overlap engaging the viewer's attention. This begins on the micro level, the smallest node of narrative," (2006, p. 17). As economic and aesthetic goals overlap, television writers develop formulaic approaches to how they construct their narratives. Newman simplifies this formula as each episode having four acts divided by commercial breaks, consisting of a total of 20-40 beats.

> This means that each of the four acts in an hour-long show has around six beats. PTSs [Prime-time serials] are typically ensemble dramas, and each episode has multiple, intertwined plots. Major plots ("A Plots" in teleplay jargon) involving a main character have at least six beats, often more. An episode usually has two or more A plots and several B or C plots with a smaller number of beats each. Each act ideally includes at least one beat from all of the episode's plots. (2006, p. 18)[25]

[25] Newman provides this simplification for American prime-time television. The number of acts in television is defined by the commercial breaks and therefore change in different territories based on different regulations. For instance, in commercial

It should be noted here that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is not bound by an economic concern of keeping viewers engaged until the commercial breaks. Its host platform, Netflix runs on a subscription based economic model rather than an advertisement based one. Arguably, the aesthetic control of the network — Netflix in this case — might not penetrate to the micro level of beats the same way that it happens in a prime-time television drama. The show still seeks attention and engagement from the viewers, but this is more apparent on a macro level. Mareike Jenner argues that with its auto-play function between episodes and skip intro function at the beginning of episodes, Netflix presents an insulated flow[26] as the suggested mode of engaging "the same way television explains itself by offering the schedule as the only means to watch it," (2018, p. 126). For instance, the intro song in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* changes every two episodes. Using the skip intro function becomes more appealing between episodes of the same story arc than episodes which start a new arc. In a way viewer engagement is ideally held for every two episodes.

Looking back at the micro level of beats, the number of beats used in each episode as well as the duration of the beats vary between three seasons. As the STNA model shows and as can be seen in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 above, the average number of beats per episode fall dramatically in the second season from 22 in the first season to 14 in the second. The average number goes back up to 18 in the final season[27].

In the first season, the first two episodes that introduce the show have 25 and 29 beats. These numbers fit within the range that Newman (2006) and O'Sullivan (2010) give as examples of prime-time television dramas. Viewers might be more accustomed to stories that are broken

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television channels are only allowed to have two ad breaks in a one-hour slot in UK (Ofcom, 2016). Because of this, American television shows seen on British television usually feature fade-to-blacks that cut back to the show — instead of a commercial break.

[26] Lisa Perks defines binge watching as an 'insulated flow' of content as opposed to the scheduled flow of broadcast television (2015).

[27] Episode lengths for *A Series of Unfortunate Events* vary in duration with the shortest being 36 minutes long and longest one running for 64 minutes. All other episodes are between 40-55 minutes. Table 5.2 shows individual episode lengths for each season.

down to segments like this. However, the third and fourth episodes have the smallest number of beats in the season, each having only 16. Moreover, as episodes employ fewer number of beats, the duration of each beat gets longer. The third and fourth episodes frequently utilise beats that run for longer than three minutes. In fact, the fourth episode features a beat that runs for over nine minutes, which would be atypical in broadcast television as beats rarely go over a couple of minutes (Brody, 2003; Newman, 2006; O'Sullivan 2010). *A Series of Unfortunate Events* can afford to run longer beats, because it is not confined by the restraints of commercial breaks, having to close and open acts in an episode's story several times to accommodate network's promotional needs.

Amy Sherman-Paladino, the creator of *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016) — also a Netflix Original — emphasises this in an interview with Writers Guild of America:

> It's so amazing to not have to think about—to not have the argument about—act breaks. Because on Gilmore, the act breaks were all about selling soap. You know, you've got to meet that act break so you can sell some tampons. It just felt like the marketing department runs network television, so we are finally in the place where the creative rules all. They don't even want to see a title sequence. They just want the story to start and keep going. As far as end time, whatever time works for the story. Some are a little longer, some are a little shorter. (Sherman-Paladino in Hoey, 2018)

As I argued elsewhere for *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* "the absence of commercial breaks enables serial narratives to have more flexibility in terms of the number and duration of beats and acts," (Can, 2021, p. 241)

A Series of Unfortunate Events switches to even longer beats on its second season. Consisting of 10 episodes, the season is the longest, but has an average of 14 beats per episode with its sixth, seventh and eight episodes having fewer than 10 beats. The sixth episode, titled *The Vile Village: Part Two,* also hosts the longest beat of the show, which runs for more than 16 minutes.

The second longest beat in the series is also in this season, in episode eight, titled *The Hostile Hospital: Part Two* — running a little under 16 minutes.

Interestingly, the narrative structure in the third season switches back to having more beats that run for shorter durations. The final season has seven episodes and displays an average of 18 beats per episode. This is interesting when taken into consideration with other Netflix Original shows that went through changes in their narrative structures throughout seasons. As discussed in its own chapter, *Arrested Development*'s fourth season — the first season on Netflix — was criticised for having a non-linear narrative structure (Travers, 2018). In 2018, the season was re-edited to tell the story linearly and the fifth and final season exhibited a narrative structure that imitated its earlier seasons in broadcast television. Season five episodes would even fade to black for commercial breaks that didn't exist and there was a tendency to use more beats that run for shorter durations. Use of more and shorter beats in season three of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* might possibly signal an intent to construct a narrative structure that is closer to broadcast television serials. As seen in other Netflix Originals, a return to shorter beats and greater numbers of beats may suggest that the structure of the beat has become inherent to televisual storytelling regardless of the format television text is being output to.

Thus far, it has been argued that *A Series of Unfortunate Events* uses narrative beats in various lengths and numbers across its three seasons. While the beats are much longer in duration and much fewer in number in the second season, the show reverts to shorter beats in the final season. The analysis of beats focused on the temporal layer of narrative. In the next section, temporality in the diegetic layers of the narrative will be analysed.

5.4 Diegetic and Metadiegetic Time in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*

As established before in this chapter, the STNA model shows that many of the episodes start with Lemony Snicket's introductory narration. As Snicket himself is a character that takes up space and time in the episode, this results in a division of story time into two: one story time that consists of events that occur in the life of Baudelaires and a second pseudo-diegetic story time, comprised solely of Lemony Snicket telling the story of Baudelaires. To make this argument of a doubly temporal story time, how narrative works as a temporal sequence should be discussed.

Christian Metz argues that narrative is a "doubly temporal sequence", consisting of the time of what is being told, and the time of its telling (1974, p. 18). Genette further examines this dual temporality, categorising them as story time and narrative/discourse time (1980, p. 33). As I have noted earlier, frequent metalepses occur between these two temporalities. Earlier in this chapter, the metafictional features of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* book series were introduced. These metafictional features were mainly attributed to the metafictional author, who used his agency as narrator within discourse time. There, Lemony Snicket was both the narrator and the implied author, his telling of the story was at the outermost temporal layer of the narrative and metalepses could clearly be observed in the text.

On the other hand, the Netflix show utilises Lemony Snicket as a narrator and character, but not as the author of the TV show. He is frequently shown on screen, narrating the story of the Baudelaires, but the audience is always aware that he is a part of the diegesis. This positions Lemony Snicket in the Netflix Original show as a pseudo-diegetic narrator. With his narration, a pseudo-diegetic layer is added between narration and story. This particular layer of story is unique to the Netflix show's version of Snicket. Snicket in the books only has agency on a diegetic and extra-diegetic level. In the 2004 film version, Snicket does not really

have any agency outside the diegetic level. He is used sparingly, and mostly as a voice-over narrator. One could argue that just like the Netflix show, the film version of Snicket comments on the diegesis, gaining his own pseudo-diegetic temporality. This is not the case since Snicket in the films does not appear to be bound to any temporality, existing in a temporal and spatial vacuum of his attic-like workshop of mechanical devices and writing tools.

The Netflix Show's Snicket on the other hand, seems to be on a linear timeline. As discussed further in the next section, there is a linear progression of his actions and even time constraints when he needs to escape somewhere or as we see in the final episode, meet someone. His temporality exists between a beginning and end.

Likewise, the temporality of any narrative text is between a beginning and an end. So, at the outermost layer, discourse time consists of the duration of beats, episodes, and seasons. It comprises the actual amount of time viewers spend watching the story unfold. I argue that on the inner temporal layer, the Netflix Original show divides the story time into two; creating one diegetic timeline of events that occur in the life of Baudelaires, and a second pseudo-diegetic story time, comprised of Lemony Snicket telling the story of the Baudelaires.

As the STNA Model shows, Lemony Snicket's own timeline has its distinct events and settings. For instance, the action "LEMONY SNICKET TELLS THE STORY OF THE BAUDELAIRES" is not only the first event that happens on screen, but it also is the most frequently recurring event. It is more frequent than Count Olaf's pursuit of the Baudelaires or the Baudelaires' search for the secret society of V.F.D., both of which are central and recurring plot lines throughout all seasons. From a strictly quantitative perspective – judging by the frequency of narrative components on the STNA model – the centre of the narrative

in the Netflix Original show would not be what happened to the Baudelaires, but Lemony Snicket's recounting of it.

Throughout three seasons, there are instances where Lemony Snicket occupies settings that only he inhabits, including at least one motel room every season and several underground tunnels. It is even possible to lift all events and existents that are exclusive to his present story time from the STNA model and lay them out as a single, distinct, linear story. This is not the case in either the literary or the film conceptualisation of the text. This is significant in how it reveals a narrative structure that seemingly follows one temporality but can be separated into two distinct temporalities: one diegetic and one pseudo-diegetic.

Lemony Snicket is more present in story time in *A Series of Unfortunate Events,* the Netflix Original show, compared to the books, but he no longer freely navigates extra-diegetically, in the discourse time. As discussed in the next section, he loses his agency as the implied author. Despite this fact, until the very end of the show, he does not seem bound by the rules of temporality that all the other characters abide by. In his present, narrating form, he does not interact with any other character on screen, yet he appears and disappears in various settings at different times.

For instance, in the final two episodes of the second season, *The Carnivorous Carnival: Part One & Two*, he frequently appears in the setting of a circus, but in two obviously different times. First, he appears on the timeline of events as they happen to the Baudelaires, sharing screen space with them but never interacting with anything in the setting. Then he appears in the same space in what seems to be a time in the future when everything is burned to the ground, and no one is around anymore. This time he interacts with his surroundings, leaving a piece of stone on the ground where the viewers saw a character die in the Baudelaire timeline (figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1

Lemony Snicket appears at the same setting in the same episode in different times, never interacting with and unseen by other characters on the top and middle image, interacting with the setting on the bottom screengrab in *A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two* (00:09:28; 00:09:50 and 00:01:43).

Madeleine Hunter argues that what happens with Lemony Snicket's on-screen appearance is a collapse of the "temporal distance between past and present" (2019, p. 83). She maintains that Lemony Snicket operates on a temporal present throughout the series and brings the temporal past and present together every time he appears on screen. However, this approach overlooks Snicket's simultaneous appearance between past and the so-called present timelines. Moreover, there are examples in the show that suggest his travel between different layers of diegetic time might put him physically in the actual settings of the Baudelaire timeline. As Hunter herself exemplifies, the ambiguity of Snicket's temporal existence is apparent in the episode, *The Hostile Hospital: Part One* (2019, pp. 88-89). Opening the episode, Snicket is seen to get into a wooden crate in his hotel room. The crate is picked up from the room, put on a truck and delivered to the middle of nowhere. As he gets out of the crate — all the while talking to the audience — he conjures a spyglass from his pocket and gazes into the distance. The Baudelaires are seen from the spyglass. Here, not only does Snicket occupy the same space with the Baudelaires in the timeline, but his present form interacts with other characters from the Baudelaire timeline.

Whenever the Baudelaires and Snicket reach the same setting, the composition of the shot makes it clear that the children should be able to notice Snicket (he frequently appears right next to the children as he addresses the audience). Yet, his existence is not recognised by any other character. In a way, Lemony Snicket displays almost omnipotent powers; but that omnipotence is restricted to the timeline of the Baudelaires. Elsewhere, in the so-called present timeline of Snicket, he is constantly on the run while he continues telling the audience about the series of unfortunate events that happened to the Baudelaires. There are moments when he barely escapes whoever was after him, yet he always looks calm and collected, never losing his composure. Maybe he enjoys the same powers in the present timeline too and

simply chooses not to use them, but either way, the character is given enough agency to conjure a layer of pseudo-narrative time.

Displaying even further play with story time, the show connects the two diegetic times at the very end of season three. Towards the end of the final episode, *The End*, we see Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire on an island, taking care of a baby, Beatrice Snicket (Angelina Capozzoli). Beatrice Snicket is Lemony Snicket's niece. The Baudelaires and Beatrice get on a boat and sail away from the island as the next beat switches to Lemony Snicket in his present timeline once again. He is in a motel room, having just received a letter from a stranger, wanting to meet him. Snicket goes to a cafe to meet the stranger, who turns out to be his niece Beatrice, grown up to be a teenager since the viewers last saw her. The viewer gathers knowledge that there is approximately 10 years between the timeline of the unfortunate events that happened to the Baudelaires, and the timeline of Snicket's present.

As Beatrice prepares to tell her uncle the story of the Baudelaires, Lemony cuts him off. "You know this story," exclaims Beatrice, surprised. Lemony Snicket says he only knows parts of it. Her niece asks, "Do you know the part about the pirates?" (A Series of Unfortunate Events, The End, 2019, 00:49:47-00:50:12). Lemony Snicket is enthused, the camera pans out and Beatrice Snicket starts telling the story of the Baudelaires and female Finnish pirates to her uncle. As the story comes to an end and all metalepses collide, the diegetic time of the Baudelaires' story and the pseudo-diegetic time of Lemony Snicket merge as the narrator of the Baudelaire story and the protagonist of the Snicket story are presented simultaneously on the same timeline.

In that final scene, Lemony Snicket does not use his extra-diegetic agency. The next section looks at the nature of this agency.

5.5 From Metafictional Author to Metadiegetic Narrator

To explore how narration plays across different metadiegetic levels, first we need to reintroduce the metafictional qualities of the source text, the book series. Patricia Waugh argues that "the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (1984, p. 6). As a literary text, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* utilises its narrator - and pseudo-author - Lemony Snicket to bring metafictional commentary to the story. The commentary is delivered in several different ways. A passage from the book *The Penultimate Peril* (2005) includes some examples:

> As I'm sure you've noticed, most of the history of the Baudelaire orphans is organized sequentially, a word which here means "so that the events in the lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire are related in the order in which they occurred." In the case of the next three chapters, however, the story is organized simultaneously, which means that you do not have to read the chapters in the order in which they appear… but can read them in any order you choose. Or, more sensibly, you could simply skip all three chapters, along with the seven chapters that follow them, and find some other sequential or simultaneous thing with which to occupy your time. (2005, pp. 83-84)

Here, Lemony Snicket explains the overarching structure of how the story is laid out: sequentially. Then he warns that the next chapters are going to diverge and be presented simultaneously instead. He comments on the narrative structure. Secondly, he forewarns the reader, suggesting they skip the simultaneous chapters, skip all the other chapters, and indulge in another activity. He makes a commentary on the reader's engagement with the text. Thirdly, he comments on his authorial preferences by stopping the flow of the text to explain his choice of words. Just as the above passage shows, his trademark phrase "a word which here means" is used frequently throughout the books.

As Barbara Kaczyńska argues, metafiction creates "its own linguistic microcosm and its own intradiegetic set of references" (2018, p.72). Lemony Snicket does not only comment on the

text, but also comments on a greater structure, the language system that the text is constructed in.

Moreover, Lemony Snicket, as a pseudo-author in the books, shows awareness of how the story is being told by somebody to somebody. At the beginning of the first book, *The Bad Beginning* (1999) he addresses the reader directly; "It is my sad duty to write down these unpleasant tales, but there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you prefer that sort of thing," (1999, p. iii). The reader does not know why it is his "duty" to tell the story and yet Snicket presents himself as having no other choice but to tell it, commenting on why the text was written in the first place.

He provides metafictional remarks that renounce his authority as a narrator too. As the author, he should be able to write the story any way he chooses to, yet he laments his inability to change it. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but that is how the story goes," (1999, p. 1), he explains on the first page of the first book after telling the reader that the story does not have a happy beginning or a happy ending.

Finally, he never enters the story as a character, always situated at the periphery of what transpires in the diegesis. Only once, in the penultimate book — *The Penultimate Peril* — a stranger is mentioned to offer the Baudelaires help, only to go his own way when the children decline his offer. The book hints that the stranger might have been Lemony Snicket himself but does not confirm it. The metalepses on the book always stay close to the diegetic level of narration. Kaczyńska notes how he "distances himself from all three levels of his ontological status: as the author, he fails to come to meetings with fans; as the narrator, he claims to have no power over his story and seems confused by the very language he uses; and as a character, he refuses to act within the story" (2018, p. 76).

Yet, his ontological status on all three levels is very different in the Netflix Original show. As the author, he hands over the authoring of the text to the people behind the camera, as the narrator, he is more confident and has more power in how he narrates the story; and as a character he appears both in the story of the Baudelaires and the story of how he recounts the Baudelaires' tragedies. Snicket's agency in all three levels is discussed in detail below.

First of all, Snicket loses his authorial status in this text. While Daniel Handler went to great lengths to maintain that Lemony Snicket is the one and only writer of the books, the series makes it clear that each episode has a teleplay written by someone[28], directed by someone and performed by actors. This includes mention of Patrick Warburton, who plays Lemony Snicket in the show. Production designers, producers and composers are all recognised in the opening title sequence of each episode. The title sequence also points out that the show is "based on the book series by Lemony Snicket", establishing a clear distinction between two texts while also signalling that the actor seen in the show is not the real Lemony Snicket (figure 5.2). Here, the story is no longer being told first-hand. The audience is made aware that elements of Snicket's story, including his own appearance, is being dramatized for the purposes of this adaptation. With Snicket's increased presence in the story of the Baudelaires and the way title credits are set, the show displays characteristics of a biographical drama. Moreover, teleplay and director credits come at the end of the title sequence, and after Lemony Snicket, suggesting that hierarchically, Snicket's authorial status in this text is inferior to the screenwriter and director.

[28] Daniel Handler uses his own name in the credits for his writing work in the show and is listed in the title sequence.

Figure 5.2

Screengrab from the title sequence shows that Lemony Snicket is not the primary author of the Netflix Original Show.

The title sequence makes it clear that this is an adaptation, a dramatic retelling of the books by giving onscreen credit to performers and crew, using a musical number that changes every two episodes and with a video montage of someone - possibly Snicket - collecting and connecting pieces of newspaper articles, photographs and objects. Interestingly, apart from the credit given on the title sequence the show does not try to convince the audience of Snicket's existence as a real person on the discourse level of narration.

While Snicket loses his authorial powers over the text, he gains newfound agency as a character in the Netflix Original. Netflix's Lemony Snicket is not just a mere narrator in the show. The show opens with the revelation of his face, something that the readers of the books or the viewers of the film never experienced (figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3

Lemony Snicket introduces himself. Screengrab from Netflix Original Show *A Series of Unfortunate Events The Bad Beginning: Part One* (00:01:48) on top, from Paramount Pictures movie *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* (00:02:27) on bottom.

Likewise, as the STNA Model shows, the first ever existent we see on screen in the Netflix Original show is the character Lemony Snicket. This is not the case in the book or the movie. The first action noted in the model for the show is, "LEMONY SNICKET TELLS THE STORY OF THE BAUDELAIRES". His first sentences in the show and the books are verbatim[29].

> If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle. (A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Bad Beginning: Part One, 2017, 00:01:30-00:01:50)

Immediately after this, the show diverges from the book when the actor Patrick Warburton takes a pause and introduces himself officially as Lemony Snicket. Several times during his initial monologue, the matchstick that lights his face burns out, yet every time he lights it again, which can be interpreted as reinforcing the show's decision to reveal Snicket's identity instead of hiding it (figure 5.4).

[29] The movie starts with a cartoon titled The Littlest Elf.

Figure 5.4

Lemony Snicket lights up the matchstick multiple times to reveal his face in the screengrab from *A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Bad Beginning: Part One* (00:01:36-00:02:35).

From that point onwards, the audience knows how to spot the narrator whenever and wherever he appears on screen. In the next few beats of the first episode, as the story of how the Baudelaire children became orphans unfolds, we see Snicket appear and disappear from the screen, showing metadiegetic agency. He seems to not only be aware of the story as a text, but also the story as being told in a visual medium. Madeleine Hunter observes Snicket's metalepses on screen with a particular example:

> [I]t becomes clear that Snicket possesses not only a foreknowledge of where and when events yet to unfold will transpire but also an awareness of how these events will be framed by the camera. This awareness is exhibited in the Briny Beach sequence, which begins with Snicket occupying the right third of foreground, only for the trolley whose arrival he pre-empts to roll in from the left of the screen. (2019, p. 83)

The Briny Beach sequence comprises the opening beats of the first episode as the characters and the story are introduced. These beats are not only used to introduce the narrative, but also to introduce the nature of its narrator, Lemony Snicket, providing a glimpse into his metadiegetic powers on one hand, and showing different temporalities of the narrative with story time and a narration time on the other. Hunter further argues that the use of camera techniques helps separate different temporalities.

> Snicket's movement in the background anticipates the movement of the camera, the series' narrator moving along the horizontal axis of the background layer to a series of points that will see him centrally located once the camera's focus returns to the foreground, (2019, p. 83).

Thus, Lemony Snicket must have extra-diegetic knowledge of camera movements and framing as he always seems to know where to position himself (figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5

Screengrab showing Lemony Snicket positioning himself in frames in the Briny Beach sequence of *A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Bad Beginning: Part One* (00:07:43 and 00:03:36).

Snicket's metadiegetic powers are acknowledged by Barry Sonnenfeld, who served as a showrunner and directed 10 episodes of the Netflix Original show. He notes in an interview that bringing Lemony Snicket forward as a central character with metadiegetic powers was something the show intended to do since the early days of development and shines light on how these metadiegetic powers manifest:

> The other thing we wanted was that Lemony should be an onscreen narrator. I thought the character was not served well by the movie — which was basically Jude Law at a typewriter. [Our Lemony] would never be in the same chronological time as the action, but he was telling the story and could be physically in the scenes. (Sonnenfeld in Lloyd, 2019)

Snicket's physical presence in the scenes transcends a mere awareness of diegetic levels. At times, Snicket seems to negotiate with the author of the text behind the camera. Often, he seems to manifest the power to change what is being shown on screen. Perhaps, just like the books, he is still unable to influence the events that unfold as a narrator, but at least in this adaptation, he is able to negotiate the composition on screen and even change what is being shown if he chooses to. His negotiation with the camera is more than having knowledge of the frame and composition. Yes, he knows where he needs to stand and which direction he needs to move to make sure the camera can still show the action, but at times the author behind the camera seems to help the narrator too. In the final episode of the second season, Lemony Snicket describes the phrase, "in the belly of the beast", and starts a monologue:

> My name is Lemony Snicket. Before this episode is over, the phrase "in the belly of the beast" will be used three times, not counting the times I've already used it. And for that reason, I would stop watching now, before this story gets so frightening that you feel as if you are in the belly of the beast. (A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two, 2018, 00:02:21-00:02:38)

As soon as he finishes, a big number "1" appears on the left side of the screen, signalling that this was the first use of the phrase. Lemony Snicket pauses for a second, then says "That time doesn't count either" (A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two,

2018, 00:02:39-00:02:41). As the narrator says this use of the word should not be counted, the author behind the camera takes the onscreen sign away and the big number "1" slowly fades away (figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6

The onscreen sign "1" appears as Lemony Snicket speaks, then disappears after Snicket's command in this screengrab from *A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Carnivorous Carnival: Part Two* (00:02:33-00:02:45).

In one instance, this negotiation between the narrator and the author behind the camera turns into a physical interaction. A significant plot twist unfolds in the penultimate episode of season one. As mentioned earlier, the show uses new characters, "MOTHER" AND "FATHER" (Cobie Smulders and Will Arnett) on a plot that follows them trying to get back to their children. With the limited knowledge given, the viewer can presume that these are indeed the Baudelaires' parents, but in the penultimate episode of the first season it turns out

they are not. They are a separate couple of parents who were simultaneously trying to reach their own children.

In the penultimate episode of the season, the Baudelaire children stand in front of a "very fancy door", waiting to see who is on the other side. Simultaneously, the Mother and Father are seen on the outside of a very fancy door too. However, once the door opens, the Mother and the Father are greeted by their own children, the Quagmire triplets. As the door in front of the Baudelaires opens, Lemony Snicket rushes in front of the camera for the first time, forcing the focus on his face to deliberately block the appearing figures outside the door. He holds the camera and points it away from the door. Once, the camera is pointing elsewhere, he looks in the camera as he always does and pleads: "I beg you to turn this program off now. Imagine this story has a happy ending," (A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Miserable Mill: Part One, 2017, 00:40:20-00:40:31) (figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7

Lemony Snicket directly interacts with the camera to change what the viewer sees in screengrabs from *A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Miserable Mill: Part One* (00:40:15-00:40:36).

As he interrupts the flow of the story, he continues lamenting over the unfortunate turn of events. When he returns to the diegesis a minute later, he has already given ample time for the viewer to turn the programme off if they decide to follow his advice. Here, his metafictional comment also has a metamedial reference. When Snicket asks the viewer to "turn off" the programme, he projects awareness that the viewer has control over how to play

the programme. The show's metamedial focus here shifts to streaming television. As Hunter argues, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* draws attention to itself "as a specific kind of television, defined by its digital (im)materiality," (2019r, p. 86). The show's meta commentary transcends its fictive boundaries and comments on the mediality of Netflix.

In another, explicit example, at the beginning of the seventh episode of season two, *The Hostile Hospital: Part One*, Snicket once again pleads the viewer to stop watching. "Your own troubles could be over this instant if you were sensible enough to halt this dire programming by pressing any nearby button marked 'stop'." (A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Hostile Hospital: Part One, 2018, 00:03:01-00:03:10). The Netflix interface does not present a button marked "stop" on any device; but depending on which device they use, the viewer is able to stop the programme by pausing, skipping, or going back to the browsing screen.

Even the ambiguity of Snicket's reference to a "stop" button works in favour of the diegetic world of the show. The world of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* shows anachronistic tools and devices from different eras. Trolleys and hot-air-balloons are seen as modes of transportation. But so is a modern Fiat 500 car. Telegraphs are used for communication, but there is also a computer designed specifically to scan and analyse any person's probability of being Count Olaf. Streaming television might have a place in this world that exists in its own time and place.

In fact, the villain of the story, Count Olaf makes several comments that hint at a Netflix-like service and binge-watching in this storyworld. Firstly, in the second episode of the show, he says that he prefers live theatre to streaming television. In the next episode, he says – while disguised as another character – that he prefers "long-form television to the movies" adding that it is more "convenient to consume entertainment from the comfort of your own home," (A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Reptile Room: Part One, 2017, 00:27:40 - 00:28:19).

While delivering this line, actor Neil Patrick Harris even looks directly at the camera and smiles for a moment (figure 5.8).

