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Female Pleasure and Theories of Desire in Narrative Structure:  
Evolution, Futurity, and Species Survival in the Post-Human and Science Fiction Imaginary

by

Laura L. S. Bauer

Claremont Graduate University  
2023



## **APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION COMMITTEE**

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Laura L. S. Bauer as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Ph.D. in English.

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## Abstract

Female Pleasure and Theories of Desire in Narrative Structure:

Evolution, Futurity, and Species Survival in the Post-Human and Science Fiction Imaginary

by

Laura L. S. Bauer

Claremont Graduate University, 2023

This dissertation explores the complex relationship between an expanded narratological theory of narrative desire, inseparable in its relation to evolution and biological reproduction, and the future survival of humanity imagined across the narrative structures of three 21<sup>st</sup>-century works of dystopian science fiction. By examining the genre's potential to address species survival specifically through female forms of desire identified as narrative recurrence, prolonged duration, and emotional resolution, this study concurrently develops a metatextual methodology that cultivates the overlooked liminal space of *quiescence*. This analytical framework emphasizes narrative structure over theme-based analysis to unlock the radical imagination present in the texts by highlighting the challenges of narrativizing a post-human future in *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mass Effect 3*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Trickster*.

The reimagined television series *Battlestar Galactica* self-consciously poses questions regarding its own structural design. A moment of quiescence, positioned after the end and before the beginning of a narrative cycle in the epilogue, exists as a phase of unlimited potentiality beyond the activity of the diegetic text. In *Mass Effect 3*, the third installment of the massively successful video game franchise, the protests of dissatisfied gamers resulted in the creation of new ending options, revealing how quiescence can also be understood as the space surrounding the text as paratextual elements, existing adjacent to but separate from the main text, that directly

influence interpretation and meaning. Finally, the archival materials of the unfinished book *Parable of the Trickster*, held at the Huntington Library and written by acclaimed science fiction author Octavia Butler, offers insights into quiescence as a location that exists akin to this pre-textual space. The archives reveal Butler's struggle with severe writer's block as a testament to the challenges and foreboding nature of envisioning humanity's future as it pertains to evolution and species survival.

By incorporating female sexuality into narrative desire, I propose that reviving this theory may offer value in contemporary structural analysis of plots, especially since the concept of quiescence allows us to explore aspects beyond the confines of the diegetic text in a world where narrative is becoming ever more interactive, multi-modal, intertextual, and transmedial. Science fiction during this era of convergence is also seeing a rapid transformation. As humanity increasingly faces existential threats such as artificial intelligence, pandemics, climate change, and nuclear apocalypse, innovative strategies and skills for survival must be developed that transcend our anthropocentric limitations. Although human reproduction is traditionally based on biological foundations that involve erotic desire, the reality of human survival - and reproduction - is rapidly evolving. The development of non-erotic desires such as scientific literacy, global cooperation, and ethical reasoning will become increasingly essential for species survival and, as this occurs, alterations to our human biology may fundamentally reshape our narrative constructs and forms of narrative desire. Ultimately, these texts reveal attempts at post-human forms of relationality within a genre of possibilities that self-consciously struggles to answer what form human survival may take in the future.

**To my husband, Aaron Bauer, who let me stand on his shoulders so I could touch the stars.**

## Acknowledgements

The realization of this dissertation would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my committee, family, and friends throughout my educational odyssey at Claremont Graduate University.

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Dr. Oishi's invaluable guidance and expertise played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of this research. Her insightful counsel throughout the dissertation journey significantly enriched the depth and quality of this study. The courses I took with her early in the program left a profound impact on my preliminary thoughts, spanning a diverse range of subjects, including science fiction, feminism, and queer theory. I am immensely grateful for her mentorship, which not only contributed to the research's success but also nurtured my growth as a scholar.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Martin, my early mentor during my time as part of the Transdisciplinary Studies Department. Thanks to her support, I was able to participate in a wide range of academic roles, including teaching, research assistance, and academic administration and event planning. Her invitation to co-edit *All Things Dickinson: An Encyclopedia of Emily Dickinson's World* (Greenwood Press, 2014) alongside Dr. Karen Stovas and her offer for the position of Film Studies Editor at *Women's Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal*, published by Taylor and Francis, exposed me to the rigors of the editorial process and fostered close-working relationships with both peers and seasoned scholars alike.