Figure 5.8

Count Olaf, disguised as Stefano, makes a remark on long-form television and smiles to the camera in screengrab from *A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Reptile Room: Part One* (00:27:40 - 00:28:19).

Later, In the final episode of the season, Count Olaf asks Violet Baudelaire "Haven't you learned anything this year… week… season?" (A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Miserable Mill: Part Two, 2017, 00:29:27 - 00:29:29). As Kaczyńska notes, the use of "week" is interesting here (2018, p. 77). A year could have passed in story time, but a week is more likely to refer to an extradiegetic time period, the time it would take some viewers to binge the whole season. This metamedial commentary is perhaps reinforced by the choice of his next word, "season", arguably referring to the story's form as a television show. The remediation of time in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is therefore recognised by the text itself through dialogue between characters.

As above instances show, the Netflix original show limits Lemony Snicket's agency as an author but extends his meta-diegetic agency as a narrator. This further leads to an expansion of the text's metafictional qualities to include metamedial instances. Whether it is Lemony Snicket's direct interaction with the author behind the camera or his acknowledgment of the show being streamed, the Netflix adaptation shows a metafictional author, transformed into a metadiegetic narrator. Lastly, the metamedial commentary even manifests itself in dialogue as remediation of time.

5.6 Conclusion

A Series of Unfortunate Events has been told in three different textual forms, showing different levels of intertextuality with each other. In its televisual form, The Netflix Original show was created at a time when the streaming company had just started investing heavily into creating original content. Neil Patrick Harris reveals in an interview that Netflix explicitly told the team behind the show that this was supposed to be the first Netflix Original show that was aimed at all age groups (Katz, 2018). With its custom-built sets that changed every two episodes, it was also one of the most ambitious projects of the streaming platform (Tiffany,

2017). At three seasons and 25 episodes released in two years, it is an expansive narrative in every sense of the word.

After analysing all seasons and all episodes, this chapter found that that the two-episode story arcs of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* were a feature of the narrative form that was reinforced by Netflix's functionalities that facilitate binge-watching. Moreover, the change in how narrative beats were used throughout the seasons showed a trend of experimenting with different lengths of beats as opposed to what was seen on the first season of *House of Cards*. The analysis of temporal layers revealed that the text transforms the implied author of the books, Lemony Snicket into a reduced meta-diegetic narrator. Snicket in the Netflix adaptation manifests metadiegetic agency that he could not manifest as the author of the books. He also gains agency as a character in the diegesis. His narration of the story of the Baudelaire orphans is ever-present across episodes and seasons. He occupies his own pseudo-diegetic temporal layer in the show. Thus, the text displays a unique temporal structure in its narrative, distinct from its source text.

The two-episodes per book narrative structure is facilitated by the fact that is presented in an SVOD environment with all episodes provided at once and with an auto-play functionality that connects each episode. This flexibility in the pacing of the story may pave the way for new experimentations in the future.

Discussing adaptations' connection to their source texts, Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn argue that an adaptation is "its own palimpsestic thing," (2013, p. 9). They contend that adaptations are always connected to a primary text without being secondary texts themselves. As the STNA model reveals, the narrative structure of *A Series of Unfortunate Events,* the Netflix Original show is much more than a secondary text. The show has a strong intertextual relationship with its source text, the 13 Lemony Snicket books; yet it utilises the

narrative components of the text beyond what the source text provides. It introduces new events and existents to the storyworld, addresses some questions that were left open in the books and raises further questions for new and existing audiences, projecting itself as a primary text that is also a secondary text to the books. It repositions Lemony Snicket from an implied author to a narrating character who is in many ways the protagonist to his own narrative.

In a way, instead of retelling the story of the Lemony Snicket books in a different medium, the Netflix Original show tells the story of how Lemony Snicket tells the story he told in the books. This reconceptualisation is interesting, since the previous adaptation – the film – denied Lemony Snicket any metadiegetic agency, rendering him a narrating character that does not provide more than a voice-over to the story of the Baudelaires. The show on the other hand, displays remarkable instances of metalepses. While the use of Lemony Snicket and metalepses in the text are not medium specific to Netflix, the metamedial commentary in the text often revolves around the SVOD platform and streaming television. These features put this text in a unique position both among the three conceptualisations of the Baudelaire Children story, and among Netflix Original shows.

As RQ1 is interested in characteristics of narrative structure in Netflix Originals, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* presents a distinct structure with its two-episode-per-story-arc form. Arguably encourages a certain way of binge-watching the text (providing natural stopping points every two episodes). Experimenting with the boundaries of the narrative landscape and the limitations of Netflix's mediality, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* shows a direction for how adaptation texts can exist within Netflix's narrative environment.

6 ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

Arrested Development (2003-2006, 2013-2019) was one of the first Netflix Originals to be offered on the platform. It was the first Netflix Original show to be revived from where its broadcast television predecessor ended (in 2006). It was the first Netflix Original show to have a whole season completely re-edited and released again. It was also one of the shows that employed Netflix's release strategy of dividing up seasons into two parts. In its six-year run on Netflix, the show explored may different ways of televisual storytelling within the Netflix ecosystem. As this research explores narrative possibilities facilitated by the SVOD platform, *Arrested Development* is an ideal case study, encapsulating the boundaries of serial storytelling on Netflix.

Arrested Development is the first sitcom and the first renewed/revived show that the SVOD platform exclusively released. Its two seasons on the platform have significant differences from each other and from the earlier three seasons on broadcast television. The fourth season (the first Netflix Original season), released in 2013, has 15 episodes, each focusing on an individual character but covering events that occur over approximately the same stretch of time, the seven years that passed between the events of third season's finale and the present timeline. After mixed reactions to the fourth seasons narrative structure, a remix of the fourth season was released in 2018, re-edited and recut to 22 episodes that no longer focussed on just one character each but tell the story in forward chronological motion. This remixed season has replaced the original cut as the default Season 4 option and the original episodes located under the "Trailers & More" menu link on the Netflix interface. The fifth and final season followed the footsteps of the remixed Season 4, adopting a more broadcast television-like sitcom formula throughout, including fading to black at the end of each act as if a commercial break is imminent. The season, consisting of 16 episodes, was released in two parts in 2018 and 2019.

The show tells the story of Bluths, the formerly wealthy, dysfunctional family of George Bluth Sr (Jeffrey Tambor), Lucille Bluth (Jessica Walter), their children Michael Bluth (Jason Bateman), G.O.B Bluth (Will Arnett), Lindsay Bluth (Portia de Rossi) and her husband Tobias Fünke (David Cross), and their grandchildren George-Michael Bluth (Michael Cera) and Maeby Fünke (Alia Shawkat). The show was created by Mitchell Hurwitz and produced by Imagine Entertainment, The Hurwitz Company and 20th Century Fox Television. It was distributed originally by 20th Century Fox Television and aired on Fox Network in the United States, but the distribution was handled by Netflix for the revived fourth and fifth season.

It should be noted that for the purposes of this research, the TV show is identified as an acquired Netflix Original as it was developed and produced by a third party but acquired by Netflix exclusively (Ball, 2018b). However, the "original" status only applies to the fourth and fifth seasons. It should also be noted that the title card that the show's fourth and fifth seasons use designate the show as a 'Netflix Semi-Original' (figure 6.1) but as of 2022, Netflix does not seem to be using this classification for any promotion.

Figure 6.1

Title card from Season 5, Episode 12 (2019).

For this research, all of Season 4 in its original form, *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* and Season 5 was analysed using the STNA Model. To explore similarities and differences between the broadcast and SVOD versions of the show, Season 3 – the final season to be aired on broadcast television consisting of 13 episodes – was also analysed, using the STNA Model. In total 66 episodes were analysed. Further interpretation, particularly regarding Netflix's supernarration was made through contextual programme analysis.

The analysis in this chapter seeks to address all four research questions of this dissertation (see page 3) to explore narrative structure, characteristics of narrative form, narrative time — especially its operation in terms of order — and paratextuality. I argue that throughout its six-year revived run on Netflix, *Arrested Development* explored and experimented with narrative possibilities that the SVOD ecosystem facilitates to a great extent. The original structure of Season 4 particularly experiments with serial televisual storytelling that has flexible temporal units, allowing for a mode of viewing that can re-arrange the order of the episodes without

compromising the integrity of the overarching story structure. I further argue that the unique way in which a full season has been re-edited and replaced the original version displays Netflix' supernarrative powers exercised to their fullest. I propose that this points towards a unique relationship between binge-watching and repeatability. While binge-watching I usually understood as watching multiple televisual texts in one session, these texts do not have to be consecutive episodes of the same text. Sometimes binge-watching includes repeat-watching[30].

Informed by the findings from the STNA Model and guided by these arguments, I speculate at the end of this chapter that while the SVOD environment and the modes of viewing it enables allows television storytelling to cross the boundaries and limitations set by conventional standards dictated in broadcast television, some of these conventional elements of television narrative are integral to serialised storytelling and are revisited in SVOD environments despite the fact that they do not have the same limitations of broadcast television.

To elaborate on these arguments, this chapter will first introduce previous research on *Arrested Development*'s revival on Netflix. It will then discuss the show within the context of televisual afterlives – its revival after being cancelled on broadcast television. It will then move on to the analysis of the STNA Model applied to third, fourth (both versions) and fifth seasons. This will be followed by a comparative analysis between seasons, providing an in-depth investigation into some of the show's most prominent narrative elements, before concluding arguments are made.

[30] See Chapter 1 for Henry Jenkins' account of repeatedly watching episodes (1992).

6.1 Previous Research

The Netflix revival of *Arrested Development* has been the subject of analysis for many television scholars. As it was one of the first Netflix Original shows and as it had a cult TV status even before its revival, the scholarly appeal to investigate the show is not surprising. Yet, much of the scholarship is from before the show's final season aired, which means the remixed fourth season, or the conclusion of the show is left relatively underexplored.

Jason Mittell uses the show frequently as an example of complex TV but does not delve into how the narrative form is influenced by its new habitat on Netflix (2006, 2015). Mareike Jenner discusses the revival of *Arrested Development* extensively, but the discussion is anchored around Netflix and the company's strategy around the revival and marketing of the show, rather than the text itself (2014, 2018).

Among research that focus on the text of *Arrested Development* and its revival, Brett Mills notes how the show can be distinguished from earlier sitcoms in terms of its rich aesthetic and visual style (2013). Maíra Bianchini and Maria Carmem Jacob de Souza focus on how the showrunners and Netflix negotiate their power on the text of *Arrested Development*'s fourth season (2017). While their arguments are valuable in discussing Netflix's supernarrative powers over its content, their work does not explore how the narrative form is enabled or facilitated within the SVOD environment. Similarly, Timotheus Vermeulen and James Whitfield take a closer look at the aesthetics of *Arrested Development* to argue in favour of a contemporary US sitcom aesthetics (2013), but their arguments are isolated to the first three seasons of the show as seen on broadcast TV. As one of the key interests in this research is temporalities in Netflix Originals, Julia Leyda's recent article on economic and industrial temporalities in *Arrested Development* presents fascinating arguments, but they are confined

within specific themes of how real-world economics have parallels to the reconstruction of narrative in Netflix's revival (2017).

Most recently, Tom Hemingway investigates how Netflix "utilised the instant availability of the entire fourth season to create a more intricate narrative which [is] dependent on viewing multiple episodes of the show consecutively to establish a sense of narrative cohesion," (2021, pp. 226-227). This is a valuable argument that is in line with my own elaboration upon how *Arrested Development* plays with order in its narrative form. Lastly, Robyn Warhol uses *Arrested Development* as one of her case studies to explore how Netflix Originals change narrative form but the focus in her article is entirely on how *Arrested Development* experiments with a non-linear order in serial form (2014).

While all these scholars make insightful arguments, a comprehensive analysis that looks at the show as a whole, or even one that looks at all aspects of its narrative form in any season is absent. This chapter is informed by the previous arguments made in each of these scholarly writings and builds upon them. They have been especially useful in connecting their specificities together to map out a broader picture of what the SVOD environment facilitates in terms of narrative possibilities in *Arrested Development*.

It needs repeating that *Arrested Development* has always experimented with form and aesthetics, testing the boundaries of the sitcom genre on broadcast television, so it is not surprising to see experimentation in its seasons on Netflix. Combined with the fact that the fourth season of the show was released among the first batch of Netflix Originals, Netflix seems to have provided the space for Hurwitz and his team to experiment with form and style, to navigate the limits of narrative capabilities in their made-to-binge programming. It is noteworthy that many of the scholars cited above emphasise the relationship between the showrunners and Netflix on how the show experiments with its content (Bianchini and De Souza, 2017;

Hemingway, 2021; Jenner, 2014, 2018; Warhol, 2014). As I discuss the findings from the STNA Model later and focus on *Arrested Development*'s play on seriality and order, Netflix's relationship with the show and how it uses its supernarration is also explored in depth. However, before I continue to a formal analysis of *Arrested Development*'s third, fourth and fifth seasons, the difference in narrative form between the first three and the final two seasons should be contextualised. Here, that context is televisual afterlives.

6.2 Televisual Afterlife of *Arrested Development*

When a television show gets cancelled, the serial text generated through episodes and seasons ceases to expand, but the text itself remains. Through syndicated reruns, through DVD boxsets and through streaming libraries, sometimes the televisual text remains accessible and repeatable. Moreover, there is a "larger industry trend in which a show's ending is no longer equivalent to textual death but automatically anticipates some sort of televisual afterlife that trades in the brand value and cultural currency of the cancelled series." (Loock, 2017, p. 302). The notion of televisual afterlife is a particularly interesting concept within the context of SVOD platforms as these platforms provide different ways to experience this afterlife.

Kathleen Loock defines three forms of televisual afterlife: "derivative", which are reboots and spin-offs; "repetitive", which are reruns; and "renewed", reunion and revival shows (2017, p. 302). *Arrested Development*'s televisual afterlife started as repetitive, with the episodes of the first three seasons syndicated and reruns aired through various outlets globally. Adding to that, DVDs of seasons and internet downloads, along with streaming services later, meant that the text of *Arrested Development* could be experienced and re-experienced, cementing its cult TV status. The show's first three seasons were already on the Netflix library before the fourth season was announced. Writing for *Vulture* in 2013, right before the fourth season was

released on Netflix, Will Leitch describes the eager viewers of the show as follows, arguing that it was the viewers of the repetitive afterlife that are responsible for the revival:

> [The fourth season] is unfathomable in every way for those few of us who watched the show in isolation back in the day—but also entirely to our credit. The resurrection is the direct result of the happy-go-tireless advocacy of a small but rabid group of superfans who have become, over the seven years since the show went off the air, a kind of cult—the best kind of cult. (2013)

The repetitive afterlife of the show is crucial for its renewed afterlife. Part of the reason for a revival of the show is because the fan support does not fade over the years and, in some cases, grows bigger. This means that the revival show has a responsibility to address the demands of the loyal viewer. Loock argues that because of this responsibility, revival shows have a "complex temporal negotiation of past, present and future," (2017, p. 303). This is apparent in *Arrested Development* as the show's seasons usually start off where the last one ended. There is a seven-year gap in real time between the final season of the broadcast TV version and the fourth season revived on Netflix. Instead of jumping forward in time to seven years later, the show decides to position the new season's temporality within those seven years. The fifth season, just like the previous ones, take off right where the previous season ends, with its first episode used to provide context to the two months of story time that passed after the fourth season ends.

A part of the decision to cover the period between the show's cancellation and the release of the new season lies in the responsibility of the revival to address demands of loyal viewers. Ryan Lizardi describes revival series that extend their original continuities as "zombie television series" that "are resurrected because of the appearance of fan support" or an apparent monetary gain (2014, p. 66). Being a zombie show means there needs to be a resemblance to the narrative form of the original text. Not only the characters and settings, but other elements that contribute to the aesthetics of the show may be demanded by the fans

in the new iteration. Leitch posits that the cult fandom for *Arrested Development* was so persistent that "not only did fans manage to bring the show back, but they also tried—on fan sites and comment threads and in e-mail campaigns—to make sure some of their favourite smaller characters returned too" (2013). As can be seen from Leitch's account, the narrative decisions must consider what the fans were expecting and what they have been longing for.

On the other hand, this is not a reunion show designed as a one-time special. The narrative needs continuation, new knowledge needs to be added and new viewers should be brought forward. Hence, as I have argued elsewhere, "the narrative constantly needs to strike a balance between nostalgia and future, familiarity and possibility," (Can, 2021, p. 246). This is why *Arrested Development*'s televisual afterlife is important to understand how narrative form is created in the Netflix iteration. Because the same factors that resulted in a revival show being greenlit may also be the reasons for why the show's seasons on Netflix have not been favoured as much by fans and critics (Heritage, 2019; Murray, 2019; Saraiya, 2018).

Chapters 4 and 5 mentioned Michael Z. Newman's argument on how aesthetic strategies of television shows come from industrial constraints (2006, p. 18). One of the aims of this research project was to see how these aesthetic strategies change when the industrial constraints of broadcast television no longer exist within the SVOD ecosystem. Here, *Arrested Development* may have escaped the shackles of industrial constraints, but it must navigate a new set of constraints that comes from its resurrected text and the viewers that are most passionate about it.

6.3 A Formal Analysis of *Arrested Development* Seasons 3, 4 and 5

The STNA Model breaks down multiple episodes of a TV show in terms of its narrative components and displays them in a linear timeline whenever they appear in the show. As

discussed in detail in the Methodology Chapter, a final category on the vertical Y-Axis of the model is listed? for each case study. More note categories were used in this case study than the previous two since *Arrested Development* notably plays on narrative form with different tools and elements. Hence, credits, fades to black, flashback, montage, voice-over narration, recap and meta references to television storytelling were specifically noted (Figure 3.8 shows a snapshot of each season's datasheet). Appendix A provides a list of webpage links for the datasheets in various file types (Microsoft Excel, PDF, Google Sheets).

As this research is more interested in looking at whole seasons and overarching plots that can transcend between episodes, the events — actions and happenings — in seasons 3, 4 and 5 of *Arrested Development* were generalised as much as possible. For instance, whether Michael tries to help his brother Buster get out of jail, or to help the family company get money, the action is coded the same as 'MICHAEL TRIES TO HELP THE FAMILY'.

This consideration and the questions determined to decide whether a new narrative element is present or not, also provided some insight the model during the data collection process. Firstly, sitcoms frequently use elements that may not make sense, or seem out of place when they first appear, only being revealed as a crucial part of a joke or a plotline later. Secondly, compared to dramas, they have more flexibility in having narrative elements that do not carry the plot forward. If the beat tells a good joke without moving the story forward, it remains. Because of these two factors, *Arrested Development* proved to be more difficult to translate onto a datasheet than the other two case studies used in this research.

This difficulty doubled as the TV show frequently uses pull-back-and-reveal jokes where the joke only becomes apparent when something in the scene that was not thought to be there in the beginning is revealed later. Vermeulen and Whitfield emphasise how central this strategy is for the show:

> It indicates that everything can potentially become significant, that what is foregrounded is not by definition more important than what is in the background, that what is large is not necessarily more important than what is small, that what is onscreen is not more important than what is off screen, and so on. The joke, after all, emerges precisely from the conflict between narrative progression and […] a moment in time which does not necessarily further the plot but reflects upon it and opens it up to plethora of other potential plot lines and meanings. (2013, pp.107-108)

This strategy encourages viewers to pay more attention to additional details that may emerge at any time. This can be noticed when looking at the source text and captured in analysis, but it is hard to log on the datasheet. What seems trivial at first may prove to be crucial later. The kernel plotlines, that would disrupt the narrative logic if deleted, are easy to spot (Chatman, 1980, p. 53). It is the satellite plots, whose demise would not disturb the logic of the plot, but "impoverish the narrative aesthetically", that require extra initiative and attention from the researcher to determine whether they should be noted down in the STNA model for sitcoms (1980, p. 54).

As a result of this challenge, a seasons-long plotline and a character has been omitted in the STNA Model data for *Arrested Development.* The first one is Tobias' hair journey where his balding hair changes form and colour throughout seasons three, four and five. The second one is the character of John Beard (played by John Beard), omitted from the STNA datasheet at first, being seen as a talking head on TV. Throughout seasons three, four and five, he was present in twenty episodes and could have been included in the datasheet. Like the peripheral characters on *House of Cards* that were present in beats even if they did not have actions or happenings themselves, the character's existence in the STNA dataset would paint a more accurate picture of the narrative world of *Arrested Development*.

Looking at the overall data from the STNA Model, it can be argued that Netflix invested both financially and creatively on the fourth season of *Arrested Development*. This is evident from the rise in the number of existents (characters and settings) and apparent in the rising number

of episodes for the fourth season (table 6.1). This seems to scale back in the fifth season with a drop in the number of settings from 54 to 34. The reasons for the change in the final season will be discussed later.

Table 6.1 Number of narrative elements for each season of *Arrested Development.*

Arrested Development	Season 3	Season 4 Original	Season 4 Remix	Season 5
Number of Episodes	13	15	22	16
Number of Characters	32	41	39	36
Number of Settings	39	54	53	34
Number of Happenings	25	28	27	29
Number of Actions	15	14	16	18
Average Number of Beats per Episode	22	17	14	14
Episode Running Times	21-22 minutes (average = 22 mins)	28-38 minutes (average = 33 mins)	22-23 minutes (average = 22 mins)	23-47 minutes (average = 29 minutes)

Also noteworthy here is to look at the average number of beats. As Tables 6.1 and 6.2 show, the third season has an average of 22 beats per episode. Bearing in mind that the show had a half-hour slot, this is well within the range for prime-time shows. The number of beats is

determined by a race to keep the audience's attention as much as possible on one hand, and to hook in new audience that may have changed the channel at any time by providing as much information as possible. As Newman explains;

> Given a set amount of weekly programming time, a cast of actors under contract, and a need to show the audience something new at least every two minutes, writers work out a system of parcelling the narrative into small pieces in regular alternation, each of which makes a new claim on the audience's interest and aims to intensify its emotional response. (2006, p.18)

As can be seen from Newman's explanation, the parameters of beats are defined according to the industrial constraints of broadcast television. The commercial breaks provide income for the network and for them to be as lucrative as possible, more people need to watch each of these breaks. For this, the television text needs to hold audience's attention as much as possible, keeping the viewers from changing channels before the break. As mentioned earlier, the industrial constraints lead the way towards an aesthetics of televisual storytelling. The number and the duration of story beats are mandated or heavily influenced by the gaps within the episodes – those being the commercial breaks.

How do the fourth and fifth seasons utilise beats in the absence of commercial breaks? The average number of beats drops to 17 in Season 4 but since average episode length is 50% longer than the previous season, the drop in the number of beats is more significant than it seems at first glance.

Table 6.2. Episode Names, number of beats and episode lengths for each season of *Arrested Development*.

#	Season 3			Season 4 Original			Season 4 Remix			Season 5		
	Title	# Of Beats	Length in mins	Title	# Of Beats	Length in mins	Title	# Of Beats	Length in mins	Title	# Of Beats	Length in mins

1	"The Cabin Show"	37	21	"Flight of the Phoenix"	15	32	"Re Cap'n Bluth"	11	22	"Family Leave"	13	26
2	"For British Eyes Only"	18	22	"Borderline Personalities"	22	29	"Three Half Men"	18	22	"Self-Deportation"	19	28
3	"Forget-Me-Now"	31	22	"Indian Takers"	20	29	"A Couple-A New Starts"	16	22	"Everyone Gets Atrophy"	17	27
4	"Notapusy"	20	22	"The B. Team"	15	32	"Just Deserters"	16	22	"An Old Start"	11	28
5	"Mr. F"	26	22	"A New Start"	20	29	"A Trial Run"	17	22	"Sinking Feelings"	11	27
6	"The Ocean Walker"	19	22	"Double Crossers"	15	32	"The Parent Traps"	16	22	"Emotional Baggage"	17	33
7	"Prison Break-In"	24	22	"Colony Collapse"	16	36	"One Degree of Separation"	18	22	"Rom-Traum"	17	31
8	"Making a Stand"	24	22	"Red Hairing"	16	38	"The Weak Become the Strong"	17	22	"Premature Independence"	21	36

9	"S.O.B.s"	20	22	"Smashed"	15	34	"Modern Marvels"	17	22	"Unexpected Company"	16	27
10	"Fakin' It"	15	21	"Queen B."	15	35	"Recurring Dreams"	19	23	"Taste Makers"	17	25
11	"Family Ties"	15	21	"A New Attitude"	14	37	"Fun Night"	13	23	"Chain Migration"	15	23
12	"Exit Strategy"	21	22	"Señoritis"	19	35	"Moving Pictures"	14	23	"Check Mates"	12	25
13	"Development Arrested"	19	22	"It Gets Better"	14	34	"Get on Up"	11	22	"The Untethered Sole"	9	28
14				"Off the Hook"	17	36	"What Goes Around"	14	22	"Saving for Arraignment Day"	13	28
15				"Blockheads"	17	34	"Locked and Loaded"	13	22	"Courting Disasters"	12	30
16							"Mixed Messages"	13	22	"The Fallout"	13	47
17							"Dire Straights"	13	23			

18							"Turning on Each Other"	10	23			
19							"Fast Company"	15	23			
20							"Cinco de Cuatro I"	13	23			
21							"Cinco de Cuatro II"	12	23			
22							"Cinco de Cuatro III"	12	23			
avg		22	22		17	33		14	22		14	29

Netflix Originals' flexibility in both timing the duration of the beats and deciding on the number of beats for an episode was a key element that emerged on the STNA Model in every show analysed for this research. Both in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *House of Cards* there was a similar drop in the number of beats and a rise in the average duration of beats. Similarly lower numbers of beats per episode were also seen in the pilot case study of this research, *Love*, and the stand-alone research on *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016) that used the STNA Model. Seeing this as a recurring pattern in Netflix Original texts that have been

analysed, I reiterate my argument that "the absence of commercial breaks enables serial narratives to have more flexibility in terms of the number and duration of beats" (Can, 2021, p. 241).

In terms of duration, *Arrested Development*'s seasons four and five present longer beats than season three. Common practice for prime-time television shows is to have beats that do not exceed two minutes in length (Brody, 2003). The beats in seasons four and five frequently go above this duration. The final episode of the show, Episode 16 in season five has a beat towards the end that runs for 22 minutes: a single beat that runs as long as one episode of the show's broadcast TV seasons.

One final note before going into a more in-depth analysis of narrative structure in individual seasons of the show should be made about the discrepancy between the number of elements in season four's original run and *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*. Tables 6.1 shows that the number of characters, settings and happenings are slightly lower in the remix and the number of actions is slightly higher. There are two reasons for this difference. Firstly, a decision was made during data collection to use a new datasheet for the new iteration of the season. As the season was re-edited and broken down into a different number of episodes, this decision translated what was seen on screen to the datasheet more clearly. This resulted in distinct viewings of the two versions.