Lastly, I am indebted to Dr. Morrison, whose expertise in literature and film has been an incredible resource throughout this journey. He consistently made time to connect when needed and always provided responses filled with thoughtful insights and clear counsel.

My family deserves far more thanks than I can express in words. At the heart of my gratitude stands my husband, Aaron Bauer, my stalwart companion through life's adventures. Over the years he has been my guiding light, illuminating even the most challenging paths, and his faith in me has been the pillar of my strength, even when it seemed his patience was on the brink of exhaustion. I owe loving appreciation to my parents, Inja Lee and Mark Smith. Their ceaseless support, regardless of the magnitude of my ambitions, has been a solid foundation on which I have built my dreams. Additionally, the love and reassurance from all members of the Bauer, Smith, Broddrick, and Lee families have been a source of comfort fortifying me through every step of this academic voyage.

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I am also indebted to the dedicated librarians and staff at the esteemed Huntington Library in Pasadena, California, whose generous assistance not only provided me access but

guided me through the intricate archival materials of Octavia Butler. Lastly, in the quiet hours of writing, my gratitude extends to my feline companions, Nilla, fondly remembered as Vanilla Bean Von Meowsnikov (R.I.P.), and Ash, also known as Ashland Francis McGillicutty Jr. Their comforting presence over the years has been a steadfast source of companionship. Thank you all for your invaluable contributions to the completion of this dissertation.

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## Introduction

*Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself.*

—Roland Barthes, *Communications* (1966)

*The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act . . . the fundamental orgasmic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation.*

—Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979)

*If we set out to seek women's pleasure in the text, there seems to have been scant yield of pleasure in our pursuit . . . Meanings generated through dynamic relations of beginnings, middles, and ends in traditional narrative and traditional narratology never seem to accrue directly to the account of the woman.*

— Susan Winnett, “Coming Unstrung” (1990)

This study approaches three works of dystopian science fiction using a metatextual methodology informed by *quiescence*, an analytic cultivated throughout this scholarly endeavor. The objective is to not only explore what is happening within the plots and plotting of these twenty-first-century texts, but to also investigate what is occurring outside of them that is so vital to their function in the collective imagination concerning species survival. By using the powerful narratological perspective of narrative desire, while considering the philosophical position of the post-human, this study pays special attention to identifying female models of desire in narrative structure that foreground quiescence – particularly in its relation to evolutionary biology.

The epigraphs loosely follow the arc of historical discourse on narrative desire, which form the starting point of this dissertation. The connection they describe refer to the intricate

linkages between plot structure and the human act of sexual reproduction. Criticism beginning in the 1980s, however, found fault in the original model that read desire in narrative structure exclusively from a heterosexual male perspective and was thus discarded. By adding a dimension of female sexuality to the original analytic I suggest that a resuscitation of the theory may prove valuable in contemporary structural analysis, particularly in the genre of science fiction in this era of convergence.

The linear, Aristotelian narrative model of a beginning, middle, and end is becoming ever more interactive, multi-modal, intertextual, and transmedial in the convergence era. In the contemporary cultural landscape, characterized by pervasive media influence, analysis that is merely textual no longer suffices, and *quiescence* is a concept that enables us to consider that which exists beyond the limits of the diegetic text, to take a larger perspective and explore the mediated dimensions that shape meaning and interpretation. I will argue that *female models of desire* focus on the narrative *phase* and *space* of quiescence, which is inherently metatextual and therefore helpful in analyzing the extra-textual influences, such as fan convergence culture and writers block, on the plots and plotting of these dystopian works within twenty-first century science fiction. This approach provides a way of *imagining post-human forms of relationality* within a genre of possibilities that self-consciously struggles to answer what form human survival may take in the future. Quiescence has yet to be given much critical attention in theories about narrative desire, but it may be a valuable analytical tool that can open up the radical imagination of the text to potential realities that lie within and beyond. In particular, quiescence highlights the *tensions surrounding a constant failure to adapt that persist alongside optimistic new forms of futurity* in these dystopian storyworlds. There will also be plots of ambition that compete with those of cooperation, seducing the reader, player, or viewer into playing a high

stakes narrative game of species survival regardless of whether they are conscious of their participation.