Secondly, As the narrative structure changed between these versions, the dominance and significance of narrative elements also shifted. Out of the two characters that appear in season four's datasheet but not on the remix', one was "SHAMAN", a character that first appeared in episode three as, Lindsay goes to India, who gave her a newfound purpose in life as she travelled back to United States. Much later in the season, it is revealed that the character was in fact Maeby in disguise all along (figure 6.2). The remix season introduced the scene with

the shaman in a later episode and the information that Maeby was in disguise was already given earlier at that point, so it was not logical to add a new character for the "SHAMAN" in the remix. Similarly, the other character missing from the remix is "MARKY'S MOM" who is seen less in the remix and plays a more trivial role in terms of plotlines.

Figure 6.2

A screengrab from Season 4, Episode 3, showing the 'SHAMAN', who is revealed to be Maeby in a later episode.

6.4 Comparative Analysis Between Seasons

There are clear differences between *Arrested Development*'s third season, which ended its run on broadcast television, and the fourth season, picked up by Netflix seven years later. There are also very clear differences between the two versions of the fourth season, released five years apart. The final season is also different than its predecessors in its narrative form. Hence, a comparative analysis between different seasons provides an insightful look into the narrative form of *Arrested Development*.

6.4.1 Season 3 vs Season 4

One of the crucial decisions in analysing *Arrested Development* was to decide which seasons from the broadcast TV show were to be included in the analysis. The first season could be a viable choice to see how the same creative team constructed their stories in the broadcast television environment compared to the SVOD environment. However, as the fourth season covered the events that happened right after the third season's finale, being able to refer to narrative elements that would be present in both seasons proved more fruitful for the analysis. Hence, only the final season from the broadcast TV era of the show was used for analysis.

Season 3 had a relatively small scale of production, possibly because it was intended to be the final season. The number of episodes ordered by the network had already been reduced to 13 from the previous two seasons' 22 and 18 episodes. Moreover, the STNA Model shows it to have fewer characters and settings than later seasons. This arguably results in a more confined narrative form as events take place in fewer settings and involve fewer number of characters.

On the other hand, the fourth season has a larger scale. The number of settings and characters both increase by more than 30%. On the other hand, the number of events does not increase as significantly. Considered within the context of fewer beats, the high number of existents and low number of events, this means that the season hosts more elaborate scenes that involve several characters or settings as they navigate through different plot points. This also gives insight into the scale of production in the Netflix revival. More settings and more characters usually require more money to be spent on production. Adding to that, picking up production after seven years also means some of the frequently used settings need to be set up again (e.g., The penthouse of Lucille Bluth, tagged "LUCILLE'S HOME" in the STNA Model).

Seasons 3 and 4 have many differences. The number and duration of beats was already discussed above as the Netflix revival used fewer beats that ran for longer. Bianchini and De Souza argue that the fourth season has three major changes in narrative form compared to the previous ones:

> (1) the elevation of the other eight members of the Bluth family to the condition of leading character of their own episodes, as opposed to Michael's role as the protagonist in previous seasons; (2) the circular temporal structure of the narrative discourse; and (3) the shifting balance between individual episodic arcs, focused on each of the nine main characters, and a larger multiperspectivist serial narration throughout the season. (2017, p. 162)

Out of these three changes, I argue that the first and the third ones cannot be attributed specifically to the change of television environment into an SVOD environment. However, the circular temporality is something afforded by Netflix and should be discussed further.

What is meant by circular temporality? As discussed earlier, *Arrested Development* always experimented with narrative form, testing the boundaries of televisual storytelling in the sitcom genre. One of the experiments was a signature element of its form: the 'call-backs'. It was a storytelling rule that was set early on and communicated clearly to the audience. Anything that may appear in the background or may seem trivial can come up again at any point to become a part of a joke. Not only did this urge the viewers towards reappraisal and urge extra attention towards content, but it also urged them towards a new mode of viewing where the most invested viewers could go back and rewatch an episode to catch the clues for a later pun, joke or plotline. Ultimately, rewatching to discover and appreciate these call-backs increased the shows repeatability and made rewatching a part of the mode of engagement for the most interested audiences.

For the fourth season, this linear back-and-forth reappraisal – going back to rewatch an episode for a future call-back – took a circular form, where the viewers could watch the 15

episodes in any order and the central plotline would remain the same while the call-backs are dispersed throughout. As the season's storyline encompasses the seven-year period after the events of season three, the episodes all revolve around a few key moments where the whole family is together. Each episode, centred on one character, loops back and forth between these key moments. Watching them in a random order would not be the ideal way to experience the story, but by the end of 15 episodes, the story would still be told in its entirety. Perhaps more importantly, a viewer could pick out any of the key moments (e.g., the Cinco de Cuatro celebrations) and rewatch each character-specific episode's relevant scenes to catch all of the callback material. In fact, before the revival episodes were aired, Mitchell Hurwitz stated in interviews that they were aiming for a structure where the episodes could be watched out of order (Martin, 2013a).

There is a dichotomy here. As I frequently call back to Michael Z. Newman's argument, televisual aesthetics arise from industrial constraints. A promise of early Netflix Originals, with the absence of commercial breaks and all episodes being released simultaneously was to be free of these constraints. This can be seen in *Arrested Development*, especially in terms of how the show utilises beats. However, its narrative form in season four was still shaped by constraints that were not under Hurwitz's control. In their interview with *Vulture*'s Denise Martin, Hurwitz and the cast of the show talk specifically about how scheduling conflicts and Netflix's structure led to the possibility of a new way of storytelling.

> Episodes won't feature every character because production was only able to lock actors for very specific periods of time. Some scenes will play and then replay from different perspectives in later episodes. If it sounds complicated, that's because it is. "It didn't seem as impossible to me until we got into it and then I realized how impossible it was," Hurwitz said. He's about to begin the massive puzzle that will be post-production. Originally, he thought of doing the season Choose Your Own Adventure-style, but the technology wasn't there. In any case, Bateman said you shouldn't compare the original series to the new one. "The original series had 22 minutes each and all the characters in every single episode," he said. "This is something that's completely different on purpose, creatively, for a format Netflix affords us." It's "sort of a hybrid package of Arrested Development." (2013a)

There are some fascinating insights in this interview. Firstly, it is interesting to note Hurwitz's comment on aiming for a choose-your-own-adventure[31] style season. The technology may not have been available in 2013, but as discussed in detail in Chapter 7, Netflix's ambition in creating interactive narratives bore fruits from 2018 onwards. Secondly, Bateman's choice of words at the end should be noted. He talks about the narrative form as a "format Netflix affords", meaning the change in storytelling practices are not inherent or instinctive, but calculated, designed, and negotiated with Netflix every step of the way. Thirdly, Hurwitz confesses that having stand-alone episodes that could be watched without an order seemed doable but proved impossible once they got to the post-production. This warrants a question about serial narratives; why is order so important in narrative form?

As Gerard Genette argues, "to study the temporal order of a narrative is to compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in the narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story, to the extent that story order is explicitly indicated by the narrative itself or inferable from one or another indirect clue" (1980, p. 35). The difference between the story order and narrative order is usually due to anachronies – the non-sequential telling of a story. *Arrested Development* displays anachronies in all its seasons and plays with the narrative time in terms of how order of events that unfold within a season's story is shown.

The fourth season embraces these anachronies and employs analepses – flashbacks – as the predominant temporality. Not only does the season span the events of seven years, it also does not provide a chronological retelling of these events. Instead, in every episode, the narrative goes back in time to certain events that happened over the six years before ending on the setting "CINCO DE CUATRO" where the season's overarching plotline comes to an end.

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[31] An interactive narrative book series (1979-1999) where the viewer chooses what happens next from a limited set of choices. Chapter 7 discusses Netflix interactive specials in detail.

As a result of this mode of storytelling, the writers of the show experience a unique challenge. They need to show the same scenes and the same events repeatedly while convincing the audience that each retelling will reward them with something new to advance to story. To do this, the pull-back-and-reveal style of telling stories becomes prominent as analepses omit certain characters and events every time they are retold, only reaching full meaning by the end of fifteen episodes.

Genette calls this specific type of analepsis, a *paralipsis;* "an omission of one of the constituent elements of a situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover," (1980, p.52). During its retelling of a past story time, the narrative "does not skip over a moment in time" but "it sidesteps a given element," (p. 52). So, every time the narrative lands on one of the key moments within the seven years with all family members, the audience is given incomplete information. This results in a temporal challenge in storytelling. On one side, the narrative focus in each episode is on a single character. On the other side, whenever a key moment in the story is revisited, new information should be provided to the viewer to maximise engagement. Yet every new information adds to the chronology of the unfolding events.

A good example for this can be seen in a multiple-episode-long joke that starts off with George Sr. Bluth bumping into his son, Michael Bluth, sometime within the seven-year period. Michael needs his father's signature to give the family's film rights to director Ron Howard. George Sr. accepts but says he needs a favour from Michael in return. Michael agrees but as they shake hands, he says that he needs one more thing. George Sr. agrees to the second condition too, but before they can shake on it, he adds a new condition. The scene goes on a few rounds like this but is never shown to the viewer in its entirety. The first favour that Michael asks is seen on the fourth episode, "The B. Team". The second favour, coming from George Sr. is in episode six, "Double Crossers", the third favour in episode eight, "Red

Hairing", and finally the fourth favour, agreed by Michael comes in episode ten, "Queen B." (figure 6.3).

Figure 6.3.

A screengrab from Season 4, Episode 6, showing a part of the scene between Michael and George Sr, where father and son keep asking each other for more favours.

In discourse time, the segment takes the span of six episodes, appearing in four of them, however in diegetic time, the situation unfolds in under a minute. Every time the show decides to revisit the encounter between George Sr. and Michael, an element — one of the favours asked — is deliberately left behind. The season is replete with paralipses like this one.

The abundance of paralipses makes watching episodes out of sequence more difficult. Whenever a pull-back-and-reveal happens, it adds new knowledge that either comes right before, or right after the already established information. Hence, when episodes are watched out of order, the order of these reveals get scrambled. Yet, this does not mean the story ceases to make sense, or the plot suffers when watched out of order. Looking at the STNA Model and seeing how the events unfold, as long as the viewers start with the first episode and end

with the 15th, the same story will unfold no matter what the order is. Some jokes may not land as intended, some punchlines might be missing, but the progression of the story will not be hindered. In a way, the viewer is given more control over the gaps between episodes as they can now re-order these gaps as well as deciding on how long the gaps will be, based on their personal schedules of viewing.

That being said, Hurwitz confirms that watching the episodes out of order is not the best way to experience the story in his interview with *Vulture,* stating: "There is absolutely an order we have put together to create the maximum number of surprises […] That's part of our storytelling. If you watch in the order we prescribe, you will get to episode 14 and go, that's why he did that in episode one!" (Hurwitz in Martin, 2013a) but the Vulture interview suggests "it's also cool if you eventually want to skip around and watch all the takes of a particular scene at once" (Martin, 2013a).

In a later interview with Vulture, Hurwitz elaborates on how they realised their original plan for episodes that could be watched out of sequence did not work:

> Our brains like to make stories out of things and that requires order. I pretty quickly realized everything here is about the order of telling the stories, that there will be shows where you find out a little bit of information and then later shows where you revisit the scene, and you find out more information — and that's not fun in reverse. To get more information first and then less information isn't as interesting. I thought, okay, this may not be up for debate. (Hurwitz in Martin, 2013b)

Here, Hurwitz believes the sequential storytelling is an inherent feature of serial narratives and admits that their experiment to break it did not go as planned. I still argue that while the story may not be experienced as intended and parts of jokes may be lost along the way, an out of-sequence viewing experience of the fourth season does not fundamentally break the story in *Arrested Development* Season 4. However, his admission also reinforces the argument that

some of the aesthetic choices television texts adopted due to industrial constraints in broadcast television has become inherent to our understanding of television storytelling.

It is also noteworthy that Netflix was on board with the plan for an out-of-order telling of the story. In fact, the company has been playing with changing order of episodes in other shows too. The most well-known case for this is *Love, Death and Robots* (2019 -), an anthology series produced by David Fincher. Netflix admitted that they have provided four different orders of episodes to its users (Liptak, 2019; Winkelman, 2019). While it is not clear what the parameters were to select which order is given to which users or why the show was presented that way, it is still a display of the SVOD platform's supernarrative ambitions.

Deciding on the order of episodes in televisual storytelling is arguably one of the most prominent supernarrative powers that television networks hold. Networks frequently change the order of episodes they air to maximise viewership. It is not surprising to see Netflix act in a similar manner and experiment with different orders. What is perhaps more surprising in terms of Netflix's supernarrative agency is the fact that the original cut of season four with each episode focusing on a character is now buried deep within the interface, only accessible if the viewer knows where to look. Netflix's apparent and significant display of the remix instead of the original cut is discussed later in this chapter.

There are also smaller differences in narrative form between the third and fourth seasons. The theme song is a slightly different version on each episode of Season 4, adding a layer of instrument to the track for whichever character the episode focuses on. The narrator starts off the season by clearing his throat, indicating that it has been a while since he last narrated. Due to the circular temporality of the season, many episodes end with the "CINCO DE CUATRO" setting and the final beat in that setting is usually very long.

Starting from the first episode as part of showing meta references to television, there is a watermark on footage from Season three with “Showstealer Pro Trial Version’ written on it[32] (figure 6.4). The meta reference here alludes to the fact that the first three seasons of the show — although licensed for use by Netflix — are the property of Fox Network. Lastly, in clear contrast to earlier seasons that ran on broadcast television, when episodes fade to white to indicate a transition to a different setting, the screen remains in white before cutting to the next scene. In broadcast television, the commercial breaks start and end with black screen, so the fade-to-whites ended with a sudden fade to black.

Figure 6.4.

A screengrab from Season 4, Episode 1, showing the watermark “Showstealer Pro Trial Version”, on footage from Season 3, which was property of 20th Century Fox.

Lastly, the episode lengths should also be noted. While Season 3 employed 21–22-minute episodes due to its half-hour slot on prime-time television, Season 4 has liberty with episode lengths. As seen on Tables 6.1 and 6.2, the season has varying lengths of episodes between

[32] In *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*, the watermark changes to “Property of 20th Century Fox”.

28-38 minutes. While this allows for more freedom in storytelling, critics frequently noted that the longer episodes felt "bloated" (Travers, 2018). Then perhaps it is not surprising that Hurwitz decided to bring down the duration of episodes to 22 minutes when he remixed the fourth season.

6.4.2 Season 4 vs. Season 4: Fateful Consequences

Where does *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* lie in *Arrested Development*'s afterlife? The third season – the final one on broadcast TV network Fox – ended with a clear message towards fans that Hurwitz and the cast were hoping to finish off the series with a feature-length film. In the next few years, Hurwitz and cast kept the buzz about the future of the show, frequently alluding to how they would all be willing to get back together again (Leitch, 2013). Before the show's revival landed on Netflix, Hurwitz had an idea "for nine TV episodes, one for each of the major characters, that would reintroduce them in preparation for" the eventual movie (Stelter, 2013). Even after season 4 was released on Netflix, it took another four years for the show to be greenlit for another season. During this time, there were still speculations on a subsequent film. A year after the fourth season, Hurwitz announced that he was recutting the season in chronological order to get more buzz towards season five and Ron Howard posted on Twitter that he was re-recording narration for the remix of the season (2014). Months before the release of the fifth season, *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* was released, re-editing the fourth season into 22 episodes that each ran for 22-23 minutes.

Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequence is clearly more than an experimentation from Hurwitz as it is the default option to watch the fourth season on Netflix. Yet, its narrative form is not created from scratch. It both adds to and subtracts from material that was already produced for the fourth season. Going back to Loock's categorisation of televisual afterlives, I argue that the remix version of Season 4 is a *repetitive* artifact of *Arrested Development*'s televisual afterlife. It is

not a rerun, but it is the repurposing of old text to facilitate a rewatch of the show, increasing its repeatability. Hurwitz admits that a goal with *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* was syndication – licensing of televisual content from other networks after they have been broadcast – so that the episodes could rerun in other outlets without scheduling conflicts due to the uneven length of episodes (Arrested Development, 2018). Hurwitz also states in his letter to fans that he pursued the remix "as a comedic experiment to see if the new jokes and a new perspective would emerge from a remix that features all the Bluths in every episode and where the simultaneity of the story plays out chronologically" (Arrested Development, 2018). As can be seen here, while the text is repetitive, there was a goal to also play with narrative form and to experiment with a new way of telling the fourth season's story.

How is the story told differently then? It should be noted that the remix and the original season 4 start off in the same way. However, the two take different routes as the remix – instead of focusing on Michael for the first episode – starts to chronologically tell what happened to all members of the Bluth family in the past seven years. The deviation between two versions of the season can be clearly seen in one plotline where Michael starts to live with his son George Michael in his university dorm room. It is the first major plotline in the original version of season four and the intricacies of roommate dynamics between the father, son and the actual roommate takes up a large part of the storyline for the first few episodes. However, in the remix, this plotline does not appear until episode six as it happens later chronologically. The STNA datasheets for both versions of the season display how events and existents are dispersed differently on each version.

Although it is a repetitive text, the remix's total running time is 8 minutes shorter than the original Season 4. The episodes are each around 22 minutes but overall, the remix version uses longer dialogues in some instances, cuts parts of jokes and most prevalently, it uses new narration and uses the narrator in a much more extensive way than the previous seasons.

Eduardo Navas defines this type of text as a *reflexive remix*. This kind of remix "challenges the 'spectacular aura' of the original and claims autonomy even when it carries the name of the original; material is added or deleted, but the original tracks are largely left intact to be recognizable" (2012, p. 66). The use of the word remix instead of recut or re-edit seems proper then. After all, the text not only reshuffles original content, but changes its form through the addition and omission of new elements. Here lies the most significant change in narrative form between the original fourth season and *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*. Narration and – as an extension of it – recaps.

The narrator has always been a big part of *Arrested Development*'s narrative form. Looking at the STNA model, following the row "VOICE-OVER NARRATOR" under "NOTES", it is easy to see how prevalent narration is across all seasons. Unlike *A Series of Unfortunate Events* the narrator is not a character in the text, hence it is not technically an existent (although as discussed later in the chapter, the nature of the narrator changes in the final season). When we take a closer look at *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*, the prevalence of the voice-over narrator progresses to another level. There are almost no beats in any episodes of the fourth season remix without a voice-over narration (See *Season 4 Remix* Datasheet). Most of the gaps you see in the STNA Model in "VOICE-OVER NARRATOR" row for the remix season are the beats where opening titles or closing credits appear in the episode. In fact, although it is not logged into the datasheet separately, the opening title sequence of *Arrested Development* also features the voice-over narration (Figure 6.5).

Figure 6.5

A screengrab from the opening titles of *Arrested Development,* narrated by Ron Howard (2019).

It is established that the narrator is ever-present in *Arrested Development,* but what does the narrator actually do? The show utilises its narrator to connect beats together, expand or elaborate on the jokes and to recap. With each season, we see the narrator recap more. On one level, this is understandable as most of the jokes in *Arrested Development* get their impact from being called back and forward. They make more sense or land more impactfully when the audience recalls what had happened a minute ago, an episode ago or a season ago. As the show gets more seasons, the backlog of jokes that can be called back increases in volume.

In *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*, through additional voice-over narration, more recaps are featured. Whether it is to make sure the jokes are understood by more viewers or to make sure that the story still makes sense when told chronologically, the narrator becomes predominant in this version of the season.

As stated above, it is hard to find a beat in the season where the narrator does not make a comment. By the end of Season 3, the audience is introduced to the character of Ron Howard, the Hollywood director. While the character himself or the narrator does not make any direct references, the audience knows that the real Ron Howard is also the voice behind the narrator, adding one more layer to the meta references the show frequently uses. Yet this familiarity with the face behind narration and the excessive use of it, dilutes the information received. This is especially true for viewers who have already watched the original version of the fourth season. In fact, this was one of the main criticisms against *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* (Matar, 2018; Travers 2018; Schroeder, 2018). Daniel Schroeder of *Slate* says that the remix "suffers from an aggressive amount of narration. It might as well just be a Ron Howard audiobook" (2018). He further criticises how narration is central to the narrative structure, saying that "To stitch together all these disjointed but intersecting plots Howard must over-narrate every step of the way, constantly reminding the viewer of all the plot threads stuffed into each 22-minute episode" (2018). *Den of Geek*'s Joe Matar is even less impressed by the over-narration.

> It is apparent that Howard has recorded new narration, but the narrator already had a problematically outsized presence in Season 4, so though I'm not positive, it certainly feels like there's a lot more. Smarting from the criticism that gradually came out against Season 4, Hurwitz seems terrified that you'll lose the plot (which you still totally will sometimes) and, as such, the narrator is constantly telling you what's going on and why, not to mention recapping things you've seen only one episode ago. (2018)

Matar and Schroeder's criticism towards recapping the show is also interesting because recaps are often seen as an integral part of the serialised televisual text (Mittell, 2015; Newman, 2006). Umberto Eco writes "to serialise is to repeat" in his essay *Interpreting Serials* (1990, p. 85). Newman argues that in television serials "recapping is especially important because of the large quantity of data about the story world that forms the background of any new developments" (2006, p. 18). Mittell points out that the recaps help bridge the gaps in

knowledge over multiple episodes, stating that a recap "will remind viewers of a key mystery or enigma that has receded to the background in recent serialised episodes" (2015, p. 189).

Criticism for excessive recapping is therefore understandable. The information that needs to be recollected may still be spread over multiple past episodes, but with all episodes available and with binge-watching as the dominant mode of engagement, that information is presumably still fresh in viewers' mind.

It is clear to see that the excessive recapping was a decision made knowingly, because the remixed season also features a 'Skip Recap' button[33]. The latter episodes of the season almost always start with a 1–3-minute recap of everything that has happened so far and by the middle of the season, the narration and recaps reach a peak point where the watching experience almost feels like watching a recap of things that already happened. Around Episode 8, "The Weak Become the Strong", a large part of each episode becomes a recap.

> The narrator was a great comedic device in the earlier seasons when he was utilized not so constantly. Here, he dominates everything, and, after a time, you tend to tune out the few interjections by the people onscreen. They've been relegated to bit parts, with the narrator as the lead. The effect is the entire season feels like a recap, even when you're seeing new stuff. Try out the tenth episode, "Recurring Dreams," which truly is almost wall-to-wall narration, and you'll see what I mean. (Matar, 2018)

It is curious that the remix of Season 4 returns to one of the main conventions of broadcast television storytelling and yet still gets criticism for doing it. The abundance of narration and recap — a "Ron Howard audiobook", as Schroeder calls it — added to the fact that *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* came out after the original version of Season 4 arguably positions *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* as one big recap.

[33] This is also interesting as the first season of *House of Cards* also does not provide a 'Skip Recap' button. The first Netflix Original shows rarely included recaps.

Of course, this contradicts how the season is presented on the Netflix interface. To explore this further, an analysis into how both seasons are positioned within the Netflix interface is necessary. As the second employed method in this research project, contextual programme analysis "invites us to find ways in which meaning is established between texts, and to search for ways in which any given program's meaning is prefigured by that which comes before it, or changed after the fact" (Gray and Lotz, 2011, p. 131).

Looking at how both seasons are positioned within Netflix, the remix appears as the default mode to view Season 4, meaning if a viewer was to watch the final episode of Season 3, the auto-play function of Netflix would automatically skip to the first episode of *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*, not the original version of Season 4. If the viewer has no prior knowledge that another, earlier version of season four exists, they could only stumble into it by looking at the "Trailers & More" section under the show's information page. Even then, with prior knowledge of the season's existence, the viewing experience would be subpar compared to viewing any other episode of the show. Netflix does not provide its standard functionalities like skipping credits or auto-playing the next episode in texts that are under the "Trailers & More" tab. If the viewer closes an episode of the original fourth season without finishing, it does not play from where it was left off. There is no dropdown menu that can be seen on the player interface that can take the viewer to different episodes either. Watching the fourth season itself is a chore as the viewer must go back to the "Trailers & More" tab, find the next episode and start watching it every time.

The fact that the original version of Season 4 is not accessible by any other means is a display of Netflix's supernarration. It is infrastructurally possible for both versions of the season to be put on the drop-down menu that navigates between seasons. Obviously, Netflix could have kept the original season in its place and offered the remix as an alternative. If they were adamant about making the remix the default option, they could have turned the original

season into a separate entry like they did with *Queer Eye: We're in Japan! (2019)* or *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) – the interactive special for the anthology series[34]. This way, the text is no longer embedded within the usual paratexts of the show's page on Netflix but is given its own page. This way, functionalities that define Netflix viewing experience could still be kept. Yet, they did not do any of this.

Matar argues that the "very existence of this new edit, not to mention that Netflix has craftily hidden the original cut behind some non-user-friendly UI, is a tacit admission that the original cut completely blue itself" (2018). I argue that it is more than an admission of an experiment gone wrong. It is using all the power in their supernarrative arsenal to shape and change the narrative at the outermost layer so that the remix version is positioned within the linear flow of seasons — perhaps the closest thing to a schedule that Netflix has. As Tanya Horeck, Mareike Jenner and Tina Kendall proposed (2018), if binge-watching is Netflix's priority, then through specific placement of *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*, Netflix attempts to design the binge-watching experience for *Arrested Development* much like a television network would design its schedule.

Elsewhere, I have argued a similar use of supernarrative power in the case of *House of Cards*. There, Netflix removed the disgraced actor Kevin Spacey's name from the paratexts as much as possible. While the actor, who plays the main character Frank Underwood could not be omitted from the shows existing text — its first five seasons — his face was taken off any promotional material and even his name was put towards the end of the cast list. In both cases, Netflix does not change the narrative within the existing text, but they use their

[34] In both of these cases, these were not part of the main text of the shows but were derivative texts, but their relationship with their source text was apparent.

supernarrative powers to change and shape the paratexts around it, transforming the overall reception of the narrative.

Instead of commenting on which version of the fourth season should have been provided as the default option, this thesis is more interested in exploring how a text that was designed from the beginning to exploit the narrative possibilities of Netflix was then repurposed into an imitation of broadcast televisual storytelling and how this new mode was decided to be the default text for Season 4. *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* uses more narration and recap, and reorganises the text of the original version of Season 4, but why? All of these appear to imitate a narrative form that more closely resembles that of its broadcast television era. *Arrested Development*'s biggest experiment with narrative form is then reverted back to more conventional practices of television storytelling and released to the viewers right before the final season is released.

6.4.3 Season 5 vs. Season 4

The first eight episodes of the fifth and final season of *Arrested Development* were released weeks after *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*. Abandoning the character-oriented episodes, but not fully committing to going back to the broadcast television-like structure, the fifth season features 16 episodes released in two parts that run for approximately 29 minutes each (apart from the finale, which is longer at 47 minutes). The season still uses fewer number of beats that run for longer durations and the STNA model shows a clearly reduced number of existents, which signals a smaller scale of production than its predecessor.