This study expands the notion of quiescence, deeming it a concept meriting further exploration through examining models of female forms of desire in narrative. These models are, in turn, substantiated by findings in the fields of evolutionary biology and psychology, which furnish their own theoretical frameworks to illuminate the function of female pleasure vis-à-vis reproduction and species survival within the evolutionary discourse. This elucidation allows one to stay consistent with Peter Brooks' conceptual model of narrative desire, which explicates the energy within narrative dynamics to generate the pleasure of the text. This overarching schema ultimately pursues a singular objective: species reproduction. For hundreds of thousands of years in modern human history, this pursuit has been predicated upon biological foundations. However, our understanding of survival as being anchored in biology is rapidly changing for the first time in our species history as survival becomes more dependent on humanity's ability to embrace a non-anthropocentric mindset.

Narratologists, even if they differed when it came to which aspects of the model were emphasized in narrative desire, always returned to an erotic paradigm because of the inescapable link between biology and sexual reproduction. To avoid confusion, this is not to say that other non-erotic forms of desire do not exist in narrative as, naturally, they do (especially on the content level where characters exhibit a desire for power, self-discovery, adventure, etc.). There are of course many forms of desire in narrative, but it is important to remember that the quintessential model for all storytelling mirrors the intimate encounter that embodies tumescence and detumescence to build tension, reach a resolution, and escalate to a climax followed by

fulfillment. Thus, the driving energy which gives rise to a reader's desire to reach the end of a story has always been approached through a paradigm that contains an erotic charge.

At this juncture, the science fiction genre engages preoccupations regarding the survival of our species in the face of existential threats. The looming threat of extinction, brought forth by artificial intelligence and other large-scale risks such as pandemics, nuclear war, and climate change demands the creation of innovative strategies and tools for reproduction and survival. These solutions must transcend the constraints of biological natural selection to adapt to an ever-changing environment. That said, evolution is a lengthy process and clearly modern concerns such as technological advancements far outpace developments in human biology. How then will the evolution of our survival impact the "archetype of all fiction" as Robert Scholes puts it as it is so fundamental to human nature? Narrative structuration appears to reflect human biology down through to its core. In the failed attempts to imagine a post-human future in these dystopian narratives, one observes the difficulty humanity faces in imagining a non-human future, suggesting that such a future, if it exists, may be devoid of current human constructs and narratives. If this is the case, then it is possible that narrative desire, which has been the underlying energetic drive of all stories, might break down in the face of technological advancement and post-humanism as species survival shifts from a traditional Darwinian understanding to a non-biological approach. Also present in these texts, however, is the impulse to create something new as the relationships between humans, machines, animals, the environment, and other non-human entities imply that something *human* may nevertheless still be preserved in a post-human future. Since these relationships are not just physical, but also involve a dimension of cognitive and psychic systems, then perhaps what fuels the dynamic and ever-changing narratives of the future may involve something that moves beyond male and

female forms of desire as traditionally understood. In the future, as humanity's development progresses beyond traditional biological adaptation, it is conceivable that non-erotic energies will play a pivotal role in driving plot movement. As skills involving intellectual, social, and ethical capacities gain prominence, including enhanced scientific and technological literacy, emotional intelligence, global cooperation, and ethical reasoning, they will become indispensable for ensuring the survival and prosperity of our species.

The drive for survival is manifested in the science fiction narratives across three contemporary mediums of storytelling for this study: television, video games, and literature. The first chapter explores the purpose for the inescapable recursion of time and events that characterize the cycles of death and rebirth, a repeating apocalypse, that is the central theme of the television series *Battlestar Galactica*. By demonstrating the self-awareness of its own design, the plot of BSG puts forward a parricidal motif (humans build machines that destroy their makers) that asks: what is the point of surviving in the face of an inevitable apocalypse? Conversely, the explosive rebirth of creation is equally as powerful as the destructive forces that end each cycle. BSG is unable to answer its own question, but it invites the audience to imagine a possible alternative *beyond* the cyclical ending when, after a period of quiescence marked by a 150,000-year leap into the future, the series starts the next cycle in the epilogue.