Looking at its narrative form and considering the reviews from the media, it can be argued that if Season 4 was an experiment on how the story could be told in an SVOD environment, then Season 5 is an experiment on to what extent broadcast television storytelling can — and

should — be utilised in that environment. Reviewing the first half of the season for *The New York Times*, James Poniewozik hints at this negotiation by saying that five years after the fourth season, the definition of streaming TV is now clear for the audiences; it is "TV, but more of it," (2018). Reviewing the first part of the season for *Vanity Fair*, Sonia Saraiya seems to agree with how the fifth season of the show bares more resemblance to the broadcast television-era seasons:

> Like those of the remix, [season 5's] episodes are sitcom-short, with built-in cuts for commercial breaks—even on ad-free Netflix. In one of the oddest innovations of streaming television—and one that kind of repudiates the creative promise of streaming platforms—Hurwitz has returned to the commercial restraints of the network model that Netflix built its brand on disrupting. Perhaps he's simply answering the siren call of a lucrative syndication deal, which the old Season 4 wasn't structured for. Or maybe it's more. Maybe he and his creative team determined that the show works best formatted like the sitcom it once was. Maybe they figured out that the audience prefers it that way. Maybe the open sandbox of streaming content is too much for our puny human brains; maybe we're not above cutting to commercial break, even when there are no ads to cut to. (2018)

Critics' likening of Season 5 to broadcast television is peculiar because at first sight, there is nothing to suggest a call-back to broadcast television practices. Multiple episodes are released or "dropped" simultaneously and unlike the remix of Season 4, episodes still have varying lengths. While some elements like cutting to commercial breaks may still be noticeable upon inspection, a large part of what makes the season more like a broadcast television season and less like Season 4 is not tangible[35].

While critics and viewers see a change towards broadcast TV-like storytelling, the number of beats per episode and the duration of these beats are still different than prime time television shows of the US market. The length of the episodes – while not as long as how they were in

[35] An audience studies research could delve deeper into what makes the viewers think that a show is more like broadcast television versus one that is made exclusively for SVOD services.

Season 4 – are also not as low as *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*. The average running time of episodes in season five is 29 minutes, only slightly less than Season 4.

A part of the reason for this might be the length of the series finale, which at 47 minutes is the longest episode of the show. It is more interesting here to see the subtle nuance in episode lengths between the two parts of Season 5. Isolating the finale, the second part of the season, which was released almost a year after part one, has an average running length of 26 minutes. This is much closer to the 22-minute running time of the remix and the broadcast television seasons. Part One of Season 5 still averages at 29 minutes per episode.

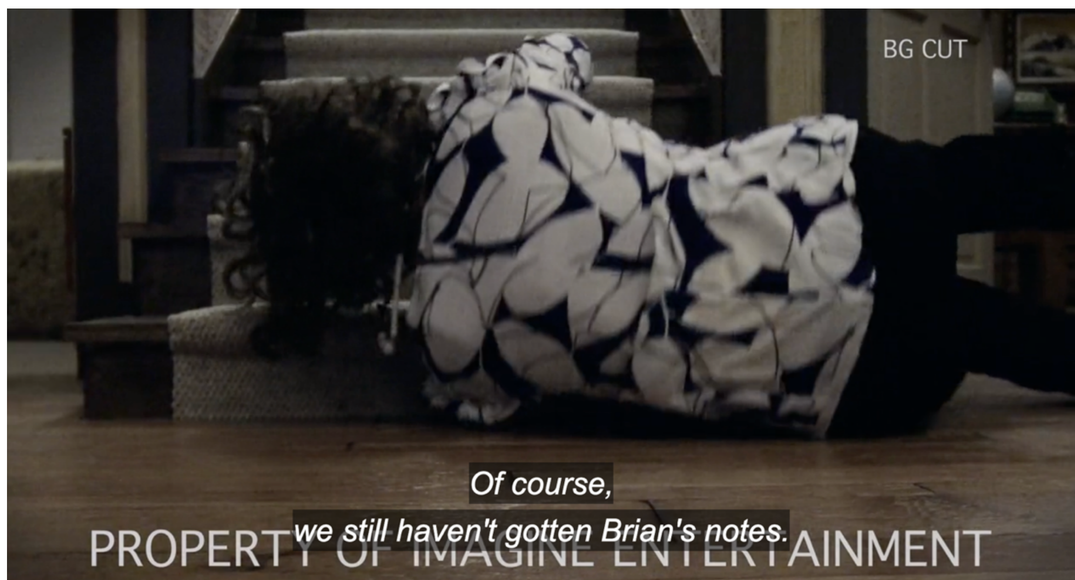
A 3-minute reduction in episode length cannot justify or support an argument on SVOD services' eagerness to go back to broadcast television's narrative forms. However, it is still noteworthy as this difference is not between seasons, but within a season, in a one-year gap. It may be speculated that a decision to trim down episodes in Part Two was made by looking at viewer data from Part One, bringing the episode lengths closer to *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*.

The STNA Model reveals that as a continuation of what was seen on *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences,* Season 5 uses recaps more frequently. In fact, the first episode plays almost like one big recap. The diegetic time starts from two months after the events of the fourth season, but it merges footage from the previous season with new footage of what happened right afterwards. It creates a hybrid recap of old and new footage, old and new information. As suggested in Chapter 4, this creates an artificial sense of betweenness for the viewer to connect the old and new knowledge about the show (O'Sullivan, 2006).

Much like recaps, the season also employs the voice-over narrator more frequently. The narrator is revealed to be Ron Howard for the first time in this season. On Episode 15, "Courting Disasters", towards the end of the episode, footage from a fictional TV show

created by Ron Howard that streams on Netflix is shown to characters. As the footage is shown, the narrator makes comments on the scene, the actors playing in it, and how he had notes to his business partner about it (Figure 6.6). As the audience already knows that the fictional TV show is created by Ron Howard, the connection is made for the first time that Ron Howard – albeit a fictional version – is the one narrating *Arrested Development.*

Figure 6.6.



Screengrab from Season 5, Episode 15 where the narrator comments on a fictional television show in a way that confirms he was involved in its making.

The above-mentioned fictional show, *Making of a Monster* was in itself a reference to Netflix's first big-hit true crime show, *Making a Murderer* (2015-2018). The fifth season of *Arrested Development* includes a lot of meta references not just for television, but specifically for streaming television.

Referencing "television" – including the industry, storytelling modes and audiences – have always been an integral part of narrative form for *Arrested Development*. However, with the fifth season we see a direct focus in these meta references towards SVOD platforms, and more

specifically Netflix. For instance, towards the end of the sixth episode titled "Emotional Baggage", Ron Howard — the character — has the following dialogue with his assistant:

> RON HOWARD: Hey Jocelyn, can you bring up the standard TV contract?
> JOCELYN: Streaming contracts, cable or broadcast?
> RON HOWARD: We got a streamer here!
> JOCELYN: No residuals.
> RON HOWARD (to Michael): Jocelyn will have those down in just a minute.
> (Arrested Development, Emotional Baggage, 2018, 00:29:18-00:29:38)

The reference here both signposts that streaming platforms are now part of the standard TV environment and makes a comment on the finances of streaming television with Jocelyn (Jocelyn Howard) nonchalantly stating that the streaming contract means there will be no residuals — payments that cast and crew get for each rerun of a television show episode, making another meta reference to syndication.

Later in Episode 14, "Saving for Arraignment Day", the meta references to Netflix become a *leitmotif* that repeats throughout the episode. It starts with the narrator talking about another fictional true crime show, *The Guilty Guys*, being cancelled by Netflix for not being bingeworthy. A few minutes later, the *"Next episode starts in…"* screen on Netflix interface is shown for the same fictional show (figure 6.7). Then, in the next beat, Maeby and George Michael are seen talking about the show. Maeby says that the show was cancelled, and a man can be heard in the background getting surprised, saying: "They cancelled that?" (Arrested Development, Saving for Arraignment Day, 2019 00:14:40-00:14:43). The fact that meta references and extradiegetic jokes are being directed towards streaming television shows that much like other elements in its narrative form, the frequently used meta references also adapt to the SVOD environment.

Figure 6.7.

Screengrab from Season 5, Episode 14 showing the "Next Episode Starts In..." interface of Netflix on a fictional TV show.

Apart from the above characteristics, Season 5 hosts the episode with the smallest number of beats. Episode 13, "The Untethered Sole", only has nine beats. As stated earlier, the final episode, "The Fallout" plays host to the longest beat with its final beat running for over 21 minutes. The fade-to-white effect also seems to be more prevalent in the season as the episodes go by. The show also keeps the "semi-original" wording in its title card which is peculiar as only two months after its release, when Netflix revived another show that was cancelled by the same network, Fox, they promoted *Lucifer* (2016-2021) as a Netflix Original show.

6.5 Conclusion

If Netflix prioritised pushing the boundaries of televisual storytelling and creating new space for narrative possibilities at the start of its foray into original content, *Arrested Development* was

arguably the flagship for trying out and showcasing these possibilities. Hurwitz notes this repeatedly in his interviews before the fourth season aired. When asked about partnering with Netflix, he says;

> I've never had a working relationship like I have with them. I developed a lot of the design of this show with them. That conversation was about, "What are your needs? What are you looking for? Will this work for you guys? Will a show work where you've got one episode per character?" They really were a creative partner. They wanted the next progression of Arrested Development and helped me find it, as opposed to telling me how to do it. (Hurwitz in Radish, 2013)

It is fascinating to look back at this statement after consideration of *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* and the fifth season. From later interviews, it seems like Hurwitz was the one to push the for the remix for season 4, not the other way around. Yet, looking at how Netflix exercised their supernarrative powers, it does not seem like the statement holds true. Interestingly, later in that same interview when asked if Netflix's delivery system could tempt him to continue changing the show even after it airs on Netflix, he jokes how that would solve problems as post-production stage was going too fast and he had a lot of material (Radish, 2013). In a way, he foreshadows the remix of Season 4 before the original is released.

It should also be noted that Hurwitz seems to be aware that the goal of telling Season 4 in a way that could only be told on Netflix was ambitious.

> … in its purest form, a new medium requires a new format. You can't do in a short story what you could do for a novel, in a novel. You can't do in a haiku what you would do in a long-form poem. In a perfect world, we would be making something that could be only on Netflix… (Hurwitz in Paskin, 2013)

Yet we know from his interview with *Vulture* that even though he tried to tell Season 4's story with episodes that could work on their own or with different, interchangeable orders, he decided in the end that sequential storytelling was an inherent feature of serial televisual narratives (Martin, 2013b).

I have argued in this chapter that contrary to his belief, out-of-sequence viewing of the season does not fundamentally alter the overall story in *Arrested Development* Season 4, but the significant takeaway from this is a television storyteller's own admission that television aesthetics, which came out of industrial constraints of broadcast television have seeped into the DNA of televisual storytelling. Therefore, while Netflix and its promoted mode of binge-watching enable a vast array of narrative possibilities in serial storytelling, some of the conventional elements of broadcast television are integral to serialised televisual storytelling. Even in the absence of the limitations of broadcast television, viewers and producers alike appear to prefer emulating some these boundaries.

Throughout its six-year revived run on Netflix, *Arrested Development* explored and experimented with narrative possibilities that Netflix facilitated. Its narrative structure has changed between seasons, first experimenting with its Season 4 episodes flexible temporal units, allowing for a mode of viewing that can potentially re-arrange the order based on which character viewer wants to follow. Then, it experimented with remixing content and re-releasing it on Netflix, returning the flexible temporality of Season 4 into a narrative form that closely resembles that of broadcast television storytelling. Finally, in its fifth season, it tried to strike a balance between a narrative structure that is closer to broadcast television and one that is freed of limitations that linear TV schedules bring. As the show navigated between different experiments with narrative form, Netflix exercised its supernarrative powers – using its paratextual surround to shape the overall narrative form of the show between seasons.

While experimenting with narrative form, the show also arguably played with how repeatability could work differently on Netflix. While the most die-hard fans of the show were eager to rewatch old episodes to reappraise and discover new elements, with its remix of season four, the show created a new afterlife for itself. While this repetitive afterlife was essentially the same text, its nature as a reflective remix provided viewers with a new way to

experience the story. Perhaps more importantly, it provided a new way to repeatedly binge the same text.

There are very few contemporary television shows that have an as complex and convoluted history as *Arrested Development*. With its three seasons on broadcast television, its cult TV status, its revival after six years, its unorthodox narrative structure in the fourth season, its decision to remix the fourth season, its meta references to television, its self-reflexivity, its use of narrative elements and how Netflix exercised its supernarrative control over it, the show is truly an amalgamation of narrative possibilities in television.

7 NETFLIX INTERACTIVE SPECIALS

As of May 2022, Netflix has 20 titles in its catalogue that are categorised as interactive specials. These interactive specials are so called because "these are TV shows, movies, or trivia on Netflix where you control the story, answer the questions, and more. Some interactive specials let you decide what happens next, while others are more like trivia," (Netflix, 2019). All 20 titles share a common feature: they utilise the Netflix interface to enable audiences to navigate through narrative content in a non-linear way.

While Netflix started as a DVD distribution service and their library of films has been a significant asset in their switch to streaming, the service is now primarily seen as an example of an internet TV platform or a subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) service. Along with television and film content, the platform hosts interactive specials.

Most of these interactive specials would be difficult to show in their interactive format on broadcast television. A technology that supports the interactivity (e.g., DVDs or websites) is needed for these texts to function and the text needs to be reprogrammed for the specific output technology. An interactive video on a website cannot be directly copied to a DVD and be expected to function the same way. Hence, the interactive specials on Netflix are television texts that are specific to Netflix because they are only accessible through the affordances of the specific platform[36].

This chapter explores interactive specials on Netflix with a specific focus on investigating Netflix's supernarrative agency. Looking at the narrative form of selected interactive specials

[36] *Minecraft: Story Mode* (2015-2017) can be argued as an exception of this, as the title can also be accessed as a stand-alone software. However, the stand-alone version is a point-and-click video game with more branching choices, while the Netflix interactive special is confined to pre-determined, pre-rendered, limited choices. It should also be noted that as of May 2022, the stand-alone version of *Minecraft: Story Mode* is not available to purchase.

and contextualising how their interactivity is structured individually, this chapter aims to contribute to a more accurate and complete mapping of the narrative ecosystem in Netflix. While I do not utilise the Serialised Televisual Narrative Analysis (STNA) Model in this chapter, I explore all research questions set out for this project using formal structural analysis and contextual programme analysis.

The main research question for this project is; What are the characteristics of narrative form in televisual serial narratives released exclusively by the SVOD platform Netflix (RQ1)? All case studies analysed in this chapter are exclusive to Netflix. Moreover, many of the examples discussed in this chapter are either serial narratives themselves, or stand-alone interactive texts which are tied to an established serial narrative. Hence, it is noteworthy to explore what characteristics can be seen in interactive narratives. Secondly, this chapter expands on the research question of what possible variations can form and structure of televisual serial narratives on Netflix have (RQ2). While interactive storytelling is not new, the ways in which interactivity is used on Netflix is a variation of televisual serial narratives. As this interactivity is facilitated by paratextual elements that Netflix provides, the chapter also explores the question of paratexts and their impact on narrative form and structure in Netflix (RQ3). Lastly, the choices made in these interactive texts are usually choices that affect the temporality of both the story level and discourse level. Hence, RQ4 on time and temporality in these narratives is also put under investigation in the case of interactive specials.

There are three reasons for why the STNA Model was not used in these case studies. Firstly, the horizontal axis of the model that logs temporality proved difficult to fill for interactive texts. Netflix does not provide a video progress bar for its interactive specials. That means there is no way to note the exact timing of any point in the text. Secondly, beats are difficult to determine in interactive specials. Some branching points where the narrative takes a turn may be easy to spot as new beats, but not all are apparent. For instance, there is a point in

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend (2020) where the viewer is prompted to select the main character's wedding dress; is it going to be a fun dress, or a classic one? In a non-interactive television serial, this decision may not be important enough to warrant a new beat, but because there is a story branch, should it still be noted down as a new beat? Thirdly, apart from rewinding to the last choice point after unsatisfactory endings, Netflix does not provide a way to watch every different version of events. Hence, even if the STNA Model was used, it could only show a particular version of how the story could unfold, unable to map out the whole narrative. For instance, *Cat Burglar* (2022) has over 200 different clips that add up to 90 minutes of content, but the actual viewing experience does not run past 15 minutes.

Keeping in mind these limitations that the STNA Model presents for use in interactive television shows, it was decided that the formal analysis would not use a model for interactive texts. Instead, diagrams to show the interactive structure have been produced for each text in this chapter. At the end of each example, I provide original diagrammatical interactive visualisations of narrative structures that I created for this research project. Each diagram is also given a name for the type of interactivity to map out different possible interactive forms in Netflix environment.

Moreover, contextual programme analysis that looks at the text in relation to all other texts surrounding would enable a more holistic analysis of interactive specials. For this purpose, paratextual elements of these interactive specials were included within the analysis. These paratextual elements include – but are not limited to – interactive specials' thumbnails on Netflix, elements of the Netflix interface, the interactive player interface and all the buttons that come with it.

Instead of focusing on a single serial text like the previous chapters, this chapter uses examples from different interactive specials on Netflix. These are *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018),

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend, *Battle Kitty* (2022), *Trivia Quest* (2022) and *Cat Burglar* (2022). The chapter further analyses a Netflix mobile game, *Exploding Kittens* (2023). All of these texts, except *Exploding Kittens,* are promoted by Netflix as *Interactive Specials* (Netflix, 2019). In these interactive specials, there are nodes at certain parts of the text that can branch into 2-4 different routes within the text[37]. This may be branching storylines for plot (e.g., *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*), a preference that will affect how the entire narrative is told (*Minecraft: Story Mode*) or questions with definite correct and wrong answers (*Trivia Quest*). In all these cases, the available options appear on the Netflix interface and the viewer is prompted to select from a limited number of choices.

Looking at these texts and how the Netflix interface is used in their storytelling, this chapter argues that interactive shows enable Netflix to use its supernarrative powers to a great extent. These specific texts display a distinct televisuality that is made possible by the affordances of Netflix. I further argue that while these interactive specials present an impression of agency on the viewer, the boundaries of narrative possibilities are still defined and limited. Hence, while these texts are peculiar in their structure, the limitations of their interactivity should be noted. Finally, I argue that interactive specials provide a snapshot of how interactive television narratives can reach a mass audience, enabling individual choices at scale.

To make these arguments, this chapter first explains and discusses the concepts of supernarration and interactive TV with a focus on the concept of hypertexts. It then provides a brief review of scholarship on Netflix's interactive specials. Afterwards, the chapter provides a closer look on each of the above-mentioned texts, drawing diagrams on their interactivity, providing examples of Netflix's supernarrative agency and these texts' exploration of

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[37] The largest number of possible choices are in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* and *Trivia Quest*, each offering four choices at times.

narrative possibilities within the Netflix ecosystem. The chapter concludes with remarks on where interactive specials can be positioned within the narrative ecosystem of Netflix.

7.1 Supernarration

The term, supernarration was first coined by James A. Parr in his close reading of Cervantes' Don Quixote (1988). Parr describes a supernarrator as "the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic text speaker, who functions as orchestrator and editor […] This entity orders, organizes, and comments upon the efforts of the pseudo-authors and sometime narrators of record," (2001). According to Parr, the supernarrator's voice has superior insight and control in comparison to other narrative voices and "is situated above them in the hierarchy of such entities," (2001). Parr argues that the supernarrator can be seen within the text itself, but it is the editorial power that the supernarrator hold over the text that identifies him as such.

Sarah Kozloff uses the same term to identify television networks in US television. Treating the broadcast television schedule as a grand discourse in which many television texts exist, she argues that behind each TV network's schedule there is a supernarrator (1992, p. 94). Very similar to Parr's supernarrator in Don Quixote, Kozloff's supernarrators behind TV schedules have higher hierarchy.

In fact, their influence on the narrative expands beyond the schedule. For instance, through television network's financial decisions on how many episodes to order for a season, or whether to cancel the show or not, these networks extend their influence over televisual narratives. While Kozloff summarises the powers of the television supernarrator as the ability to interrupt, delay or preempt televisual texts, Parr also recognises that the supernarrator is "a useful concept for understanding and appreciating the narrative hierarchy in the text, and he is important also for appreciating [Cervantes's] achievement as an innovative and

experimental teller of tales," (2001). I have already established in previous chapters that the supernarrator proves to be a useful concept in exploring the relationship between Netflix and the televisual texts it hosts.

The supernarrator as applied in this research project takes the characteristics of the television supernarrator that Kozloff lists, but especially in the case of interactive shows, the audience gets to experience the text only through the organisation provided by the supernarrator. This supernarrator – like Parr's – is detectable in the text. Every time the viewer is asked to press a button to interact with the story, the viewer is reminded to the existence of these functionalities provided by the supernarrator. I have further applied the term *supernarrator* in this thesis to achieve a consistent terminology towards a narrative theory of SVOD platforms. I use the term *supernarration* to define the acts of the supernarrator that have an influence on the text. I also use the word *supernarrative* not as a noun, but as an adjective – such as supernarrative power, supernarrative agency, supernarrative tools – to signpost any act, characteristic or feature of the supernarrator that exists directly because of its status as the supernarrator.

Elsewhere in other chapters and especially in Chapter 4, I have discussed Netflix's personification as a supernarrator through its use of logo and signature sound[38]. I have also discussed instances where Netflix exercises its supernarrative agency over paratexts to influence texts. In the case of *House of Cards* (2013-2018), this was most apparent in the erasure of Kevin Spacey from all posters and thumbnails visible to the user. Spacey played the lead character in the show's first five seasons, but after allegations of sexual assault, he was fired from the show and did not return for the sixth and final season. In the case of *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013-2019), the fourth season of the show was re-edited and remixed

[38] The third aspect of personification for TV networks, the voice-over narrator is not present in Netflix (Kozloff, 1992, p. 94). In Chapter 4, I argue that this element is replaced by the interface in the case of SVOD platforms.

into what is called *Arrested Development Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* (2018) and Netflix replaced the fourth season with the new version in its interface, in an act of supernarration, making it the default option to watch the story that unfolds over the fourth season.

In this chapter, supernarrative agency of Netflix is investigated in terms of the functionalities that the SVOD platform provides. Netflix states that interactive specials are shows where the audience controls the story (Netflix, 2019). These interactive stories can be likened to Choose-Your-Own-Adventure stories, named after a popular book series, that presents multiple paths and endings to their stories. Starting from 1970s with over 200 published titles, this book series are written in second-person-singular and the readers are prompted to select what they would like to do next at the end of each section, continuing to read the book from a particular page based on their answer (History of CYOA, n.d.).

While Netflix claims that individual audience members have control, closer look on these texts suggest that in reality their choices are limited, and the audiences' perceived control has boundaries. These boundaries and limitations are set by the creators of the text at the story level by which options are generated to move the story forward. They are set by Netflix on the discourse level as the actions of the audience are limited by what the interface allows them. In other words, this perceived control is provided by Netflix's technology and more specifically, buttons and functions that have been put on the interface by Netflix, the supernarrator.

7.2 Interactive Television

Interactive specials on Netflix may have come into existence from late 2010s but interactive television as a concept has been around for decades. Experiments of interaction with televisions go all the way back to the 1950s with picturephones that allowed two people to

communicate via telephones while they see each other on their television sets (Jensen, 2008). Experiments on interactivity with televisual content started in 1970s onwards. Jensen explains that it was during this period when television networks started experimenting with using decoders on television box sets for the viewers to participate in game shows or order pay-TV (2008). These experiments were costly and television networks could not justify the costs with the level of audience engagement. However, the use of ancillary devices with television sets became more common as Jensen argues that the next decade signalled an "interactive turn" in the media culture:

> Generally, the 1980s were characterised by the breakthrough for and the spread of a broad spectrum of new interactive media and technologies that invaded the domestic setting, the workplaces and places of education and which offered a greater degree of control over the use of media: video cassette recorders, gaming consoles, videogames, personal computers, cash dispensers, microwave ovens, information stalls in public places and so on. (2008, p. 4)

Perhaps it can be argued that as early 1980s, the promise of interactivity on TV was tied to a limited number of buttons and functionalities as audiences grew more accustomed to engaging with media through the use of these ancillary tools. While this understanding of interactivity in television developed further in the next decades, it also expanded and new forms of interactivity with television were introduced. As a result, the concept of interactive television is now broadly defined:

> [Interactive television] comprises a number of technologies and program formats that allow viewers to interact with television content as they view it, that is, a new form of television based on actual physical interaction with the media in the form of choices, decisions, and communicative input. In this manner it becomes possible for the viewer to gain control over what to watch, when to watch, and how to watch, or even the potential for active participation in programs or upload of content generated by the user. (Jensen, 2014, p. 299)

This definition is important as it helps investigate the nature of *narrative* interactivity on Netflix interactive specials. Firstly, not every interaction with television influences the televisual text. There are interactive television elements that exist on the periphery such as electronic

programme guides, and there are interactive television shows that do not have a narrative element such as t-commerce shows where the viewers transact through television content, purchasing products and services as seen on TV (Jensen, 2014).

In a way, the whole experience of watching televisual content on Netflix has levels of interactivity. The like buttons, adding to a personal list, the buttons that enable navigation within the texts by pausing, playing, fastforwarding, rewinding etc. can all be considered as interactive functionalities. Elizabeth Evans argues that interactive "defines content that requires two-way communication, with audiences providing input into the content," (2020, p. 53). The emphasis here on providing input into "content" can be applied to the case of Netflix, as it implies the interactivity should impact not just how something is presented on screen but change the content of what is seen. Hence, in this chapter, interactivity is used only in terms of interactive narratives that Netflix interactive specials provide.

A discussion on how to address the audience that experience these texts is also warranted. Is it still viable to refer to audience members as "viewers" if they now have a more active interaction with the text? Carlos Scolari proposes use of the term "teleuser" (teleusuario) to define this audience. He argues that there is a specific type of audience who use computers and mobile devices, have played video games, and understands what the interaction with an interactive text would be like (2019). This term is taken forwards by Crisóstomo Gálvez and Valderrama Carreño to define a "proactive consumer of different types of narrative in different audio-visual media," (2019, p. 125). While I understand the semantic relevance of defining this user, I refrain from designating them as anything other than viewers. This is because the corpus of this chapter consists only of Netflix interactive specials. It is hard to argue that most Netflix users use the platform for interactivity rather than televisuality. Moreover, the audience for these specials is not a consideration for this research. The focus is on the narrative and the supernarration executed by Netflix.

A final note should be made on the history of interactive narratives on broadcast television. Here, I provide a selection of experiments in 20th and 21st century. As early as 1953, an American animated kids show, *Winky-Dink and You* (1953-1957) experimented with interactivity (Dodson, 2001). Children could buy a special cover to put on top of their television screens and draw on the screen as instructed by the characters in the show. In 1988, BBC aired *What's Your Story?* (1988-1990), another children's show where viewers could phone in to suggest how the story should progress (Dodson, 2001). In 2005, Channel 4 in the UK promoted *Dubplate Drama* (2005-2009) as the world's first interactive TV Show. Each episode had two different endings that were already shot, and the viewers could vote by sending text messages to determine which ending would be used. A year later in Finland, *Accidental Lovers* (2006-2007) utilised text messaging further. Viewers were encouraged to send text messages on what they think should happen between the main characters. Text messages were categorised into certain keywords (such as loneliness, love, romance). Scenes and voice-over segments were edited in real time to present distinct narratives every time it was broadcast (Ursu et al., 2008).

Since then, there have been experimentations with interactive storytelling in broadcast television around the world, but interactivity relied on ancillary tools and devices. Viewers must call, send a text message, use an application, or log on to a website to make the interactivity work in broadcast television.

7.3 Hypertext

As I discuss the interactive specials and focus on interactive narratives, a final note on their interactive nature should be made. As these texts are non-linear and can have changing narratives based on the input from viewers, a discussion of hypertextuality is needed.

A hypertext is broken into fragments and stored in a network of nodes connected by electronic links (Ryan, 2001, p. 205). It provides a nonlinear mode of reading the text by letting readers navigate the database of nodes. Marie-Laure Ryan argues that hypertexts' literary prominence relies on how effectively they can be used in storytelling (2001, p. 242). Hence, the "narrative potential of the interactive text is a function of the architecture of its system of links," (p. 246). As such, I examine the architecture of Netflix's interactive specials to comment on the narrative potential of these interactive texts.

While these interactive specials can be seen as hypertexts, they are not cybertexts. According to Espen Aarseth, a cybertext is a machine-like text that produces a variety of expressions with input from the reader (1997, p.3). Because there is input from the reader that transcends the simple act of reading, these texts are considered ergodic. The term "ergodic" is derived from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, work and path. Espen Aarseth describes 'ergodic literature' where "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text," (1997, p. 1). In contrast to nontrivial effort, Aarseth argues that in nonergodic literature, the only responsibility placed on the reader is eye movement and the 'arbitrary turning of pages (1997, p. 2). Aarseth further argues that in a cybertext the distinction between what is being read and what is left unread becomes apparent:

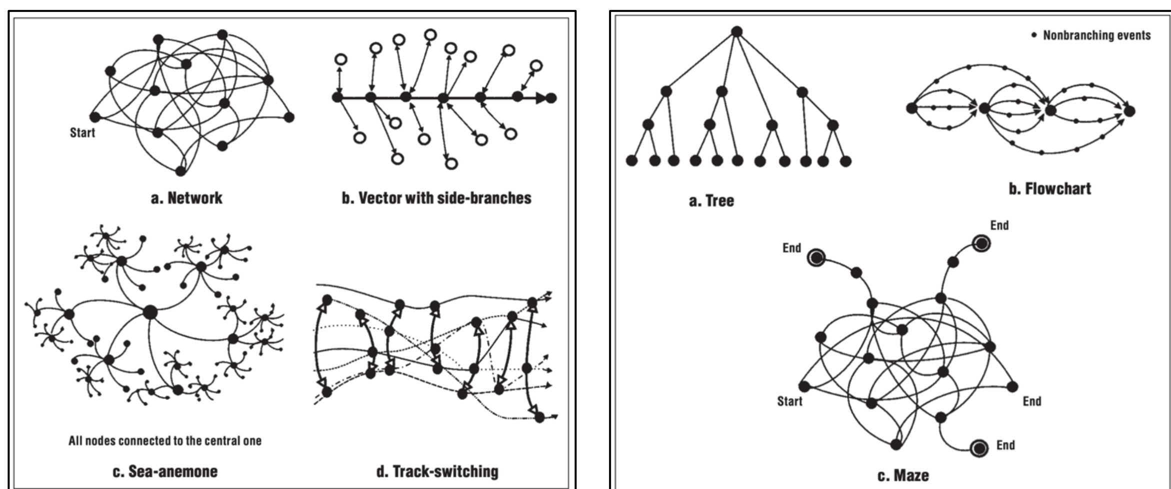
> [W]hen you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that us, exactly what you missed. (1997, p. 3)

While the interactive specials on Netflix seemingly put the viewer on different paths, the path-not-taken is always within reach with the help of the interface that lets the viewer go back one step in the choices. Furthermore, in these texts, the final path – whichever one it may be – usually takes the viewer back to the most recent choice they have made, actively prompting the viewer to access all paths. In almost full contrast to a cybertext, the viewer is urged to

experience as many of the paths as possible. While there is an illusion of many choices being presented and the text becoming anew with each new path, in reality, all permutations of different choices are mapped out within Netflix. Hence, these texts may seemingly be ergodic, but they cannot be considered as cybertexts. As choices are limited and pre-determined in these texts, they show a "selective interactivity" where the viewer "takes action deliberately but cannot foresee the consequence of his actions" with the purpose of their interaction being to "keep the textual machine running so that the text may unfold its potential and actualize its virtuality," (Ryan, 2001, p. 205).

Lastly, Marie-Laure Ryan categorises different types of structures that an interactive text can have (2001, 2006). Figure 7.1 shows diagrams of "interactive architectures affecting discourse and story (2006, pp. 103-104).

Figure 7.1



Diagrams showing different types of structures in interactive narratives according to Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, p. 101, 103). Diagram on top shows an interactive structure affecting the discourse, the one the bottom shows a structure affecting the story.

Influenced by Ryan's diagrams, I propose a conceptual diagram of how the structure of each interactive special in this chapter looks. Further influenced by her categorisation, I propose a taxonomy of interactive specials on Netflix with each diagram.

7.4 Research on Netflix's Interactive Specials

While there is a growing volume of research on Netflix Original shows, research on interactive specials is still limited. First mention of interactive narratives for Netflix can be found in 2013 when the first Netflix Originals were released. In 2013, Mitchell Hurwitz, creator of *Arrested Development* said in an interview with *Vulture* that for the fourth season of his show on Netflix, one of the initial discussions was to make it a choose-your-own-adventure style text, but "the technology was not there," (Martin, 2013a). The emphasis of technology for interactive special is important as the specific technology and software used for interactive specials will be a recurring discussion in the analyses provided in this chapter.

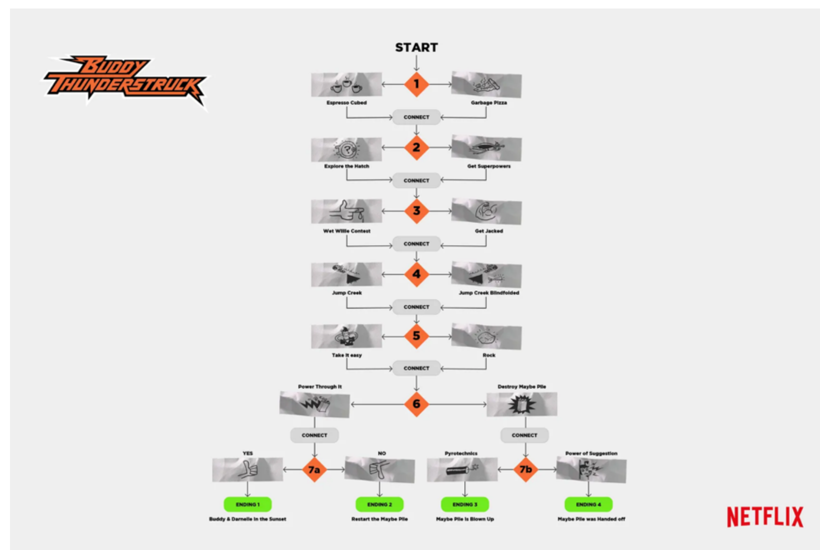
The first interactive special arrived on the platform four years later, in 2017. *Puss in Books: Trapped in an Epic Tale* (2017) presented a series of straightforward choices for viewers that lead to one of two endings (Figure 7.2). As Figure 7.2 shows, the branching of the narrative was simplistic with no more than two choices ever presented.

Figure 7.2

The narrative paths in *Puss in Books: Trapped in an Epic Tale*. Promotional diagram provided by Netflix on release.

The same year, Netflix released their second interactive special *Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile (2017)*, a special for their animated series *Buddy Thunderstruck* (2017). Featuring a simple branching narrative again, *Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile* provides the viewers with a series of choice points that do not branch out to different storylines until the very end where the viewer can get one of the four endings (figure 7.3). In *Puss in Books: Trapped in an Epic Tale*, the viewers were ushered at the end if one ending to a choice point that would branch out to the different ending. As can be seen of Figure 7.3, the emphasis of interactivity in *Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile* was on providing multiple endings.

Figure 7.3



The narrative paths in *Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile.* Promotional diagram provided by Netflix on release.

The following year, Netflix released another interactive special for one of its series; *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch.* Arguably, it was the global popularity and cultural currency of this interactive special released at the end of 2018, that elevated scholarly interest in interactive specials on Netflix. Terrence McSweeney and Stuart Joy provides the first close reading of the interactive narrative in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* in 2019, in an edited collection on the *Black Mirror* series. McSweeney and Joy consider *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* as an example of "hyper-narrative interactive cinema" and comment on the text's replayability as well as the extent of control viewers have on the narrative (2019). Crisóstomo Gálvez and Marc Valderrama Carreño use *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* as a case study in exploring new possibilities in audio-visual ergodic narratives (2019). In line with my above argument, they argue that the interactive specials fall short of providing ergodic mechanics and instead, only imply the illusion of choice (2019, p. 127).

Much of the later research on *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and other interactive specials overlook the form of interactive special (Elnahla, 2019; Lay and Johnson, 2020; Roth and Koenitz, 2019). Some scholars focus on the audience experience while others investigate specific themes and representations in these texts. This is in line with previous discussions on literature review, methodology and respective chapters as formal analysis and narrative form of Netflix texts is often understudied in television studies.

Christian Roth and Hartmut Koenitz study reception and user experience in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, focusing on the perceived interactivity by the audience (2019). Their surveys with viewers provide interesting insight into how audiences react to interactive content on Netflix but does not explore narrative itself. Chris Lay and David Kyle Johnson look at the same interactive special to explore philosophical 'worries' that can be seen in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2020). As their chapter focus on the themes that run within the text, it does not provide any formal analysis. More recently, Nada Elnahla looks at interactivity in the same text, but her focus is on how Netflix can use data gathered from this interactivity for data mining and advertising purposes (2019).

Finally, there has been recent research on *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend*, the interactive special for the Netflix Original show *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019). Stephanie Patrick explores the interactive special in terms of interactive witnessing and gendered violence. She argues that Netflix's interactive features could potentially be used in transformative ways to convey sensitive messaging (2021).

Out of the 20 interactive specials on Netflix (as of June 2022), majority follow a simplistic branching narrative to tell a linear story. However, there are formal differences between their narratives and how they utilise the interactive functionalities provided by Netflix. As this

research positions Netflix as a supernarrator while exploring narrative possibilities it provides in its ecosystem, a closer look at individual interactive specials is warranted.

The chapter will first look at narrative-driven examples of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend.* Then, a shift in the use of Netflix's interactive technology will be investigated through *Battle Kitty*, focusing on how interactivity is used to enhance the narrative without using a choose-your-own-adventure layout. Next two examples of *Trivia Quest* and *Cat Burglar* will explore how trivia games are situated within Netflix environment. Finally, Netflix's latest expansion into mobile video games will be put into context with the example of *Exploding Kittens*.

7.5 Black Mirror: Bandersnatch

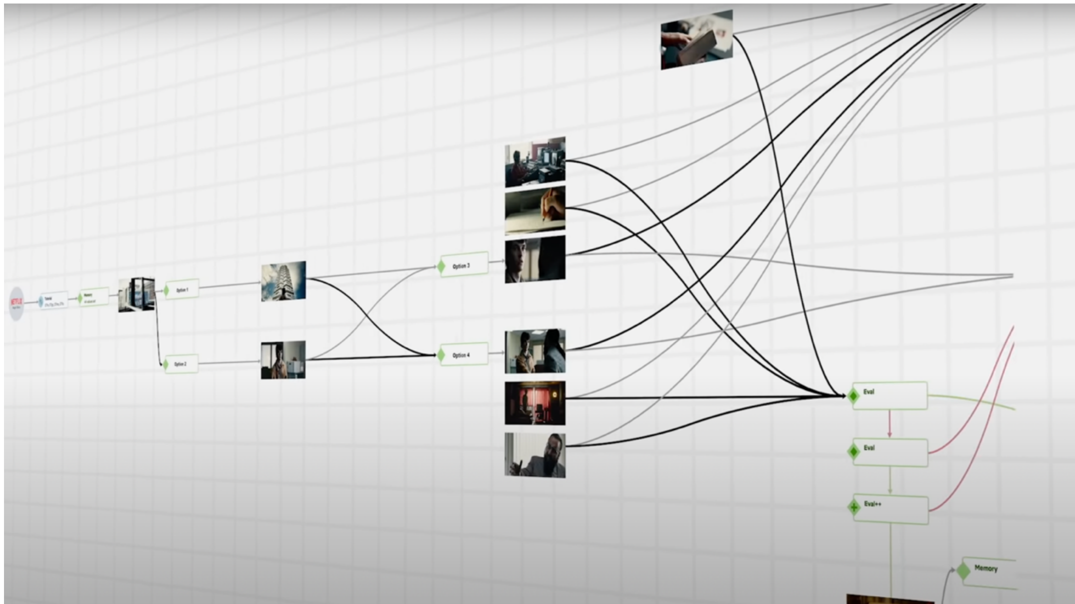
Set in 1984, the interactive special *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* tells the story of young programmer Stefan Butler (Fionn Whitehead) as he tries to develop and sell a videogame he adapted from a fantasy choose-your-own-adventure style book. The viewers make decisions for the main character using the Netflix interface. While there are millions of ways the story can play out through permutations of all the choice points in the interactive special, there are a total of 250 segments that culminate in one of the five essential main endings that viewers can reach (Reynolds, 2018; Desowitz, 2019). The interactive special is a part of the anthology series *Black Mirror* (2011-2019), but it was promoted as a special rather than an episode of one of the seasons of the show. The interactive special is displayed separately from *Black Mirror* in the Netflix interface. The interactive special —like episodes of the show – does not require previous knowledge of the show for its narrative to make sense.

While the interactive special is displayed individually on Netflix, it was originally planned as a part of the fifth season of *Black Mirror* (Strause, 2019). The creative team behind the series had

already shot one of the episodes for the fifth season when they started working on *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. In fact, the linear storytelling of the episodes in the fifth season and the branched-out narrative of the interactive special were edited concurrently at times. According to the series' creator Charlie Brooker, this made it clear that the interactive special needed to be stand-alone. As Brooker puts it, "it was basically the length of an entire season and in one go" (2019).

The non-linear, branched-out story of the interactive special may have been more laborious during editing, but in terms of the storytelling infrastructure, the labour began much earlier. In 2017, when Brooker and executive producer Annabel Jones started working on the interactive special, Netflix created a software called Branch Manager that enabled the narrative flowchart with all its branching paths to be seen and edited together (figure 7.4). A change in one part of the script or — later in postproduction — an edited scene would adjust all other branches without causing the flowchart to collapse (Rubin, 2018; Altman, 2019; Strause, 2019). Hence, the technological boundaries of storytelling were set by Netflix. As the viewer's navigation of the story is also facilitated by whatever options Netflix provides through its interface, this means that Netflix can influence the story on both the production side and the reception side with its own technology. Netflix's supernarrative agency becomes visible both on production and reception.

Figure 7.4



A screengrab showing the interface of Branch Manager, from a promotional video Netflix made for *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Netflix, 2019).

The branching storytelling practice and the use of Branch Manager resulted in interesting phenomena during production. As it was revealed in an interview Brooker and his team gave to *The Hollywood Reporter* after the interactive special's release, there is a scene in the interactive special that is impossible to reach:

> There is a scene that you can't get to but was too late to be removed. It's the third time Colin encounters Stefan in the office and he's almost finishing his sentences. Somebody managed to find this. I think they illegally ripped it and put it on YouTube. But the doors are locked in terms of you getting there. I remember saying in the edit that if you can't get to it, we should just dub the Beatles all over it and not have to pay because no one will ever know. It's a good thing we didn't do that! (Brooker in Strause, 2019)

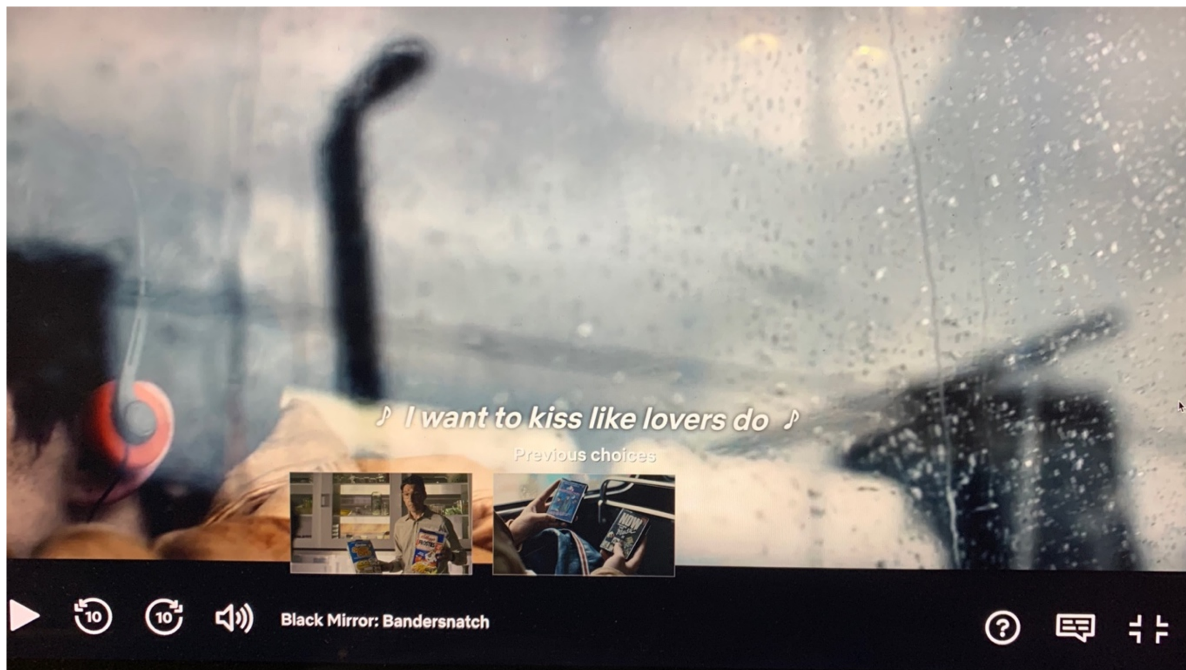
This is particularly interesting in terms of whether this scene can be considered a part of the narrative or not. Clearly Brooker and his team have cut the scene out for a reason. They no longer consider it to be a part of the story told in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Yet, because the scene is still embedded into the Branch Manager software, Netflix can supernarratively

present the scene (e.g., as a "deleted scene" under the "Trailers & More" tab) but they choose not to. This is doubly interesting as viewers are encouraged to try to experience as many paths in the story as possible, adding to the repeatability of the text. Annabel Jones and Charlie Brooker explain their approach towards repeatability:

> If viewers didn't pick that option initially, they will likely be able to revisit that story path as long as they keep playing and ignore the "End Credits" prompts. Once viewers get to an ending, two continuing story paths appear, and some will include past options that were ignored. We're guiding users to pick the moments that are crucial for their storytelling. (Engelbrecht in Strause, 2018)

As illustrated by the statement above, in one of the most obvious displays of supernarrative agency, Netflix makes it very easy to go back to nodes in the story and try out different choices. The interface, which features the usual volume bar, play/pause button and buttons that travel 10 seconds to the past and future, no longer provides a linear progress bar that shows how much of the episode is watched or how much time is left (figure 7.5). Instead, there is a small box that shows a thumbnail of the most recent point of choice. If the viewer hovers on the box, the text "Previous Choices" appears.

Figure 7.5.



Screengrab showing the Netflix interface on *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch.*

The interactive special aims to have the viewer watch and re-watch as much as possible. Most of the endings in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* immediately takes the viewer back to the previous choice point, so they can discover what happens down the other path:

> "We don't really want people to exit and start playing again," says Jones of how to play, since the state tracking lets the character learn as he goes through the different branches. "Every time you get to an end, you can exit and restart from the beginning, or you can keep going and then we'll give you shortcuts to bits that we know you haven't done yet," Brooker adds, "Eventually, there is a point that you will arrive at just credits. But that means you've seen almost everything." (Strause, 2018)

In *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and in many other interactive specials, the viewer does not actually have to make a choice at any of the choice points. Whenever a choice is presented, there is a 10 second window to decide. If the viewer does not choose, the interactive special continues with a pre-selected option. The supernarrator has a pre-picked linear version of the story for the most inactive viewers. In the case of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, a viewer who

makes no choice throughout the interactive special watches a 90-minute-long version that according to director David Slade, is not the best version of the story (Rubin, 2018). An active viewer who participates in the choice-making points of narrative will usually watch the interactive special for 60-120 minutes, depending on the paths they take and the choices they replay.

Netflix's director of product innovation, Carla Engelbrecht admits how important it was for Netflix to see if the viewers would actually participate in selecting the paths. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, she discloses data that shows 94% of viewers actively used the choice points to select which path to take next. She elaborates on this point:

> We're talking about decades of training that when you watch TV, you put on what you want, drop that remote and snuggle into the couch. And instead of snuggling back, people were actually leaning in to make these choices. (Engelbrecht in Strause 2019)

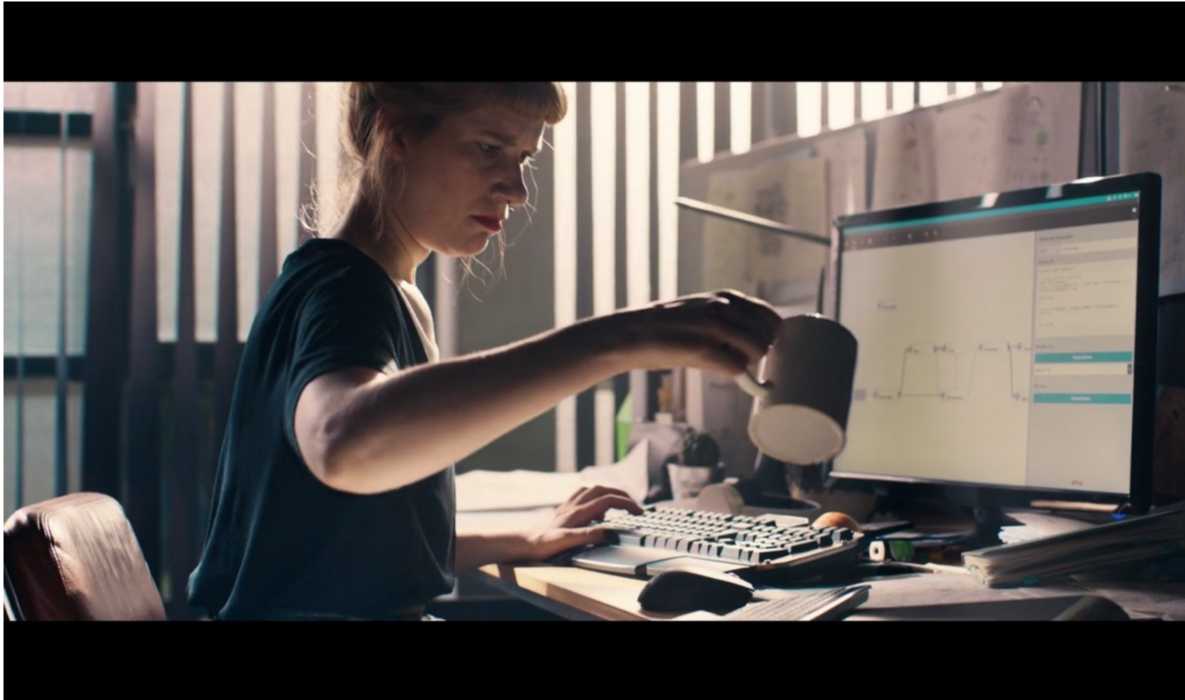
This statement raises an interesting perspective on supernarration. For decades, television networks' supernarrative decisions were made to discourage the viewers from interacting with the interface and keep watching the same channel. Interacting would often mean using the remote control to change channels. Here, Netflix is trying to do the exact opposite supernarratively. The platform encourages the viewers to interact with the interface, to go back and try new points in narrative, to prolong the narrative experience as much as possible to stay on the platform.

Netflix's supernarration in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* even gets references inside the interactive special. In one of the darker main endings of the interactive special that plays if the viewer chooses for Stefan to chop up his father's body, Stefan finishes the video game, and the game becomes a critical success before he is caught by the police and sent to jail. The interactive special then flashes forward to present day where the character of Pearl Ritman (Laura

Evelyn) is trying to develop a reboot of the game. As the viewer sees Pearl encounter some of the same bugs Stefan encountered originally, the choice screen appears with the same prompt as one that appeared before in the interactive special: should the character throw tea over the computer or destroy it? The computer in this question has a screen that seems to show a flowchart of what is assumed to be the game's narrative. On the day of the interactive special's release, Netflix's Director of Design, Interactive Experiences, Dave Schlafman confirmed on Twitter that "the application on the computer screen also happens to be the tool used to 'design' the interactive film throughout production," (2018).

The present-day character uses Netflix's Branch Manager tool to recreate the video game that was based on a choose-your-own-adventure type book (Figure 7.6). Earlier in Chapter 5, and Chapter 6 I discussed how characters made meta-diegetic references to Netflix as a streaming video-on-demand platform in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *Arrested Development*. There were references to all episodes being available at once, self-reflexive statements on the fact that Netflix enabled the show to be released and watched all at once. Here, in a similar vein the interactive text makes a reference to the tool that enabled its interactivity. The interactive special also makes metamedial references similar to *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. In one of the branching paths, the viewer is given the option to disclose to Stefan that he is being watched in an interactive special, on Netflix in the 21st century.

Figure 7.6.



Screengrab from one of the endings in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. The software on the computer screen was confirmed to be Branch Manager, Netflix's software for interactive specials.

One final note should be made about *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. While the interactive special gained worldwide interest, its interactivity was often criticised as forcing the viewer towards an intended path. Reviewing the interactive special for *Variety*, Daniel D'Addario points out that some choices do not seem to matter at all:

> To wit, if you instruct Stefan to accept an offer of help working on his game, a more experienced game designer (Will Poulter) says "Wrong path" and you experience the story all over again. Along the paths I took through "Bandersnatch," various choices are either false ones (you're given the option for Stefan to take LSD or not, but if you decline, he's drugged against his will) or not really choices at all. When Stefan is presented with psych meds, the viewer is given the option to "throw them away" or "flush them." Moments like these — as Whitehead winces and grimaces in close-up, waiting for the viewer to deliver a meaningless verdict — make "Bandersnatch's" claim to grandly advancing what television can do feel a bit tenuous. (2018)

From interviews with viewers, Crisóstomo Gálvez and Valderrama Carreño deduce that "binarity, the degree of limited implication on the part of the spectator and the lack of empathy generated towards the characters of the plot" are seen as shortcomings of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* in telling an interactive story (2019, p. 127). These criticisms may have solid rationale behind them, but can the number of choices presented be enough to assess the success of interactive narratives? Can number of choices presented be a measure of narrative form?