The second chapter examines the real-world consequences of unfulfilled plot expectations after a prolonged duration and the demand for multiple new forms of futurity since all endings resulted in the protagonist's death and represented a failure to adapt save one. The ending of the originally released video game, *Mass Effect 3*, was extremely controversial as the game's dystopian narrative seemed to underscore the inescapability of racial conflict through the propagation of Social Darwinist principles. The gamer's avatar, Shepard, embodies this



ideology, with the game's multiple endings necessitating her death and capitulation to a far more powerful species called the Reapers, symbolically acquiescing to their fatalistic political beliefs. Gamers felt their decisions had no effect on the ending which translated to a sense of meaninglessness. The extratextual outcry functioned as a quiescent moment in position to the text, a pause in narrative temporality that generated action from the developer Bioware to expand on each of the multiple endings beyond what the originals had implied. Gamer dissatisfaction extended to their unwillingness to imagine beyond the text themselves, revealing their anxieties over unknown futures devoid of a “happy” ending and a resistance to innovate using their own imagination.

In an experimental analysis, the third chapter investigates the unpublished and unfinished would-be third novel of Octavia Butler’s Parable series, *Parable of the Trickster*. Archival research reveals Butler’s false starts and research notes that span over a decade, illustrating her fight to develop a new vision of the future that valued community and advanced emotional intelligence. Arrested in this stage of quiescence, Butler’s struggle with writer’s block reveals the author’s pre-textual process of creativity in her attempt to speculate on human adaptation in an interplanetary future for humankind. I argue that having successfully written about human evolution in *Lilith’s Brood*<sup>1</sup> (2000) and the *Patternist* series (1976-1984), Butler found writing *Trickster* insurmountable because of its closeness to reality - in both existent time and biology.

This dissertation explores the intricate correlation between narrative desire and human survival prospects within the scope of three works of 21st-century science fiction. It delves into the texts’ capacity to address the convoluted facets of species survival through a paradigm of

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<sup>1</sup> The science fiction series, comprised of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), was originally combined in the now out-of-print book titled *Xenogenesis*. Later, the collection was reissued under the current title of *Lilith’s Brood* in 2000.

female narrative desire, thereby expanding an understanding of the unexplored narrative phase of quiescence. Such forms of desire, including narrative recurrence, duration, and emotional resolution, manifest through the texts *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mass Effect 3*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Trickster*. These insights align with Peter Brooks' model of narrative desire, explaining the force propelling narrative gratification. While species reproduction has traditionally been based on biological foundations, the rapid evolution of human survival and reproduction underscores the importance of narrative desire as an analytical tool for interpreting these texts. This accelerated pace of change also accentuates the role that science fiction may have in newly emerging contexts, highlighting the significance of narrative desire in understanding these shifts. The attempt at envisaging inventive narratives that foster our species' sustained existence and prosperity is captured through this analytical framework of structural female forms of desire in ways that a theme-based analysis would otherwise overlook, revealing the challenges of narrativizing a truly post-human future and illustrating the utility of narrative desire as a useful analytic for the plots of contemporary texts.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Methodology: Female Pleasure and Theories of Desire in Narrative Structure**

Narratology,<sup>2</sup> or narrative theory, has been enjoying a resurgence of interest throughout the world in recent years. Narrative theory studies the distinctive nature of narrative and its representations with the aim of discerning the basic mechanistic units, techniques, structures, components, uses, effects, and formulas of narrative which are common to all acts of storytelling. For example, one of the important fundamental distinctions of narratology used to examine plot is its ability to distinguish the chronological order of events contained within a story. This is referred to as *fabula* by the Russian formalists,<sup>3</sup> or as *story* in contemporary studies, from how narrative events are presented in any particular story (referred to as *syuzhet* by the formalists, or as *plot* in contemporary studies). Narratology is also crucial for examining how narratives affect perceptions and interpretations, for it postulates that narrative is an essential human strategy for coming to terms with the fundamental elements of experience. Narrative is a way of comprehending space, time, and causality. Thus, narratology goes beyond the reading and interpretation of *individual* stories and attempts to study the *nature of story itself* as a concept and as a cultural practice. Understanding what narrative is and how it operates is crucial for understanding what it means to be human. Narratives represent the complex ways in which people forge their identities, express their affiliations, make sense of their experiences, manage their memories, and craft meaning. Ultimately, stories offer the opportunity to develop an understanding that cannot be arrived at by any other means.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “narratology” is an anglicisation of French *narratologie*, which was coined by Tzvetan Todorov in his work *Grammaire du Décaméron*, published in 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Russian formalism was a school of literary criticism that flourished in Russia from the 1910s to the 1930s and included numerous highly influential pre-structuralist scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky, Vladimir Propp, and Roman Jakobson among others.

The attempt to explain how narratives operate and have such a powerful and seemingly universal hold over people is a theory referenced as “narrative desire,” which describes the reader’s experience of pleasure by the act of reading as well as the model of narrative dynamics that connects human experience of erotic desire to narrative structure. Roland Barthes, Peter Brooks, and Robert Scholes are prominent critics who established the paradigm that explains narrative as a cognitive process complexly related to sexual desire by articulating a critical analogy between Freud’s dynamic model of the psyche (referred to also as the “masterplot”) and the dynamics of beginnings, middles, and ends in traditional narrative.

In this dissertation, I will be revisiting a theoretical issue within narrative desire illuminated by feminist critics Theresa de Lauretis, Susan Lanser, and Susan Winnett who revealed how the theory was based on a male model of desire and was thus an androcentric paradigm that discounted female experience. Susan Winnett is the critic who comes closest to suggesting an alternative working model that incorporates female experience and pleasure but, as she openly acknowledges, it is not truly analogous to the original schema. This study shall suggest a third model that incorporates research from evolutionary biology and psychology to explicate female pleasure within the sexual paradigm of narrative desire. This critique opens a space to investigate other forms of narrative desire and their concomitant patterns within narrative structure as informed by research on female desire and evolutionary biology.

Opening up a critical view to these other forms of narrative structure provides an expanded set of analytical tools, it allows us to understand the ways that texts engage viewers’ expectations and desires and helps us to reconceive narrative openness, closure, and structures of temporality, speed, repetition and recursiveness through the experience of female bodily pleasure. This, in turn, develops our understanding of *quiescence* in the dynamic theory of

narrative, which by no means refutes the theory but expands it by hypothesizing female pleasure in an evolutionary context.<sup>4</sup> The notion of quiescence will evolve into a *pivotal theoretical framework* throughout this study that is intrinsic to the interpretation and close readings of each text.

I examine these structures in twentieth and twentieth century science fiction, a genre that intersects with evolutionary biology in its concerns with questions of species survival. I explore forms of narrative structure and desire whose pacing and patterning are more aligned with “female” forms of desire—marked by emotional resolution, communal forms of identification and cooperation as narrative drivers, and multiple climaxes—in contemporary science fiction narratives across a number of mediums, arguing that an attention to these structural questions are key to the texts’ imagination and representation of new forms of futurity.

### *Historical Context*

It is necessary to provide some historical background about narratology in order to precisely frame the context of this study. The origins of the methodology can be attributed to the publication of a special issue of the journal *Communications* in 1966.<sup>5</sup> Critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Gérard Genette, and Tzvetan Todorov contributed essays that are now considered foundational to narratology. Collectively, these authors were heavily influenced by the prior work of the Russian formalists, the fields of linguistics and anthropology, and Aristotelian philosophy. The development of this methodology occurred at the height of the French

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that there is a revised definition of reproduction informed by the research located in the introductory chapter. In addition to the hypothesis of female pleasure that it offers, this concept of reproduction provides an explanation for the role of non-reproductive and same-sex desire in the evolutionary narrative which has just as much potential to suggest alternative narrative forms or patterns as well; however, these could not be explored substantially due to the space constraints of this study.