Roth and Koenitz argue that there is a categorical challenge that causes this criticism towards *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* on whether to categorise it as a "game" or as a "TV episode" (2019, p. 253). I argue that at this point, there is no confusion categorically in where interactive specials are positioned. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Netflix lists these interactive specials to be "TV shows, movies, or trivia on Netflix" that have an element of control on the viewer's side (2019). The company makes no claim on these texts being games. This is also evidenced by the company's separate endeavour called Netflix Games which will be discussed later in this chapter. Hence, it is plausible to think of the elements that comprise these interactive narratives as televisual elements. In that case, it does not matter how many choices are presented at any given point or – as will be the case in later examples – how the branching interactivity is utilised in the text.

So, how does *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* utilise its interactivity? Figure 7.7 shows a simplified diagram for how the narrative is structured in the interactive special. I call its structure a "branching interactive narrative" as the story branches out to different possible plotlines. While some of these reach premature endings, there are multiple branches that reach all the way to the end (in this case, the five main endings).

Figure 7.7

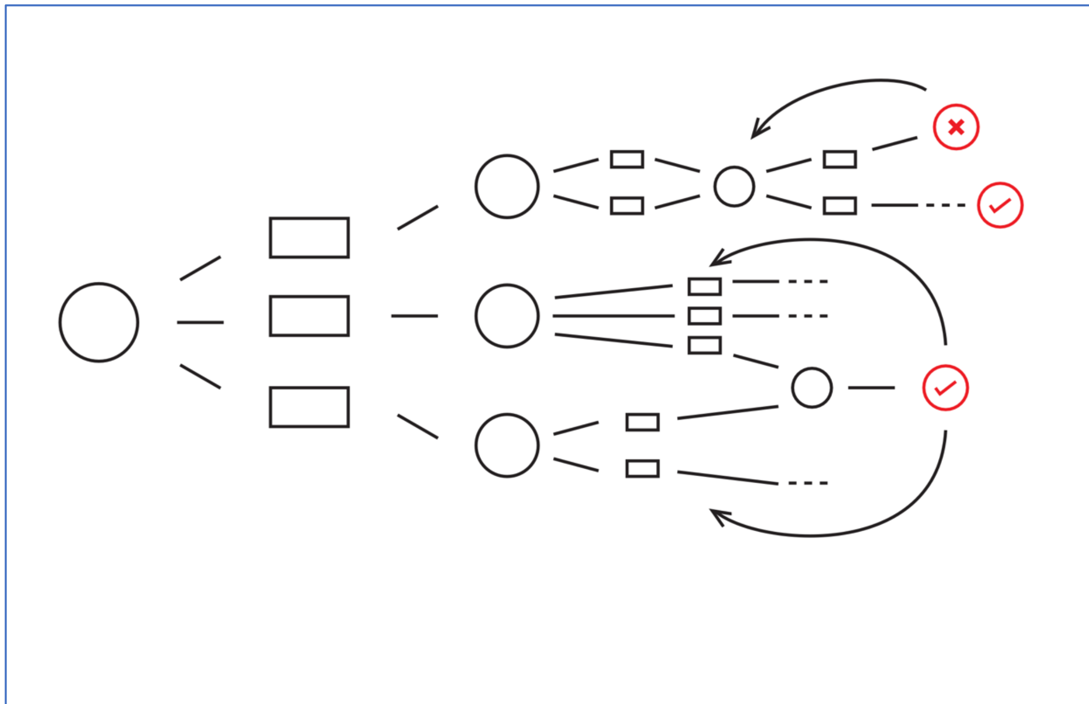


Diagram showing a "branching interactive narrative" in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Circles represent story segments; rectangles represent available choices in choice points. A circle marked with an "X" indicates a dead-end. A circle marked with a "✓" indicates a main ending.

As figure 7.7 shows the narrative has the potential to expand with choice points branching out. However, all choices are still pre-determined. Dead-ends and intended main endings are clearly marked. Dead-ends and endings bring viewer to earlier choice points to encourage more exploration within the text. The viewer is given interactive agency, but the agency is still confined within the boundaries of all branches of the narrative.

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch is often viewed as the title that kickstarted Netflix's ambition in interactive specials. In fact, upon its release, some reviews went as far to call the show "the TV of tomorrow" and that a new genre of TV was finally here (Mangan, 2019). What *Black*

Mirror: Bandersnatch brought was newfound interest around interactive narratives and the opportunity for Netflix to show that interactive televisual narratives were possible in its SVOD environment. As mentioned above, out of these interactive narratives, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* was neither the first one, nor the most ambitious. Even at the time of its release, Netflix has already been promoting their next endeavours in interactive storytelling in different genres and Netflix's next widely advertised interactive special came in the form of a comedy.

7.6 Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend

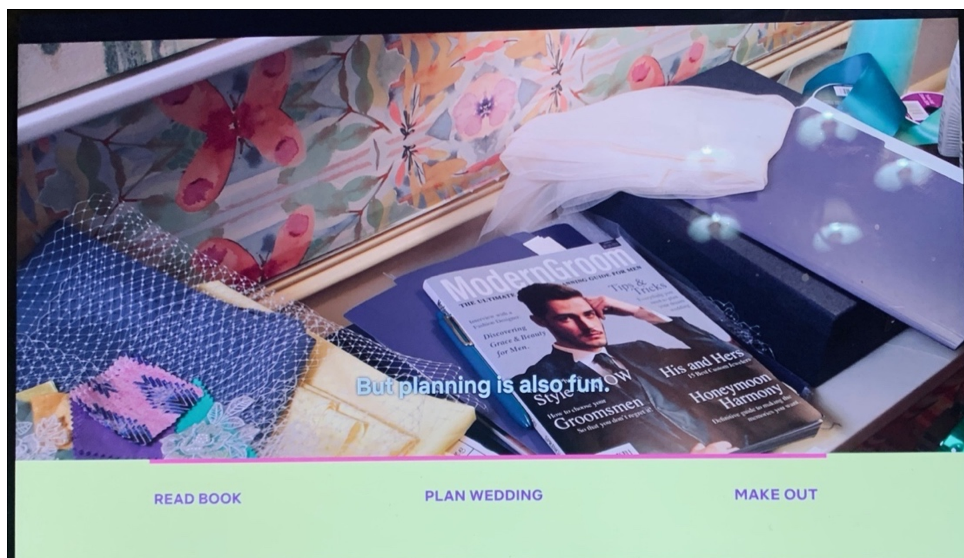
By the time Netflix released *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch,* news outlets were reporting that a comedy interactive special was also in the works with *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* (hereinafter referred to as *Kimmy vs the Reverend* for brevity). An interactive special for the Netflix Original show *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019), the interactive special focuses on Kimmy Schmidt's (Ellie Kamper) upcoming wedding to the English Prince Frederick (Daniel Radcliffe). Kimmy is now a very successful children's book author, having survived 15-years in a bunker as part of a doomsday cult, held captive by Reverend Richard Wayne Gary Wayne (Jon Hamm), who is now in prison. As she prepares for her wedding day, she finds a choose-your-own-adventure book in her old backpack, only to discover that the book was checked out of a library years ago, in a town she does not know. Taking this to mean that the reverend had other girls held captive in other towns, she sets out to learn the truth and free the others captive women.

As an interactive special, *Kimmy vs the Reverend* uses the same tools as *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, utilising the Branch Manager software that Netflix developed. Similar to *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, it also includes a choose-your-own-adventure book as part of its plot, making a

similar metadiegetic reference. However, the narrative structure set out with Branch Manager is different.

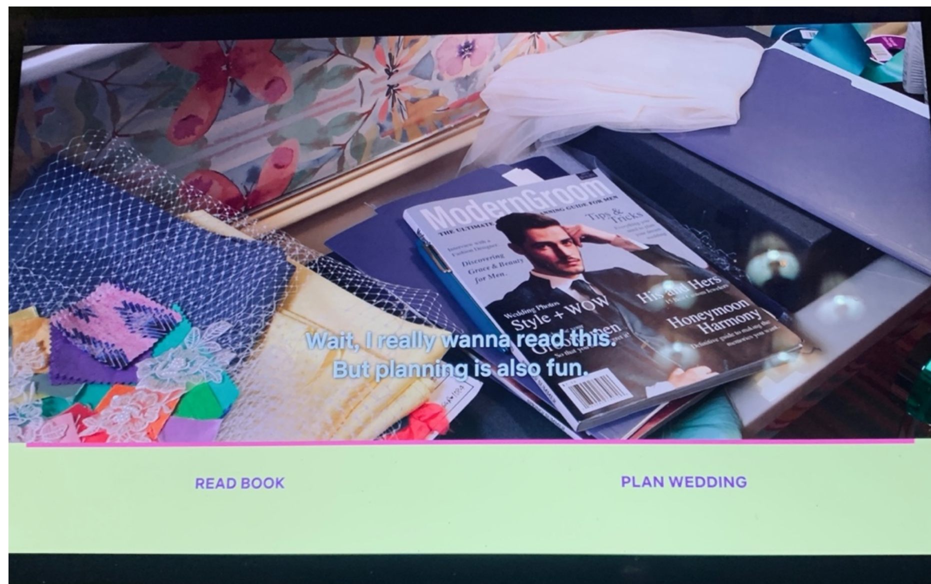
As stated earlier, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* has five main endings. *Kimmy vs the Reverend* has multiple endings too, but the interactive special clearly has one main ending that viewers are supposed to reach. Every time the viewer ends the story on a different path, they are brought back to their latest choice point to pick a different one. Taking the viewer to the previous choice is a strategy that *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* employs too, but what is different in *Kimmy vs the Reverend* is that none of the endings provide definitive closure to the story, except for one. Some choices have alternative versions, but if a choice only leads to one event, that choice is crossed out when the viewer returns to that point. Figures 7.8 and 7.9 show screengrabs from the interactive special where a certain choice – in this case making out with Prince Frederick – results in a premature ending and when the viewer is taken back to the choice point that choice is no longer visible.

Figure 7.8



Screengrab from a choice point in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend.*

Figure 7.9



Screengrab from the same choice point in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* as Figure 7.8, but when the viewer returns to make the decision, the "make out" option is no longer presented.

In *Kimmy vs the Reverend,* the only main ending that brings closure comes from figuring out the mystery of whether the Reverend has more hostages and if so, saving them. This ending only appears when "correct" choices are made every step of the way. The pursuit of this ending is not gamified in the sense that it provides a challenge. As mentioned above, the text is very keen to redirect the viewer to choice points whenever an unwanted ending appears. In *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* all five main endings had plausible closures. In *Kimmy vs the Reverend*, the viewer needs to go back and redo every time to get to the main ending. *Variety*'s Caroline Framke notes this difference in her review:

> Sometimes, a "choice" is really just there to play out some joke alternatives while keeping the scene's outcome the same either way. […] more than occasionally, a choice brings everything to a crashing halt (more than occasionally literally), at which point a character saunters across the screen to confirm that yes, you irrevocably screwed up, but yes, you can go back and fix it now that you know. As

> you go along, you start to understand what might make a “good” decision, but unlike something like “Bandersnatch”, the main point of “Kimmy vs the Reverend” isn’t to emerge unscathed at the end, but to have as hilariously ridiculous a time as the characters. (2020)

In this case, the experience of the viewer in watching *Kimmy vs the Reverend* becomes more about the journey with the many forking paths, seeing alternative jokes and — often bizarre — ending scenarios. As the viewer navigates the story, they get accustomed to how they should experience this text. Stephanie Patrick argues that the interactive special relies on the viewer’s understanding of Kimmy’s character to make the choices (2021, p. 36). In that sense, the viewer who has prior knowledge of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* can easily choose the right answer every time to get to the main ending. As can be seen from Framke’s review, the uninitiated viewer too quickly gets accustomed to understanding what kind of decisions will keep the story from abruptly ending.

This learned intuition brings an advantage to the viewer when they get to the end. When Kimmy and the Reverend – her abuser of many years – come face to face in the end with Kimmy holding a gun, Kimmy – and the viewer – is given four options. Viewers can choose to shoot the reverend, stomp on the reverend, use a bazooka and make him explode into a million pieces, or spare his life (figure 7.10). By that point, whether the viewer has prior knowledge of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* or has only experienced the interactive special, it is apparent that the right thing to do is to spare his life. This is the only option that resolves with Kimmy being able to save the other girls. Other options result in the reverend’s death and Kimmy not being able to locate the missing girls — or Kimmy exploding with the reverend in the bazooka option. The interactive special cuts to a flashforward of Prince Frederick marrying someone else before the viewer is taken back to the choice point to make the decision again. If the viewer uses all other options and kill the reverend three times, the

interactive special cuts to a scene where the Reverend is in hell, telling the audience — and breaking the fourth wall — that killing him three times is "fucked up"[39].

Figure 7.10.

Screengrab from *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend,* showing possible actions Kimmy can take against the Reverend.

It is important to note here that this choice point is the only time when the viewer is given four options. In *Kimmy vs the Reverend* and other narrative-driven interactive specials, most choice points provide 2-3 choices to select from. As the show tells the story of a survivor whose agency was stripped away when she was abducted, the fact that the final choice point presents the maximum amount of agency can be seen as a meta-diegetic reflexivity.

While presenting a greater number of choices, Patrick argues that this "comedic moment potentially undoes the violence of his death" and lets the viewers off the hook for not showing mercy (2021, p.40). However, she also adds that the viewer's "choices are being read and responded to directly by the characters onscreen: [viewers] are judged for how well [they] know Kimmy and how 'good' [they] are in relation to her and her selfless morality," (2021,

[39] Many "wrong" endings in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* include a character or actor breaking the fourth wall and addressing the audience.

p. 40). I agree that the comedic end-scene gives viewers relief but beyond that, the way *Kimmy vs the Reverend* takes viewers back each time from catastrophic endings and nudges them towards the correct one makes the decision to kill the Reverend much easier. At that point the viewers are already used to the safety-net nature of this interactive special and are aware that any decision that does not fit Kimmy's characteristics will be remedied by returning to the choice point.

This is unique to *Kimmy vs the Reverend.* For instance, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* presents a choice where the viewer essentially decides which character dies. As Stefan and Colin (Will Poulter) are on a balcony after a drug-infused conversation, the viewer is prompted to select one character to jump off the balcony. If Stefan is selected, he jumps and dies with the interactive special showing an ending where the video game is finished by others and released to negative reviews. If Colin is selected, he dies and other characters notice his dead body on the ground, followed by Stefan waking up in his dad's car — a setting that had appeared earlier in the special. The viewer is never told whether this was a dream, or a reset back to a prior choice point, but no matter what options are picked thereafter, Colin never appears in the interactive special again. Both options of killing someone have solid consequences within the story. By the time the viewer is presented with a similarly grave set of choices in *Kimmy vs the Reverend*, the knowledge of this interactive experience allows the viewer to be more casual in their selection and in their resort to violence. The viewer — aware that they will be ushered back into the right and righteous path that is suitable for Kimmy — arguably has an easier time pulling the trigger.

The two interactive specials also have similarities. As mentioned before, they both use a choose-your-own-adventure style book as a plot element that is central to the story. They also both break the fourth wall occasionally, their characters seemingly interacting with the audience. In *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, this happens if the viewer chooses to disclose that they

are watching the show in 21st century, on Netflix. In *Kimmy vs the Reverend*, this usually happens when a wrong choice is made, as characters address the viewer to bring them back to the previous choice point.

Even though *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* was criticised for seemingly nudging its viewers towards intended storylines, the same was not the case for *Kimmy vs the Reverend*. As Figure 7.11 shows *Kimmy vs the Reverend* does not present a narrative that expands with each branch. The branching out is usually limited, and the viewer is steered back to the intended path every time. Like a skier going down a snowy mountain, the viewer can slalom and change course slightly on the way down, but the end point will not change. Based on this analogy, I call the interactive structure seen in *Kimmy vs the Reverend* a "slaloming interactive narrative".

Figure 7.11.

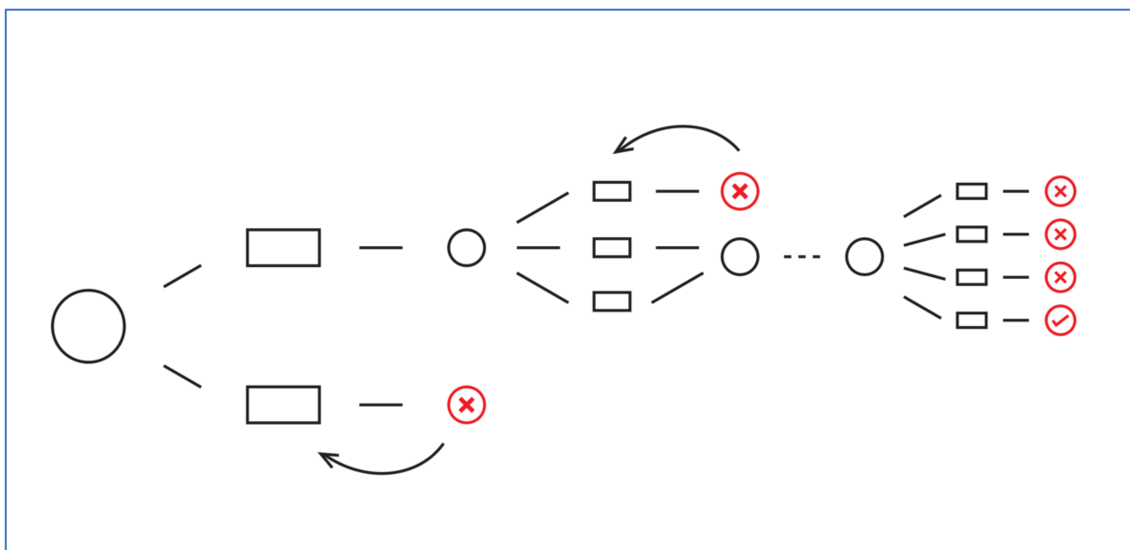


Diagram showing a "slaloming interactive narrative" in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend*. Circles represent story segments; rectangles represent available choices in points. A circle marked with an "X" indicates a dead end. A circle marked with a "✓" indicates a main ending.

It is curious to see that while both *Kimmy vs the Reverend* and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* employ interactivity in a similar way to move their narrative forward, their approach to guiding the viewers is dissimilar and are responded to in a different light. This shows how versatile the Netflix narrative environment can be in terms of interactive storytelling. In fact, it is this versatility that is at the core of the next few examples of interactive specials. While *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and *Kimmy vs the Reverend* have different approaches to branching narratives, the next examples utilise Netflix's Branch Manager software in even more distinctive and advanced ways.

7.7 Battle Kitty

Battle Kitty is an animated interactive children's show released on Netflix in April 2022. Based on Matt Layzell's web comic *The Adventures of Kitty & Orc*, the interactive special tells the story of Kitty, an adorable but feisty kitten and their friend Orc as they go on a journey to become the greatest champion by defeating monsters on Battle Island. Developed for Netflix by Matt and Paul Layzell, the interactive special consists of 9 episodes that are only unlocked gradually as the viewer navigates through an interactive map (figure 7.12).

Battle Kitty does not use interactivity to present narrative choices to the viewer. The story, told over tens of videos within episodes — ranging between 1-12 minutes — cannot be interrupted by the viewer's choices. The viewer never gets a prompt to interact while watching the story unfold in these videos. Instead, the interaction comes from the navigation of content. As the introductory storyline ends with Kitty escaping prison and sailing towards Battle Island with Orc, the viewer is presented with an overworld map, showing the fictional lands in the interactive show for the first time (Figure 7.12). Kitty and Orc can be seen on the map, but the character design is distinctly different than how they look within the story. Here,

the viewer is given the option to choose where Kitty and Orc go next. Going from location to location, collecting keys from their encounters with monsters – called boss battles – they unlock new maps all the way to the final boss battle that decides if Kitty is a great champion or not.

Figure 7.12

Screengrab showing an overworld map in *Battle Kitty*. Each arrow designates a new location in the map where the viewer can access new videos of Kitty and Orc.

With each new video watched, whether they are a 12-minute-long boss battle or a 1-minute joke segment, the overworld map changes, reflecting the new state of the world after the events of whatever happened in the latest segment. There are a total of 31 maps and 159 different states these maps can take, based on which videos have been watched. Here Netflix's Branch Manager software branches the story into 'states' within the overworld map, instead of branching them into 'segments' or 'recaps' of the story.

Matt Layzell points out that the overworld map mechanic is something that is used in role-playing games to connect all possible levels and locations of the game. To emulate an overworld map for *Battle Kitty* they used "the branching narrative technology they'd used for other shows […] and broke it, almost used it for something it shouldn't be used for" (Charara, 2022).

The overworld map functions like a video game menu. Viewers are only allowed to watch later episodes in the show if they have watched enough content from earlier. The different states of the overworld map shows viewer's progress, visualised as where they currently stand on the Battle Island. Viewers are rewarded "monster keys" when Kitty beats a boss monster, but the viewer cannot influence how Kitty fights these monsters. The only way to collect these keys is to watch the fight videos until the end. Only through collecting enough monster keys can the viewer progress to the next episodes. As Sophie Charara notes in her *Wired* article, the idea of viewers being rewarded with keys after watching boss-battle videos is similar to beating a boss at the end of a level in a video game to get the rewards (2022).

The video game similarities in *Battle Kitty* are also prevalent within the videos in the show. The characters and settings are drawn in a cartoon 3D video game style (Figure 7.13). Storywise, Kitty battles and defeats "bosses" to get to the next level and next boss, much like a video game would have boss monsters at the end of its levels. Kitty's selection of specialist equipment and weapons to use in these battles — various cute and functional bows — is shown through graphics that resemble video game character inventories. At times, watching the show resembles watching a video game as it is being played by someone else.

Figure 7.13

Screengrab from the first episode of *Battle Kitty*, showing Kitty selecting equipment from an inventory during their fight with a boss monster.

On one hand, like *Minecraft: Story Mode*[40] (2017), *Battle Kitty* shows a video game-like world with a story that emphasises video game mechanics such as defeating boss monsters and becoming champion, yet this aspect of the show does not utilise interactivity. On the other hand, navigating between episodes is not only made interactive with the overworld map, but also gamified as the viewer is only allowed to proceed to the next episode — or in a way, the next level — if they pass the current one by gathering enough monster keys.

Battle Kitty's interactivity is also interesting in terms of Netflix's supernarration. The company's rise to popularity is often linked to its binge-model that encourages viewers to watch all episodes of a show at once — or as many as possible in one sitting (Jenner, 2018; Lotz, 2018b). Moreover, they facilitate non-sequential viewing by making all episodes available. I discussed the company's experimentation with order of episodes in Chapter 6,

[40] *Minecraft: Story Mode* — another interactive special that builds on the popular video game *Minecraft* – uses similar mechanics and aesthetics.

arguing that through specific shows like *Love, Death and Robots* and the experimentations on *Arrested Development*'s fourth season, the company was testing how significant order of events are in serial storytelling.

The option to watch any television content out of sequence is used frequently by viewers, especially in some genres. Viewers can play a random episode of their favourite sitcom on Netflix or go to a specific episode of a cooking show like *Chef's Table* to watch what they desire. Content aimed at children are often watched non-sequentially. Viewers on Netflix can also skip episodes of a show to get to a specific part of the story, or all the way to the end, to learn how the story ends. As iterated throughout this thesis, viewers can watch episodes in different orders as they repeatedly view these texts over and over again.

Battle Kitty does not allow this kind of engagement with the text. All monster keys should be collected by watching all the boss battles to get to the final episode (figure 7.14).

Figure 7.14

Screengrab shows what happens when a viewer tries to jump to a future episode in *Battle Kitty,* here this warning comes from jumping to *Episode 8: Sky Co. Docks*.

By implementing a progress mechanic in *Battle Kitty,* Netflix suspends the agency it has provided the users with, urging the viewer to watch more of its content in order to reach the end point of the story. The overworld map arguably guides the viewers to "complete" their watching. As a video comes to an end and viewer is transported back to the map, the collected keys are shown and the videos that are not yet watched are highlighted with stars. This "incomplete" state can nudge the viewer towards clicking on the next video to "finish" the map.

I propose that as the interactivity in *Battle Kitty* does not affect diegesis but helps navigate the narrative at discourse level, it displays a structure of "navigational interactivity". As Figure 7.15 shows, viewers must navigate multiple segments to reach the ending (the final episode). The interactivity is still complex even though the text does not present choice points inside the diegesis.

Figure 7.15

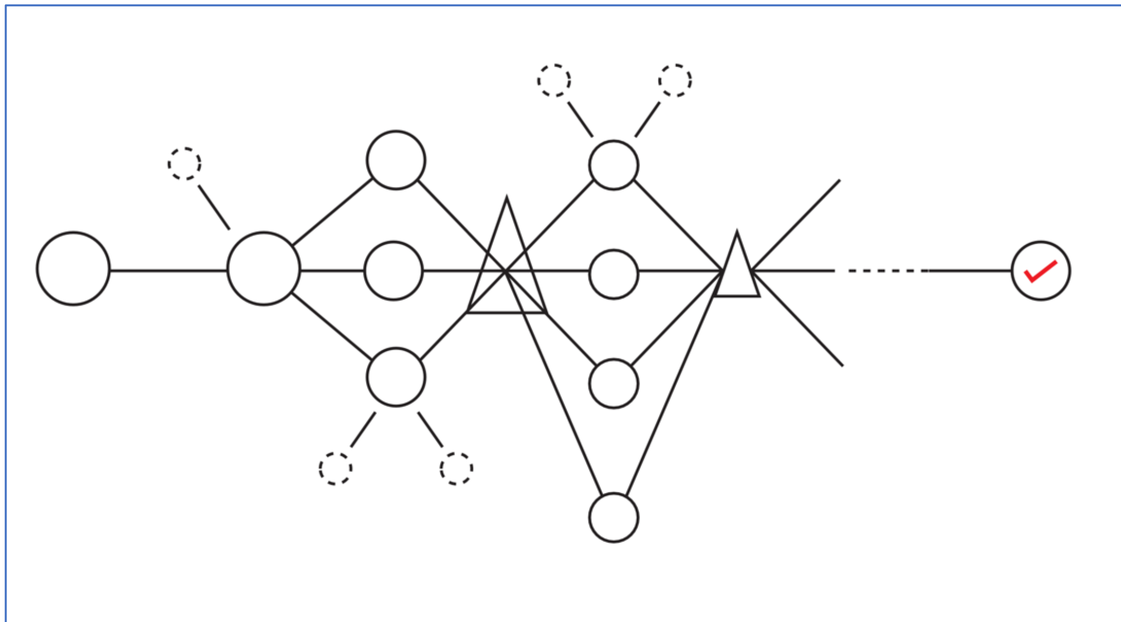


Diagram showing a "navigational interactive narrative" in *Battle Kitty*. Circles represent story segments. Straight lines that connect between two circles mean they must be navigated. Straight lines that do not touch means, they are optional to the advancement of discourse. Circles with dashes are story segments that are optional. Triangles are overworld maps that show connecting story segments. A circle marked with a "✓" indicates a main ending.

7.8 *Trivia Quest*

Whether the viewer picks what happens next in the story, or they pick which part of the story to navigate from an overworld map, the interactive special examples so far have used Netflix's Branch Manager technology primarily to tell a narrative story. However, there are some interactive specials that utilise interactivity primarily for gamification purposes. *Trivia Quest* and *Cat Burglar* are two examples that use Netflix's interactivity tools this way.