<sup>5</sup> Major precursors to the field of narratology include structural linguistics (especially Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Anthropologie Structurale*, 1958), Russian formalism, and Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

structuralist intellectual movement (1966-1980), which is reflected in classical narratology's quest to create a formal system of analysis that could be universally applied to any narrative content.

Roland Barthes<sup>6</sup> was the first to propose an erotics<sup>7</sup> of reading in *S/Z* (1970) and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), in which he established a close connection between narrative structure and sexuality, literally associating the pleasures of the body with the "pleasure of the text." Although there are many possible factors which may contribute to the generation of pleasure from reading, Barthes' *S/Z* is one of the few works of literary scholarship which attempts to explicitly develop a theory of the pleasures of reading. In this document, Barthes argues that forward progression of plot is only part of the process,<sup>8</sup> and that forward progression can itself be separated into two elements: The hermeneutic code and the proairetic code, which together give rise to the desire to continue reading. The hermeneutic code is caused by unanswered questions, and the proairetic code is caused by the anticipation of the resolution of the action (Felluga 130). These two ways of creating suspense in a narrative can only exist in a temporal form with cause and effect at play, and the presence of either code can give rise to narrative desire.<sup>9</sup>

Barthes also states that one kind of pleasure (*plaisir*) is the result of a reader feeling as though they can make sense of a text easily, but that another kind of pleasure (*jouissance*) is the

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<sup>6</sup> Several posthumous collections of Barthes' writings have been published. Among them, *Incidents* (1987) revealed Barthes' homosexuality, which he had not publicly acknowledged. The relationship between Barthes' sexuality and the retrospective criticism that accuses Barthes' work as being exclusively male and heterosexual in relation to narrative desire is moot.

<sup>7</sup> It is understandable to expect that some theorists would discuss non-erotic desire, to represent desire in other than sexual terms, as cravings for money, power, knowledge, or God - but narrative theorists almost never stray from the sexual paradigm (Clayton 36).

<sup>8</sup> "Story" refers to the actual chronology of events in a narrative (as opposed to "discourse" which refers to the manipulation of that story in the presentation of the narrative).

<sup>9</sup> Narrative desire refers to the desire of the reader to continue reading. When a reader (film or tv audience member, video game player, etc.) is invested in the resolution of a story. This stems from a desire for the end.

result of a reader feeling as though they can make only partial sense of a text when it is first encountered, but nevertheless can do so in a way that is meaningful or significant, and which will be much more relevant later (Syrewicz 3). This distinction corresponds to a further contrast that Barthes makes between *texte lisible* and *texte scriptible*, translated respectively as "readerly/readable" and "writerly/writeable" texts.<sup>10</sup> Barthes explicitly and repeatedly references Freudian models throughout his works, and draws from psychoanalysis to describe an Oedipal relationship between the reader and the text. In her chapter on "Desire in Narrative," Theresa de Lauretis states: "once suggested, the connection between narrative and the Oedipus, desire and narrative, not only appears to be incontestable but... urges a reconsideration of narrative structure—or better, narrativity" (De Lauretis 105).

In *Reading for the Plot* (1984), Peter Brooks draws upon Freud's articulation of the human struggle between the pleasure principle and the death drive. This work represents a further attempt to align the libidinal with narrative structuration to deepen the understanding of how narratives operate. By doing so, Brooks begins to map the experience of pleasure and reproduction onto narrativity, asserting that the text can be read as a libidinal process made up of resistances and desires analogous to that of the psyche. For Brooks, plot is everything, for it mirrors the human psyche and is the logic of narrative discourse. He argues that plot is an inescapable human universal, essential to the mind's structuring of reality, and, perhaps more importantly, a model of the structure of the mind itself. Brooks concludes that Freud's theory of the self is also the "masterplot" of human narrative and leans heavily upon the plots of the nineteenth century classic novel, such as Arthur Conan Doyle's novels on Sherlock Holmes, to

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<sup>10</sup> While readerly texts can derive pleasure, writerly texts can derive bliss. The difference between a readerly and writerly text is the reader's position within the text. Texts that maintain readers as a subject are readerly texts while texts that challenge convention, literary codes, cultural positions, etc. can be writerly texts which produce bliss.

perform his analysis concentrating on the logic of the temporal structure to make sense of the drive the reader has to read until the end. Brooks describes how heroes may be seen as “‘desiring machines’ whose presence in the text creates and sustains narrative movement through the forward march of desire, projecting the self onto the world through scenarios of desire imagined and then acted upon” (40). The goal of the forward progression or narrative desire is to reach final closure; it is ultimately a: “‘desire *for* the end” (52). The end of the plot coincides with the death of desire:

a life that has outlived plot, renounced plot, been cured of it: life that is left over. Plot comes to resemble a diseased, feverish state of the organism caught up in the machinery of a desire which must eventually be renounced. Plot, we come to understand, was a state of abnormality or deviance.

In the works of Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, and Charles Dickens, where plot and desire had seemed so powerful and straightforward, what Brooks discovers and praises is an understanding that it is the anticipation of an ultimate quiescence that waits beyond all desire and all plot.

Like Brooks, Robert Scholes believes delay and climax constitute the essence of narrative, and he reinforces this idea of the heterosexual promise of reproduction in narrative structure by drawing an analogy between sexual intercourse and the rhythms of tension and release in narrative. This methodological connection is summarized by Scholes in this frequently quoted portion of his chapter on “The Orgastic Pattern of Fiction” in *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979):

The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act... what connects fiction - and music - with sex is the fundamental orgastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation. In the



sophisticated forms of fiction, as in the sophisticated practice of sex, much of the art consists of delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself. When we look at fiction with respect to its form alone, we see a pattern of events designed to move toward climax and resolution, balanced by a counter-pattern of events designed to delay the very climax and resolution.” (26)

For Brooks, narrative desire is a reading practice that is bounded (meaning everything is within the text), and it values deferral and displacement in service of the desire for the end. For Barthes, the focus on the “dilatory space” is intended to value the middle rather than the end of a narrative. Barthes highlights the importance of emphasizing delays, digressions, and deferrals rather than resolutions in ways that are unbounded (Lobb 6). Brooks’ notion of “narrative desire” and Barthes’ concept of the “dilatory space” are two post-structuralist psychoanalytic concepts that contribute to the overarching desire to reach closure. These two concepts are quite similar and closely related, even though one author seems to emphasize the middle more than the end of a narrative. One might equate straightforward narrative closure with easy “readerly” reading, and more challenging texts - with their more unconventional use of delays, digressions, deferrals of satisfaction, and potential openness - as writerly reading. They play off each other, and the more sophisticated the forms of desire that work in concert together, the more satisfying the outcome will be. Time is the organizing principle: Whether what is under discussion is progression or digression, it is still meaningful only in relation to our real-world sense of time.

In the 1980s, gender consciousness arose as the feminist interrogation of the classical model revealed it as being a “desexed” poetics guilty of masking an androcentric position (Lanser, “Gender”). Feminists revealed that classical models previously created by Barthes, Brooks, and Scholes were not as gender neutral and universal as they claimed to be. Instead, they

resembled a shape of plot that presumed a heterosexual male pattern of sexuality that lacked female representation, and which assumed the male experience represented the universal experience. Thus, this framework of understanding narrative desire was largely abandoned.

Instead, early feminist interventions considered women's relationship to the production of prose fiction by examining content and considering context to incorporate the cultural constructions of gender that previous classical approaches lacked. For example, questions pertaining to narrative authority, women writers, female points of view, and narrative empathy were now being factored into studies of plot.<sup>11</sup> Feminist theories of gendered plot formations view the representation of women in conventional linear sequential narrative as problematic. Early critics understandably thought of women's writing in terms of plotlessness because the historical realities experienced by women were presumed to be primarily focused upon the domestic space, because women did not often leave home. However, I take issue with this assumption. I note that even Lanser has commented upon the potential fallacy in thinking theories of plot may be inconsistent with what women have experienced both historically and textually, for she points out that "'adventure' plots of the kinds early feminists considered both masculine and definitional to plotting are surprisingly common in novels with female protagonists" ("Are We There Yet" 37). Claiming that women's writing is defined by plotlessness is, like the category of "woman" itself, a woefully over-generalized grouping that leaves no room for the variety of counterexamples that exist in reality throughout history.<sup>12</sup>