Released in April 2022 with a new episode made available every day throughout the month, *Trivia Quest* is an "interactive daily quiz show" (Elizabeth, 2022). The premise is that every day throughout the month of April 2022, a new episode would appear with 24 trivia questions on various categories. After April 2022, all 30 episodes remain available. The viewers answer multiple choice questions: first 12 easy ones, then 12 harder ones. Netflix stated that there is a sense of narrative in the interactive daily quiz show as follows on their press release:

> [V]iewers must help a loveable animated character named Willy rescue the folks of Trivia Land from the villain, Evil Rocky, who is intent on collecting all the world's knowledge for sinister purposes. As viewers reach different level checkpoints, Evil Rocky's prisoners are slowly released. But if you mess up, no need to fear! You can replay the quizzes in order to rack up the points you need to help Willy save the day. (Elizabeth, 2022)

As much as it seems like there is an overarching narrative, the interactive special does not convey a story moving forward in a way that Netflix's press release claims. *The Guardian*'s Stuart Heritage writes in his review that "the game tries to justify its existence. There's a storyline of sorts," but in the end "it's really just a gussied-up version of the general knowledge quiz machines you find in pubs," (2022). As the viewer gives correct answers to trivia questions, Willy's friends get released at the end of each episode, but the release of Willy's friends don't have impact on the story. There are mini-scenes at the end of episodes where Willy and Rocky talk but they are simple variations of banter between enemies. As opposed to *Battle Kitty*, the freeing of Willy's friends is not tied to the viewer having watched previous episodes. The only mechanic of progress in the show is the coins collected by answering the questions. Once a set number of coins are collected, a new friend of Willy is released but whether the viewer collects them from Episode 1 or Episode 30 does not have an impact on the outcome or order of their release.

Moreover, the friends of Willy are animated characters that represent categories of trivia such as history, music, film, sports etc. Yet their freedom or captivity does not influence the trivia experience. Hence, even if they were prominent elements of the text, they do not impact other elements of the text. They show up in short and simple animations whenever a question in their category comes up and these mini-scenes do not change between their pre and post captivity states.

Figure 7.16 shows a simplified diagram of how such an interactive narrative structure works conceptually. I propose the term "gamified interactive narrative" for *Trivia Quest*'s structure, as the main element of interactivity comes from the trivia game it provides. There are story segments – mainly at the beginning and end – but their connection to the gamified elements of the interactive special is superficial.

Figure 7.16

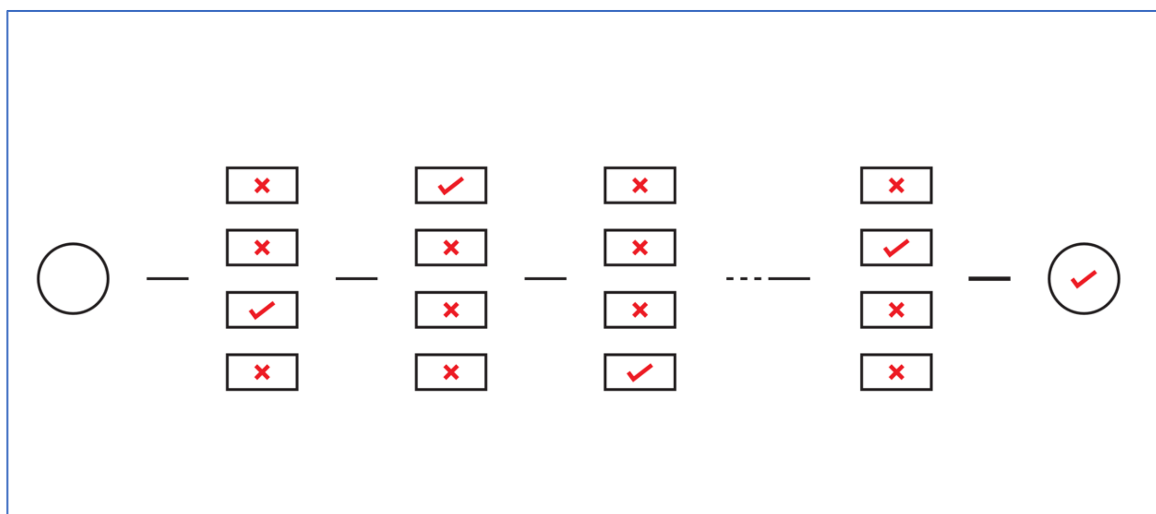


Diagram showing a "gamified interactive narrative" in *Trivia Quest*. Circles represent story segments. Rectangles represent choices at choice points. Rectangles marked with a "X" are wrong choices on the multiple-choice questions. Rectangles marked with a "✓" are correct choices. A circle marked with a "✓" indicates a main ending.

Lastly, *Trivia Quest*'s daily release opens up new venues of engagement. *The Guardian*'s Stuart Heritage notes how a text like *Trivia Quest* can result in new habits for the Netflix users:

> You couldn't possibly base an entire evening around it in the way that you could with, say, *Narcos*. It's too brief for that. But it could be the first thing you do when you look at Netflix. It could become an instinctual part of people's routines. Switch on, wind down by using your general knowledge to free some cartoon blobs from a talking sword for a couple of minutes, then on to the serious stuff. (Heritage, 2022)

The daily updated text can be an alternative to the binge-release model. With gamified interactive specials or Netflix Originals (e.g., short monologues from talk shows), daily released shorter content could become part of the routine for Netflix users. Arguably then, Netflix could further influence viewers' personal schedules.

7.9 Cat Burglar

While *Trivia Quest*'s use of narrative is superficial, another interactive trivia show, *Cat Burglar* uses trivia as a device to move the narrative forward. Created by *Black Mirror*'s Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones, *Cat Burglar* is an animated interactive special released in February 2022 that follows Rowdy the cat burglar as he tries to steal a valuable artwork from a museum protected by the security guard dog Peanut. As Rowdy and Peanut go through scenes of triumph and challenge, the viewer is asked sets of three rapid-fire trivia questions. If all three answers are correct, Rowdy succeeds in his scheme — getting through the museum wall, finding the correct room etc. — and the narrative continues. If the viewer fails to answer any question correctly or runs out of time, the scheme fails and Rowdy faces certain death through various cartoonish scenarios — getting electrocuted, being slingshot into the air etc. If Rowdy dies three times, losing all his "lives", his spirit goes up to heaven, only to be kicked back down to earth – in several different ways – for the viewer to try again.

The animated interactive special can be experienced in less than 15 minutes. However, with the trials and errors, and with scenes alternating each time, it is expected that the viewer will go through the narrative at least a couple of times. The total runtime for all different scenes is longer than 90 minutes.

Here, the interactive functions do not control the narrative at the story level. The trivia questions are not related to what is happening on screen. Yet, the outcome of this interactivity impacts the story. Guess correctly and the story moves forward with a triumph for the cat burglar. Guess one wrong and the next scene will depict a violent failure. Fail three times and Rowdy ends up dead.

Charlie Brooker describes the interactivity in the show as wanting "to try something different with this where you weren't making choices for the character, but you were influencing their fate, as it were. So, it's an experiment to see if that sort of concept carries through," (Brooker in Zachary, 2022). In a way, if *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* or *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* use choice points to influence the fate of the characters on a micro level (such as when the viewer decides which cereal Stefan eats or which wedding dress Kimmy chooses), *Cat Burglar* does it on a macro level.

It is interesting to note the use of phrase "experiment" here, connecting to discussions elsewhere in this chapter and as well as previous ones. *Cat Burglar* experiments with the boundaries of Netflix's interactive storytelling, testing ways interactivity can be used to influence the story. Unlike *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend*, the viewer does not have the option to sit back and watch the story unfold in its default mode. At the very beginning, Peanut the security guard dog addresses the audience directly, warning them that this is an interactive show, and that the viewer needs to click on the correct answers. If the viewer clicks on nothing in the first try, resulting in Rowdy's death,

Rowdy's spirit knocks on the screen telling the viewer to wake up and get their hands on their mouse[41] (figure 7.17). This further reinforces the idea that the viewer controls the "fate" of the story rather than just the choices of characters.

Figure 7.17

Screengrab from *Cat Burglar* where Rowdy's ghost warns an inactive viewer to interact with the text.

Cat Burglar has been praised by critics (Framke, 2022; Jeffries, 2022; Rosenberg, 2022). Consensus among them was that the element of nostalgia with the drawings, violence, constant failure, and musical score emulating Tex Avery style MGM cartoons of 20th century, made the interactive special very replayable. Indeed, with its relatively short run-

[41] If the interactive special is played on a mobile phone, Rowdy's ghost tells the viewer to get their fingers on the 'screen' instead of 'mouse'. This signals that separate versions of this segment was created for Netflix on different devices. Hence, interactivity not only plays within the text, but also across different formats.

time and dynamic editing that automatically skips scenes that never change, it is easy to replay the interactive special multiple times in one session.

I discussed earlier in this chapter that Netflix supernarratively encourages replaying as the interface makes it easy for the viewer to go back to earlier choice points. Earlier in Chapter 6, replayability and multiple viewing of episodes were underlined as aspirations for the fourth and fifth seasons of *Arrested Development*. It can be argued that interactive texts like *Cat Burglar* find new ways of replayability. As Rosenberg states in his review, the viewers – especially if they have a nostalgia towards Tex Avery style cartoons – are welcome to replay to see new exaggerated ways of catastrophes, new ways of things going wrong and new ways of Rowdy getting through the obstacles (2022). Instead of rewatching the same serial text and being left to their own devices to explore and discover new meanings within the text, the viewer gets to have a new experience on each replay of the show.

Considering replayability, supernarrative choices also seem more strategic here. Less time to answer trivia questions means a higher chance of getting a question wrong, which in turn means a higher probability of losing all three lives, having to go back again. If *Cat Burglar* can hold audiences for longer than its intended runtime of 15 minutes –by having them replay it multiple times – then similar narrative strategies could be experimented with in future interactive specials.

How does *Cat Burglar*'s interactivity work between narrative progression and a gamified experience? Figure 7.18 shows a simplified diagram of the interactive structure in *Cat Burglar* called "gamified journey interactive narrative". As the diagram shows, the interactive element – mini quiz games in between scenes – works on two levels. On the first level, mini games enable progression of diegesis. On the second level they determine whether viewers are

allowed to reach to the end of the diegesis or not, depending on how successful they are in solving the quizzes.

Figure 7.18

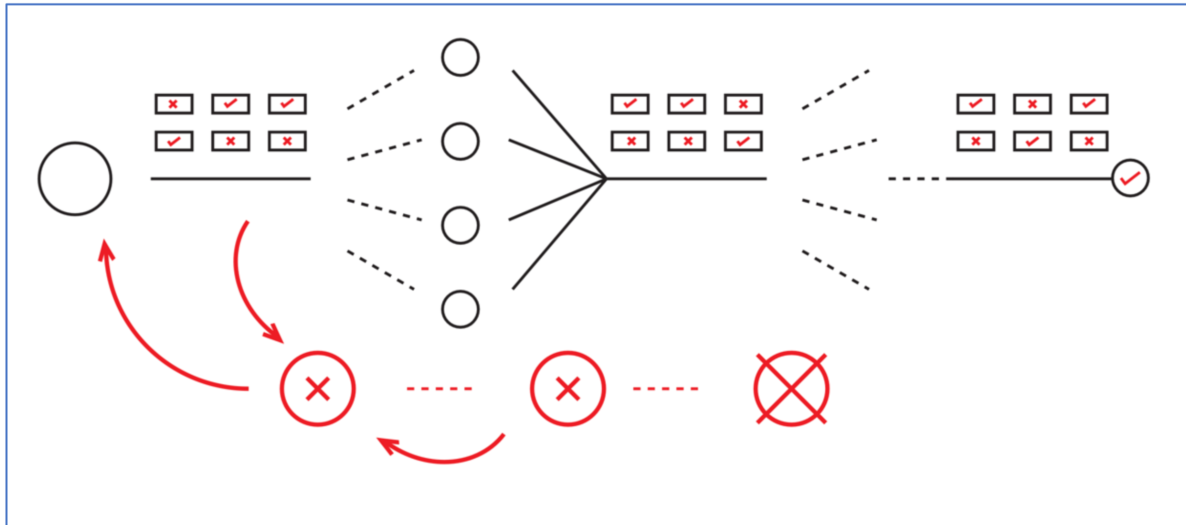


Diagram showing a "gamified journey interactive narrative" in *Cat Burglar.* Circles represent story segments. Rectangles represent choices at choice points. Rectangles marked with a "X" are wrong choices on the multiple-choice questions. Rectangles marked with a "✓" are correct choices. A circle marked with a "✓" indicates a main ending. A circle marked with a "X" is a dead end, taking the viewer to the previous choice point. A circle that is crossed out means game-over.

7.10 *Exploding Kittens* and Netflix Games

While this chapter focuses on interactive specials, a more recent frontier in the Netflix environment is worthy of consideration. On February 11, 2021, Netflix ended a press release for its new division with four words: "Let the games begin," (Verdu, 2021). It was an announcement made by Mike Verdu, Vice-President for Game Development at Netflix, introducing Netflix Games, mobile titles that were available exclusively to Netflix users. By the start of 2022, there were 18 games with a plan to release 50 games in total by the end of

year (Dinsdale, 2022). All games are free-to-play for Netflix users and do not offer in-game purchases. Some games like *Stranger Things 3: The Game* (2019) tie in directly to Netflix intellectual property. Others, like *Townsmen: A Kingdom Rebuilt* (2022) are stand-alone mobile games that are not relevant to any current Netflix Originals. These titles are not interactive specials, and they cannot be accessed directly on Netflix. Instead, their thumbnails redirect to webpages that let the viewers download from their application stores (e.g., Google Play Store, App Store) to their mobile phones.

One of these Netflix Games, *Exploding Kittens* was originally a tabletop card game created by Elan Lee, Matthew Inman and Shane Small, released in 2015. The game involves a deck of cards, all themed around cats. Each turn, each player draws a card. There are four cards that "explode" when drawn, which eliminates that player. The final player to stand wins the game. Players use a variety of other cards to either escape from the fate of explosion or to force other players to draw the exploding kitten cards.

In April 2022, Netflix announced that a new animated original series based on *Exploding Kittens* was coming to Netflix in 2023 and Netflix users could play an exclusive online version of the tabletop game from May 2022 onwards (Vincent, 2022). Before *Exploding Kittens*, Netflix Games' only games that directly tied into a Netflix Original show were *Stranger Things: 1984* (2017) and *Stranger Things 3: The Game*. In both of those cases, the games were released after the Netflix shows.

With *Exploding Kittens*, the mobile game came before the Netflix Original, but the press release shows that this decision may point towards a design strategy that is beyond the order of the titles. The press release specifically states:

> Future updates featuring content from the animated series will also be free. That means if you're "feline" frisky toward anyone introduced in the show, you'll be able

> to play with cards featuring your new favorite characters as the cards will be updated with artwork and imagery from the Netflix series. (Vincent, 2022)

Here, Netflix makes it clear that Netflix's televisual and gamified *Exploding Kittens* texts are going to be connected to present an experience of the fictional world that can be explored through multiple different media texts, what could be described as a "transmedia" experience (Jenkins, 2006; Evans, 2014).

This is not the first time Netflix licensed intellectual property that originally existed elsewhere or embarked on transmedia storytelling strategies. One of the biggest examples for this would be *The Witcher* (2019-), a Netflix Original show that was adapted from the Polish book series and video game franchise of the same name. The show was very successful, and Netflix developed several spin-off and tie-in texts, including a prequel series and an anime film. Similarly, *Stranger Things* (2016-) – apart from the mobile games – have tie-in books, comic series, licensed boardgames etc.

Looking back at Netflix's history, the company's ambition for transmedia storytelling goes back to 2017. Netflix's first acquisition as a company was Millarworld, a comics publisher. The first title published by Millarworld after acquisition was released along with an announcement that it was being developed as a series for Netflix (Otterson, 2021). As of 2022, the series is still in active development.

Taking these examples into consideration, it seems like the design of the transmedia experience in *Exploding Kittens* is intended to be more contained within the Netflix environment. The Netflix Original text and the video game are both developed exclusively for Netflix. It would be interesting to see how the different texts of *Exploding Kittens* are positioned within the narrative ecosystem of Netflix. The interplay between these texts can uncover new narrative possibilities within this ecosystem.

7.11 Conclusion

Marie-Laure Ryan argues that television's inherent interactivity – viewers being able to switch channels – is detrimental to the "appreciation of individual texts," (2001, p. 205). It can be argued that a goal behind interactive narrative experiments in television is introducing interactivity to the medium that emphasises individual texts rather than discarding them. Ryan further argues that the future of hypertext and how viable it would be as a literary form would depend on how prevalent it would be used to tell stories:

> The future of hypertext as literary form rests to a large extent on its power to generate a type of meaning that is shared by almost all of the popular modes of entertainment, from drama to the novel and from movies to amusement parks. It is the ability to tell stories that will decide whether hypertext will secure a durable and reasonably visible niche on the cultural scene or linger on for a while as a genre consumed mostly by prospective authors and academic critics.

Keeping in mind hypertextual aspirations, it is interesting to see how different interactive specials on Netflix operate and implement interactivity in various forms. We have already established in previous chapters that different Netflix Original shows experimented with different ways of serial storytelling limited by the boundaries set by what Netflix's narrative ecosystem afforded them. Due to the isolated nature of interactive technologies on Netflix — the company's use of their own software, Branch Manager for all interactive specials — and the stereotypical example of interactive television being seen as the choose-your-own-adventure style of storytelling, one could expect all interactive specials on Netflix to be similar. Therefore, it was surprising to see a range of interactive specials, designed within the limited capabilities of the same Netflix-based software.

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch shows a more complex approach to choose-your-own-adventure style storytelling. With 250 segments, five main endings and millions of different ways the final story can play out, the show encapsulates how a hyper-narrative televisual storytelling

can be possible on Netflix. On the other hand, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* displays a different approach to interactive storytelling on Netflix. While both stories are similarly branched out, the goal in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* is to follow the most appropriate path to the ending while exploring the variations that the interactive special provides.

The different approaches to interactivity arguably show television storyteller's resolve to push the aesthetic boundaries of their medium and format, wherever they are. Some of the examples shown here, like *Battle Kitty* used Branch Manager in ways that were admittedly different than the intentions of those who developed the software (Charara, 2022). In *Battle Kitty*, they use the software to navigate a world map of the story instead of forcing the viewers to choose what happens next in the story. In another example, *Cat Burglar,* the software is used to combine narrative storytelling and trivia games with the aim of giving the viewer a different type of agency in the story. Not deciding what happens next, but ultimately deciding on the fate of its main character. In *Trivia Quest*, interactivity is used solely for gamification purposes, as the interactive special provide a daily trivia game to Netflix users.

Looking at the examples overall, there is a spectrum of interactive narrative design. As figures 7.7, 7.11, 7.15, 7.16 and 7.18 show, each of these interactive specials use Branch Manager to construct a different interactive structure. As such, this chapter identified five different interactive structures in Netflix so far. These are: branching interactivity, slaloming interactivity, navigational interactivity, gamified interactivity, and gamified journey interactivity. As each interactive special is different, parameters of how much influence the viewer has on the content (like *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* where the viewer is always returned to the correct choices) , on which level of diegesis the interactivity plays out (like *Cat Burglar* where the interactivity plays out on the outermost layer of diegesis, deciding if the story comes to an end or not) and how the interactivity pushes the narrative

forward (like *Battle Kitty* where the interactivity does not push the diegetic time, only the discourse time) change between different interactive specials.

While the "authors" of these interactive specials and the viewers negotiate this interactivity, they are both influenced by Netflix's supernarrative agency. As established in this chapter, through the use of its own software, Branch Manager, Netflix directly influences the boundaries and limitations of interactive televisual storytelling within its narrative ecosystem. On the other side, the viewers are also confined to the capabilities and functionalities of the interface. While navigating interactive texts, the viewers are more susceptible to supernarration than ever because supernarration no longer happens on an outermost layer. In interactive specials, supernarration happens momentarily as the viewer interacts with the text. Hence, I argue that interactive specials display a distinct type of supernarration.

In previous chapters, I outlined narrative form and structure of different Netflix Originals to showcase the narrative possibilities in Netflix ecosystem. The examples in this chapter – while all of them have interactive structures – show differences too. Just like two Netflix Originals can show vast differences in their form, the same holds for interactive specials too. Informed by the peculiarities of these interactive specials, I argue that the vast variety of approach to interactivity in these texts signal to the biggest potential in interactive storytelling in the Netflix ecosystem. These texts enable a massification of interactive TV, facilitated by the affordances of the platform they are hosted in. The next set of discoveries in new ways of interactivity should be closely observed.

8 CONCLUSION

The research presented in this thesis provides a formal analysis of Netflix Original shows. To provide this analysis, Chapter 1 introduced key concepts around binge-watching, SVOD platforms and television narratives. Chapter 2 reviewed relevant literature around narratology, narrative in television studies and internet TV. Chapter 3 proposed a new model of textual analysis, the Serialised Televisual Narrative Analysis (STNA) Model. The model built upon Seymour Chatman's taxonomy of narrative form (1978) to break down serialised television narratives into their narrative elements, beat by beat, episode by episode in a single datasheet. The formal analysis was supported by contextual programme analysis, investigating the texts in terms of how they were positioned within and around surrounding texts.

Chapter 4 used the STNA Model to analyse the narrative form in the first season of *House of Cards* (2013-2018). Being one of the first Netflix Originals, the show displayed similarities to serial broadcast television narratives in how it was structured. While it is hailed as the first "made-to-binge" show (Klarer, 2014; McCormick, 2016; Sim, 2016; Barker, 2018; Finn 2017; Jenner, 2018), the use of beats and episode lengths showed a narrative structure that was closer to serial broadcast television narratives then later Netflix Originals analysed in this thesis. The chapter showed that in the absence of commercial breaks, the serial television text created its own gaps between different segments of its narrative, specifically through the use of stand-alone episodes. Finally, the chapter revealed that Netflix maintained supernarrative characteristics similar to broadcast television networks and its identity as a supernarrator was connected to its relationship with *House of Cards*, as evidenced by its signature sound.

Chapter 5 utilised the STNA Model to provide a close reading of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (2017-2019). Looking at all three seasons of the show, the model showed clear changes in narrative structure between seasons with varying episode lengths, beat lengths and experimentation with using smaller number of beats. I argued that this Netflix Original further displayed a narrative structure over its three seasons that would be hard to replicate on broadcast TV. The adaptation was able to break down every book in its source text into two episodes because of the SVOD service's affordances, providing access to all episodes of a season at once. Chapter 5 also showed how in the process of adaptation, the metafictional author of the book series turned into a metadiegetic narrator in the TV show.

Chapter 6 investigated *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013-2019) with the STNA Model. Looking at its final broadcast television season and its revived seasons on Netflix, the chapter showed a range of experimentation with narrative possibilities facilitated by Netflix. Season 4 showed a distinct narrative structure with each of its episodes focusing on one character's journey over the course of seven years. While this provided an opportunity to offer episodes non-sequentially, the show returned to a more linear format with its Season 4 remix where the whole season was re-edited to 22-minute-long episodes that more closely resembled its earlier narrative form as a broadcast television sitcom. This further cemented Netflix's status as a supernarrator as *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences* is the default option to watch as of 2022. It was also apparent that with its final season, the show's form returned to a more conventional, broadcast television structure.

Chapter 7 focused on interactive specials on Netflix. Providing an analysis of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend (*2020), *Battle Kitty* (2022), *Trivia Quest* (2022) and *Cat Burglar* (2022), the chapter provided an insight into the possibilities in interactive narratives within the Netflix environment. The analysis further proposed models of interactivity for each example to contribute towards a taxonomy of interactivity in

Netflix. Using Netflix's Branch Manager software as evidence, the chapter showed a distinct facet of Netflix's supernarrative agency. The chapter concluded with the discussion of *Exploding Kittens* (2022), a mobile game under Netflix Games and its tie-in Netflix Original show of the same name. The structural analysis of interactive texts on Netflix led to the argument that boundaries of interactive television are pushed further than ever before within Netflix.

With these arguments, the case studies presented in this thesis answered the following research questions comprehensively.

8.1 What are the characteristics of narrative form in televisual serial narratives released exclusively by the SVOD platform Netflix?

The case studies *House of Cards, A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *Arrested Development* showed that there were some elements of narrative form that showed similarities in all three case studies. Moreover, these similarities were also present in the pilot study of *Love* (2016-2018) and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016). Firstly, the length of beats tend to be longer than serial broadcast narratives. While a one-hour prime-time drama in US television would typically have 20-40 beats per episode (Brody, 2003), this research showed that Netflix Originals usually have lower beats per episode and in some cases (like in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*) goes even lower than 10 beats per episode. Secondly, while each beat typically lasts under two minutes in broadcast television shows, Netflix Originals feature much longer beats more frequently. For instance, *Arrested Development* had a beat that ran for 22 minutes, equal to the total runtime of most half-hour comedy shows on US broadcast television. Likewise, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* featured a 40-minute episode in its second season that only had 7 beats, an average beat running longer than five minutes.

The reason for differences in beats can best be explained by the absence of schedules and commercial breaks. As Michael Z. Newman argued, the structure of beats is heavily influenced by television networks' competition to hold the attention of audiences (2006). While exceptions exist, for most television networks, the hourly slots need to be broken down to segments in terms of commercial breaks. The structure of televisual texts then need to conform to these segments and have a number of acts that correspond to these breaks. In each segment between the breaks, the text needs to hold the audience's attention at a maximum level to discourage changing channels.

Using a subscription based economic model and not requiring commercial breaks, SVOD services provided the opportunity for television storytellers to experiment with different lengths of segments (whether it is beats, acts, episodes, or seasons). While this opportunity was exploited to a great extent, later seasons of Netflix Originals including *Arrested Development* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events* signal a return to shorter beats and more uniform episode lengths.

Considering Michael Z. Newman's argument that television's aesthetic choices were a result of industrial constraints (2006), it has been assumed that in the absence of these constraints aesthetic choices can be transformed freely. Perhaps in such an assumption, the audience's habits have been overlooked. After all, a large part of SVOD audiences of today were the broadcast television audiences of the past having been exposed to the television aesthetics that arguably resulted from the industrial constraints. Then, it can be argued that some of aesthetic choices of broadcast television are now ingrained into the DNA of television storytelling as a narrative form.

As *Arrested Development*'s creator Mitchell Hurwitz noted, "to get more information first and then less information isn't as interesting… this may not be up for debate" (Hurwitz in Martin, 2013b). Hence creators of Netflix Originals need to negotiate between the established norms

of narrative structure in serial television and experimentation with the possible variations facilitated in the Netflix environment. They must operate between which features of serial broadcast narratives can be left behind and which should be taken forward as serial televisual narratives are designed for SVOD services.

8.2 What possible variations can the form and structure of televisual serial narratives released exclusively by Netflix have?

As the SVOD services provide a space for narratives to exist simultaneously, unhindered by a schedule, various different forms and structures can be seen among Netflix Originals that have been studied. In fact, all three case studies in this thesis showed different narrative forms. *House of Cards* employed a narrative structure throughout its first season that closely resembled broadcast television. Its use of existents and events was similar to "epic" television shows like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Deadwood* (2004-2006) with big budgets and an abundance of existents.

A Series of Unfortunate Events employed a distinct structure where every two episodes presented a closed narrative with a clear beginning and end, while pushing the narrative forward. Such a structure could be possible in a broadcast television network, but it would be difficult to financially justify the two-episode story arcs since a viewer who missed the first episode of the arc would have less incentive to watch the show the following week.

Arrested Development displayed various forms in its televisual afterlife on Netflix. Its fourth season – the first one on Netflix – structured each episode around one character over a period of time. The whole season's story would make sense only when all episodes were watched, and the viewpoints of all characters were seen. Hence, a viewer at the halfway point of the season would have gaps in knowledge as the story time so far would have been filled with

instances of anachronic narrative moments. With *Season 4 Remix: Fateful Consequences*, the episodes were re-cut to conform to broadcast television standards of length (each episode at 22-23 minutes) and to resolve the anachronic storytelling, providing a progression of the story where characters' fate advanced simultaneously. Finally, the fifth season showed a narrative form that borrowed some of the tools that the show used during its life in broadcast television such as fading to white between scenes that replicate the fades used in serial broadcast television narratives before commercial breaks.

Interactive specials in Netflix also show variation with form and structure. Firstly, they are separated from serial televisual narratives due to their interactive nature. Some of the interactivity that is experienced in Netflix such as *Battle Kitty*'s navigational interactivity or *Cat Burglar*'s gamified journey interactivity, would be difficult to emulate in a broadcast television environment without the use of ancillary tools and devices. Secondly, these interactive specials also have varying forms and structures. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* shows a branching interactivity while *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs the Reverend* presents a slaloming interactivity. *Battle Kitty*'s use of an overworld map to experience the segments of the story show a navigational interactivity. *Trivia Quest* displays a gamified interactivity whereas *Cat Burglar*'s interactivity is defined as gamified journey interactivity.

8.3 How do paratextual elements (including, but not limited to: the thumbnails, teasers, promotional texts, and interface elements) effect narrative form and structure in Netflix?

The case studies in this thesis show how Netflix uses its supernarrative agency to influence texts. In terms of supernarration, Netflix's interface has characteristics and leverages the characteristics and opportunities of broadcast television scheduling. As I evidenced in Chapters 4 and 6, its use of paratextual elements on the interface can directly preempt texts.

Firstly, it is the Netflix interface that facilitates engagement with the texts. The interface presented when watching content on Netflix typically provides – from left to right on the screen – play, pause, rewind, fast-forward, mute, volume up, volume down, video progress bar, skip to next episode, episode list, audio, subtitles, playback speed and fullscreen functionalities. A change in these functionalities or the omission of any of these elements will impact viewer's experience of the text.

I underlined the difficulty of accessing and watching the original fourth season of *Arrested Development* in Chapter 6. It may seem trivial to suggest that not being able to auto-play episodes in the fourth season or having to navigate the platform from the beginning every time a new viewing session starts (as the episodes are under "Trailers & More" tab, they do not appear on the "Continue Watching" category either) presents hardship. For the accustomed viewer, this only results in minimal additional interaction with the interface and a few seconds more than what the auto-play function would provide. However, it should be noted that this is not the intended mode of engagement for Netflix. It has been underlined here and elsewhere that Netflix's business strategy relies on continued engagement of the viewer (Jenner, 2017, 2018; Perks, 2015). The auto-play function is a vital element in sustaining this. If the episodes do not pick up from where the viewer left off, if the next episode does not automatically start and if the watched season does not even appear on their homepage, then how does the viewer have the Netflix experience of watching? Hence, when Netflix removes a text from its usual position on the interface, it has a similar effect to schedule changes on broadcast television.

Secondly, Netflix uses its supernarrative agency on paratexts that promote its texts too. Chapter 4 evidenced one such deployment of agency by taking out Kevin Spacey's images from thumbnails of *House of Cards* and burying his name deep down the cast list (he appears 12th on the cast list as of June 2022) on the landing page of the show on Netflix.

Thirdly, Netflix utilises paratexts through the way it uses taste communities and the promotional categories for the placement of texts within its interface. With specific categories and over 2000 taste communities, the same text can be promoted to different users based on their preferences (Pajkovic, 2021). They will not only use different thumbnails but will also come under different categories. For instance, *Arrested Development* can be catered under a category of "TV shows featuring dysfunctional families" or "cult TV sitcoms".

Finally, interactive specials on Netflix are experienced directly through interacting with Netflix's interface. Providing different paths for the story may be a decision made at the narrative level, but these paths are presented to the viewers only through the interface. Moreover, the interface makes it possible to go back to choice points in interactive specials to try different routes. Bearing in mind the more minimal player interface in interactive specials and the bottom centre placement of a significantly sized button that takes viewers back to the previous choice point, it is evident that Netflix urges viewers through its interface to try as many possible versions of its interactive stories as possible. As the interface urges the viewer to go back and view alternative routes, Netflix encourage repeatability in its interactive texts.

8.4 In what ways can time and temporality in televisual serial narratives released exclusively by the SVOD platform Netflix deviate from those that are aimed for broadcast television?

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 reveal distinct temporalities in Netflix Originals. Firstly, these shows minimise the unrecorded existence of their characters (Geraghty, 1981). In all three case studies, episodes end and begin in close succession. In *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, every new 2-episode story arc picks the narrative up from where it was left. As discussed in detail in Chapter 6, *Arrested Development* sometimes jumpstarts episodes and seasons into the future, but by the end of the episode or season the time period in between is always accounted for. *House*

of Cards has time jumps between episodes (as each season covers approximately one year of story time) but whenever this happens, the passing of time is noted through dialogues and asides, usually commenting on how nothing out of the ordinary happened in that time period. The pilot study for this thesis, *Love* (2016-2018) also displayed almost no unrecorded time between episodes, with most episodes picking up right after whatever event occurred in the previous episode (including going to bed at the end of an episode and waking up in the next) (Hemingway, 2021).

In the Preface for this thesis, I explained the initial inspiration of this research as the uninterrupted viewing experience of a weekly broadcast television show, *How I Met Your Mother* and how disorientating it was to watch three episodes in a row. These episodes were originally released in the span of more than one month (there was a break between two episodes) and diegetic time jumped between each week. My initial reaction to that experience was: "They could not have done this on Netflix,". The analysis in this research demonstrated that Netflix Originals need to negotiate the delicate relationship between story time and discourse time according to release patterns of the SVOD platforms.

Like *Arrested Development*'s final season, released in two parts, Netflix – and other SVOD platforms – still experiment with different release patterns in 2022. *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* on Netflix was released as "parts" from the beginning, never officially having seasons. *Arcane* (2021-), consisting of nine episodes in total was released over three weeks, three episodes at a time. Most recently, Netflix decided to release the fourth season of *Stranger Things* (2016-) in two parts. Showrunners proclaimed the decision to release in two parts was due to the season's size, running longer than the others before (Aurthur et al., 2022). However, with only the final two episodes reserved for part two – which is scheduled for release only 5 weeks after part one – the move seems to be another experiment for a release pattern. The two-part release was not communicated to the audiences beforehand. Television scholar Derek

Kompare notes on social media "[t]he power of the weekly drop (or at least of delaying the finale a bit)" (2022a). He interprets the delayed release of the final two episodes as "a test run of similar to come down the line from them, because they see how this is working for their competitors, and because a full season drop is a dumb hill to want to die on" (Kompare, 2022b).

Going back to Netflix Originals' negotiation of discourse time and story time, the experimentations with release patterns and the temporality within these shows primarily serve to create or omit gaps. In the absence of weekly schedules, commercial breaks and seasonal release slates, these texts need to navigate how they create and use gaps. As Sean O'Sullivan argued, the viewer plays with old knowledge from all the previous episodes and new knowledge that comes from the episode they are watching at the moment (2006). The in-between state that surround acts within episodes and episodes within seasons are used by viewers to elaborate and speculate on the story, expanding their engagement. For the most part, this in-between state is facilitated by television schedules.

Chapters 4 and 6 showed that Netflix Originals utilise a variety of strategies to emulate these gaps. Using stand-alone episodes – which themselves are a convention of serial broadcast television narratives – to break the narrative momentum and focus on secondary stories or emphasise characters or settings is one such strategy. Chapter 4 showed it being used as early as the first season of *House of Cards*, but other Netflix Originals such as *Stranger Things* have also used this technique frequently. While the stand-alone episode is not unique or novel to Netflix, its use to facilitate a gap is arguably unique to the binge-release model that the SVOD service utilises.

Chapter 6 displayed another strategy of how temporality is adjusted to emulate gaps within episodes. *Arrested Development*'s episodes on Netflix use fade-to-white at the end of scenes to

signal a closure as the next scene appears. The fade was essentially an aesthetic component of television narratives that resulted from the constraints of commercial breaks. Each act break on broadcast television would start with a fade to black to ensure a smoother transition to the commercial texts (like the dimming of lights after each act on a theatre stage). Imitating this fade to commercial breaks without actually showing the commercial break, *Arrested Development*'s text pretends like there is a gap.

The final strategy of emulating gaps in Netflix is the use of recaps and promotional material. As Chapter 4 showed, the announcement of new seasons of Netflix Originals usually come a few months before their release dates. This aims to reinvigorate the 'suspended betweenness' that viewers are in, prompting them to think about the old knowledge of the television show they had and to speculate on the new knowledge that they will get. Similarly, recaps are a tool used in Netflix Originals to create an artificial betweenness for the viewer. As new seasons begin with a recap of what happened before, the recap not only compresses the story time to a montage, but also the time between the release of two seasons into one. The viewer might have waited more than a year for the new season but once the recap ends, the story of the last season will have ended just a few seconds ago and new knowledge from the new season will come in the next few seconds. Story time and discourse time become parallel again.

8.5 Main Arguments: Towards a Narrative Theory of Internet TV

Over the last three decades there has been several attempts at theorising the narratology of television. Most recently, Kathryn VanArendonk attempted to theorise the television episode as a stand-alone unit of storytelling in TV narratives (2019). Jason Mittell elaborated on the many different ways television texts show complexity, theorising how complex narratives function on television (2015). Sarah Kozloff's chapter *Narrative Theory and TV*, cited widely by

television scholars, provided a list of the "most common traits" of American television narratives in early 1990s.

- predictable, formulaic storylines;
- multiple storylines intertwined in complex patterns and frequently interconnecting;
- individualized, appealing characters fitting into standardized roles;
- setting and scenery either very evocative (commercials) or merely functional (series);
- substitute narratees, voice-over narration, and direct address often employed to "naturalize" the discourse;
- complex interweaving of narrative level and voices;
- tendency toward omniscient, reliable narration;
- reliance on ellipsis and scene;
- chronological order to entice (previews) or inform (flashbacks);
- series, serial, and "hybrid" formats;
- accommodation of interruptions;
- lengths cut to fit standardized time slots;
- and permeable diegesis. (1992, p. 93)

While it would be premature to provide such a checklist from the analyses in this thesis, the main arguments provided below show insight on how serial televisual texts intended for SVOD platforms compare to Kozloff's taxonomy which was proposed 30 years ago. Arguably, apart from the penultimate item on the list (lengths cut to fit standardized time slots), all these traits can still be attributed to Netflix Originals. This does not necessarily mean that the inherent features of serial broadcast narratives and serial narratives on SVOD services are the same. If anything, serial narratives on SVOD services expand on these features. The aim of this thesis was to look at different possible narrative forms and not to look at direct changes in the form.

Case studies analysed in this thesis showed a variety of narrative possibilities facilitated in the SVOD environment of Netflix. The STNA Model showed specific characteristics in each case study but there were several points that came up regularly across all case studies including the interactive specials and in the pilot study on *Love* as well as the independent study on *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (Can, 2021). Here I provide a list of main takeaways

from this thesis. The list is not exhaustive in encapsulating Netflix Originals' various plays with narrative form and structure but should provide a springboard for further discussion towards a narrative theory of internet TV.

8.5.1 *Netflix Originals are able to experiment with narrative form and structure more freely than broadcast television.*

The analysis of case studies showed that in the absence of network schedules that place televisual texts into slots and provide a linear flow, Netflix Originals showed a variety of experimentation with their form and structure.

8.5.2 *In the absence of commercial breaks and network schedules, gaps are created differently in Netflix Originals.*

The above-mentioned absence of schedules and absence of gaps resulted in these texts emulating gaps and viewers generating their own gaps. For the viewers, these gaps were created individually by their temporal preference of watching. Viewers create their own gaps by their individual schedules of how they binge-watch the shows. On the side of the text, these were created either diegetically using stand-alone episodes and prolepses or at the discourse level, with supernarrative agency such as the SVOD service providing recaps.

8.5.3 *Some temporal elements of narrative in serial television such as sequential ordering of episodes and the length of beats have become inherent to the form.*

Chapters 4-6 revealed that some features of television storytelling were harder to change in the Netflix ecosystem. While these texts experimented with order of episodes and length and number of beats, the analysis showed a tendency to return to broadcast television conventions with shorter beats. Chapter 6 further revealed with *Arrested Development*'s remix of fourth season that Netflix does not shy away from following these conventions.

8.5.4 Netflix is a supernarrator.

This thesis aimed to determine Netflix's position in relation to the texts it hosts. Chapters 4-7 showed that the company used a supernarrative agency that was similar to broadcast television networks. It uses this agency through interface, through paratexts and even through specific technology underpinning the production (Branch Manager).

Moreover, just like broadcast television networks, Netflix's supernarrator identity was individualised and personified through its use of logo and signature sound. As Chapter 3 evidenced, its signature Ta-Dum! sound is influenced by a diegetic recurring sound in *House of Cards*.

8.5.5 Netflix's interface serves the functions of a broadcast television schedule.

Sarah Kozloff argued that television networks exercised their supernarrative agency mostly through their use of schedule. I argue here that Netflix's interface serves the functions of the broadcast television schedule, especially considering how it is used supernarratively. The interface here includes the homepage, the video player screen and the algorithms that work in the background to provide users with categories and recommendations.

8.5.6 Netflix's supernarrative agency enables change in televisual texts.

I argue that Netflix's supernarrative power to pre-empt texts exceeds that of broadcast television networks. It can force change in the televisual text and replace it with another one (as seen on *Arrested Development*). For instance, in 2019, Netflix announced that a scene from the first season of *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) depicting the suicide of a major character has been deleted (Gilbert, 2019). Unlike *Arrested Development*, the original cut is no longer accessible through Netflix's library. This represents a direct intervention from the supernarrator to modify the text.

8.5.7 Netflix facilitates repeatability just as it facilitates binge-watching.

While discussions of bingeability focus on the consecutive viewing of episodes, they usually ignore repeatability. Just like syndication was a driving force behind broadcast television shows to ensure reruns of the text, repeatability is a key factor in Netflix Originals' existence in the SVOD environment. Firstly, as can be seen in *Arrested Development*, the platform uses its supernarrative powers to provide alternative versions of the text to encourage repeat. Secondly, the company also uses supernarrative powers using paratextual elements to encourage repetition with categories like "Watch It Again". Thirdly, Chapter 7 shows evidence of experimentation with interactive specials to urge replaying the texts. A text like *Cat Burglar* takes less than 15 minutes for the story to unfold from start to finish, but the text actively encourages the viewer to go back and repeat, prolonging the engagement up to 90 minutes.

8.5.8 Interactive specials on Netflix are able to push the boundaries of interactive narratives in television further and enable a massification of synchronous interactive TV narratives.

The linear schedule being broadcast to all households was a key challenge in experimentations with interactive narratives on television. As Chapter 7 provided examples, most experimentations with interactive narratives on broadcast television required collective decision-making/polling practices from the audience. Using its own infrastructure and software, Netflix can present interactive televisual narratives to large audiences while ensuring each viewer is engaged with them individually. There are a limited number of interactive specials on Netflix as of 2022 but as Chapter 7 demonstrates, they use Netflix's software Branch Manager in different ways, showing different ways of interactivity on Netflix.

8.6 Significance of Study and Contribution to Field

A decade ago, in their book on YouTube, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green reflect on the challenges of putting an emerging digital medium in context when there are multiple interpretations of what YouTube is (2009). They argue that "each scholarly approach to understanding how YouTube works must make choices among these interpretations, in effect recreating it as a different object each time" (2009, pp. 6-7). Ramon Lobato applies this point to the study of Netflix.

> While Netflix is an established global brand with 20 years of history, there is still very little agreement about what Netflix *is* or how it should be understood by the public, scholars, or media regulators. Netflix—like many disruptive media phenomena before it, including radio and broadcast television—is a boundary object that exists between, and inevitably problematizes, the conceptual categories used to think about media. This definitional tension can be seen in the marketing slogans Netflix uses to describe itself, which reflect evolution in both the company's distribution model and its discursive positioning in relation to other media. (2019, p. 20)

A lot of early research on Netflix came out at a time when Netflix was indisputably the dominant SVOD platform. Starting in late 2010s and accelerating in 2020s, "streaming wars" saw entrance of new actors into internet TV market (Farley, 2022). Moreover, broadcast television networks changed their practices in the last decade. As a result of these developments, in today's internet TV environment, it is still difficult to contextualise Netflix absolutely.

Added to this challenge, there is also a lack of close reading of televisual texts produced for SVOD platforms. Chapters 4-7 show a compilation of analytical work on the case studies as much as possible but as I argued throughout the thesis, these are usually confined in their scope, either focusing on specific themes in these texts, specific narrative elements in these texts or specific units of these texts (e.g., analysing a single episode). Moreover, much of the research focuses on earlier examples of narrative texts on SVOD services.

Each chapter in this thesis contributes to the volume of scholarly work on the corresponding text. Moreover, looking at later seasons in shows like *Arrested Development* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, close reading of more recent narrative texts on SVOD services is made available. Chapter 7 in particular includes interactive texts on Netflix that have been released in 2022, providing analysis of recent interactive texts. Future analysis on Netflix Originals will benefit from the holistic approach this thesis took on analysing them.

8.6.1 Towards a Textual Analysis Model for Television Texts

One of the main objectives of this thesis was to provide a holistic analysis that can pave the way towards a narrative theory of internet TV. To do this, a new model of structural analysis was created. Over decades, scholars of film studies have developed tools of analysing film texts in various different ways. With different models and approaches to textual analysis, today a film scholar has multiple tools in their disposal to do a close reading of film texts. In comparison, the television scholar has limited tools and usually borrows from other disciplines to provide a close reading of televisual texts.

The main contribution of this thesis to the field of television studies is the proposition of a new structural analysis model capable of capturing narrative form and structure in serial televisual texts. During the design process of the Serial Televisual Narrative Analysis (STNA) Model, the main objective was to provide a tool that could break down multiple episodes of serial television texts in consecutive order.

The STNA Model allows the researcher to break down serial televisual texts to its narrative components. As the criteria for inclusion in the datasheet is not inherent to the model, it can be adapted and changed to serve purpose in specific research contexts. Chapter 3 lists the specific criteria in this research to determine what would be included in the STNA datasheets for the case studies. Other researchers can alter the criteria or even change narrative elements

listed on the X and Y axes to cater to their own needs. Such a flexible model should facilitate more close reading of serial television texts both on SVOD platforms and on broadcast television.

8.7 Reflections on Research

Chapter 3 listed limitations in research design. The development of the STNA Model itself proved to be a challenge. Between the pilot study and the final iteration, the model went through several changes. Moreover, as the interactive specials could not be effectively analysed using the STNA Model, integrating interactive case studies required a specific adaptation of the model? approach to be able to connect with other chapters.

At times, the scope of this research proved challenging. Ideally, I would have liked the scope to include many more Netflix Original texts to map out the narrative ecosystem of Netflix as much as possible. However, there are as many different narrative possibilities on Netflix as there are narrative texts. Drawing a complete map of narrative possibilities would be very difficult and time consuming. Hence, a challenging part of the process was selecting which case studies to include and which ones to exclude.

Another challenge was the timing of this research. When I started this PhD project in 2017, Netflix had recently made its global expansion to over 160 territories (the platform is now available in more than 190 countries). It had just expanded its slate of Netflix Originals to have hundreds of new films and shows a year, it was just beginning to focus on local content and apart from Amazon's Prime Video, it did not have competition with other SVOD platforms.

In 2022, not only has Netflix itself has changed, but the SVOD landscape is very different. The beginning of the year saw the company report a loss in subscriber numbers for the first time (Hern, 2022). Disney+, Apple TV+, HBOMax and many other SVOD platforms have entered the so-called streaming wars and show stronger competition than ever. Apple TV+ became the first SVOD platform to have a Best Picture Academy Award with *Coda* (2021). Disney+ has a library consisting of intellectual property from Disney, Marvel, Star Wars, Pixar, National Geographic, Hulu, and Starz. Moreover, they release original transmedia texts for massive popular culture phenomena like Marvel Cinematic Universe and Star Wars. HBOMax has not only acquired *Friends* (1994-2004) – which Netflix has paid hundreds of millions of pounds for years to keep in its catalogue (Lee, 2018) – but also hosts WarnerMedia's full library including intellectual property from Harry Potter franchise and DC Comics as well as HBO.

Broadcast television networks do not follow the same conventions they did in 2010s or 1990s either. It is becoming rarer to see the 20-25 episode per year television shows. Most broadcast television shows opt for shorter seasons. The slates of Fall and Summer releases in traditional broadcast television networks have dissipated. In USA and worldwide, it is possible to see release of broadcast television shows year-round. Hence, while SVOD services adopt features of narrative form from serial broadcast narratives, television networks also evolve with new practices influenced by SVOD services.

With these developments, perhaps most central to this thesis is the fact that all of Netflix's competition today use weekly release models for new content. As discussed earlier, Netflix still experiments with different release patterns, but the binge-release model is still predominant. It is safe to argue that they are still experimenting with different narrative forms too. Chapter 7 ended with a note on *Exploding Kittens*. It will be interesting to see how the company navigates transmedia storytelling between Netflix and Netflix Games.

8.8 Recommendations for Further Research

Upon publication of this thesis, all STNA datasets have been made available for public access to encourage use of data in further research. The STNA Model has already been used outside this thesis for a case study of comparison between *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (Can, 2021). My ambition and hope is that other scholars can apply the model for their case studies, adding to the volume of analysis that provide holistic investigation of television texts.

While analysing the case studies, there were times when I made notes on how a different methodology or different corpus could explore new questions. For Chapter 3, a full STNA Model of all seasons of *House of Cards* can bring the complete picture of how narrative form was shaped in the show throughout its run.

One of the earliest decisions in this thesis was to limit the case studies to Netflix Original shows. In the future, a comparative study between different SVOD platforms could reveal insight into each platform's TV aesthetics. Moreover, each platform will have different supernarrative tools and use their supernarrative agency differently. Hence, supernarration in internet TV can be comprehensively explored.

Netflix has more than 2500 original shows and films as of June 2022 (Complete List of Netflix Originals - What's on Netflix, 2022). While not all original shows can be analysed, there are some Netflix Original shows that are already flagged for future research.

For instance, *Stranger Things* is arguably the flagship Netflix Original show as of 2022 (Andreeva, 2022). It is the most watched English language show on the platform so far. The narrative of the show is noteworthy in terms of how the events change over the course of

three seasons. The change in elements of narrative illustrate the constraints of Netflix's release model, releasing all episodes simultaneously. The writers of the show can only utilise gaps between seasons to introduce changes to events. For example, as *Vanity Fair*'s Laura Bradley points out, a plotline that runs throughout the second season was added because of fan backlash to the off-screen killing of a minor character at the beginning of the show (2016). A minor event in the first season transformed into one of the major plotlines of the second season to address fan expectation. The show also displays various paratextual elements. There is an accompanying aftershow to its second season called *Beyond Stranger Things* (2017) which opens new ways of exploring paratextuality inside Netflix. There are two tie-in mobile games released under Netflix Games. Lastly, the show has also been transformed into an immersive viewing experience outside the domain of Netflix in 2019 with the *title Secret Cinema Presents: Stranger Things*. With the addition of books, board games and merchandise these paratexts unfold compelling questions on how Netflix narratives operate outside the Netflix ecosystem. As the show's upcoming fifth season was announced to be the final season (Goldberg & Hibberd, 2022) it could be significant to conduct a formal analysis of the full serial text.

Chapter 7 discussed several interactive specials. One thing that was noted was *Battle Kitty*'s approach to navigating episodes and episode order. By implementing a progress mechanic in *Battle Kitty,* Netflix suspends the agency it has provided the users with, urging the viewer to watch more of its content in order to reach the end point of the story. It would be interesting to see and compare viewership numbers for *Battle Kitty* with other serial texts on Netflix. What is the completion rate? Did a bigger percentage of viewers stick all the way to the end? The data from these questions could provide guidance for how the progress mechanic impacts bingeability. Audience research could further explore these questions around bingeability and narrative in Netflix.

In summary, there are two potential ways of furthering this research. One is to expand the corpus of texts that are analysed with the STNA Model, looking at new texts and providing holistic structural analyses for full seasons. The other is to shift methodology and look at these texts from the perspective of audience and industry studies. Either way, further research will contribute to understanding of the internet TV environment.

8.9 Closing Remarks on Bingeable Narratives

American television network FX's CEO John Landgraf infamously declared in 2015 that the time of "peak TV" had come, that there was too much quality TV on television, and it could not be sustained. In 2022, his prediction has still not come true, but he is adamant it is bound to happen (White, 2022).

Today the television viewer has more choices than ever. The number of choices on where to watch (broadcast television, SVOD platforms etc.), which device to watch on (television set, laptop, mobile phone, tablet etc.) and ultimately, which televisual text to watch, have all increased in volume. It is incredible to think how prominent binge-watching has become as a mode of engagement with televisual texts. It is also remarkable how the form of televisual texts has changed in the two decades, especially in SVOD platforms.

Sarah Kozloff concludes her chapter on *Narrative Theory and Television* with a statement; "Perhaps, television is conscious of its role as a storyteller. The Bard is dead… long live the (TV) Bard" (1992, p. 94). The statement summarises the intricate complexities of how televisual texts are created and how negotiations within the structures of broadcast television play out to generate the televisual narratives that viewers watch. 30 years on, I would like to borrow her statement to conclude this thesis.

Perhaps, Netflix is conscious of its role as a storyteller. TV is dead… long live (internet) TV!

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APPENDIX A – ONLINE ACCESS TO STNA DATASETS

The following hyperlinks provide access to all STNA Model datasets online.

For the full website with all datasets: https://netflixnarratives.wordpress.com/

For *House of Cards* dataset: https://netflixnarratives.wordpress.com/house-of-cards/

For *A Series of Unfortunate Events* datasets: https://netflixnarratives.wordpress.com/a-series-of-unfortunate-events/

For *Arrested Development* datasets: https://netflixnarratives.wordpress.com/arrested-development/

The datasets are only published online for examination purposes. The website or the webpages have not been made public otherwise.