There are many more who have considered gendered plot formations that assume narrative

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<sup>11</sup>. For example, Rachel Blau DuPlessis challenged conventional thinking about plot by exploring what she saw as the different dynamics of women's narratives. Her emphasis throughout is on narrative endings as the moments when convention is most clearly exposed as ideology. Nancy K. Miller's article "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction" is another influential article of this time.

<sup>12</sup>. Such examples may include the emergence of the female action heroine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pre-existing archetype of the mythological warrior woman, or women of early American frontier literature.

structure is gendered and linked with social structure; Rachel Blau DuPlessis argued that women “write beyond the ending,” Nancy K. Miller discussed dynamic refusal and helped “expose notions of plot as male-centered constructs masquerading as universal norms,” and Maria Brewer equated plot with a masculine need for “adventure, project, enterprise, and conquest” (Lanser, “Gender”).

It may be worth noting here that coming within range of this interrogation of female pleasure in narrative structure are the collective thoughts on the *écriture féminine* and *jouissance* proposed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by early poststructuralist French feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Although they introduce theories of the body into discourse that deal explicitly with pleasure, the concepts of *jouissance* and the *écriture féminine* extend beyond the boundaries of this study (although this French feminist theoretical discourse strongly influenced feminism in narratological approaches).

The binary model of these initial feminist interventions received criticism<sup>13</sup> for grouping women into a single category utilizing a deductive approach built on the premise of difference. The intersectional approach that followed in the 1990s abandoned the presumptive implications of gender and worked upward by inductively examining specific and diverse textual instances and taking into account the specificities of multiple social vectors.<sup>14</sup> In effect, feminists transformed narrative theory and analysis by making inquiries which are conscious of identity into previous formalisms,<sup>15</sup> which ushered in the era of postclassical narratology.

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<sup>13</sup>. First wave feminist works were more Anglo, American, post-1800, novelistic, and cinematic rather than global, pre-1800, and pan-generic.

<sup>14</sup> The theory of intersectionality argues “that diverse aspects of identity converge to create the social positions, perceptions, limitations, and opportunities of individuals and groups,” thus considering details such as nationality, age, race, and social class (Lanser, “Gender”).

<sup>15</sup>. Intersectionality maintains that no coherent female or male experience exists even within a single culture - let alone across cultures. This is because cultures are always constituted from within, and, in turn constitute, aspects of identity, location, individual agency, and discursive realm. Rather than adopting a deductive approach by starting with the premise of difference, as was usually the case for feminist narratology in the 1980s, an intersectional

The emergence of queer theory in the 1990s considered the implications of sexuality for narrative analysis. This approach further dismantled conventional categories of sexuality and gender by designating non-heteronormative sexual identities and attempted to consider practices that transgressed or deconstructed these categories and binaries. Of particular interest to scholars of sexuality and narrative is whether narrative is “irrecoverably heteronormative or, conversely, is capable of ‘queering’” (Lanser, “Gender”). Lee Edelman’s *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory* (1994), Marilyn Farel’s *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (1996), and David A. Miller’s often quoted *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (1992) all investigate the question of heteronormativity in narrative. Broadly speaking, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner explain heteronormativity most succinctly as a system of “institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations” that privilege heterosexuality even in “contexts that have little visible relation to sexual practice” (Berlant 548). Despite an ever-growing body of work that continues to investigate heteronormativity in narrative, the theory of narrative desire as outlined by Barthes, Brooks, and Scholes remains as a problematic concept due to its exclusivity of female, non-reproductive, and same-sex forms of desire.

### ***Direct Challenges to the Theory of Narrative Desire***

This historical background has provided an overview of the development of narratology to illustrate how narratology has broadly engaged questions concerning gender and sexuality to date. As just overviewed in the preceding paragraphs, discussions of narrative structure can and have persisted without exploring, specifically, the relationship of structure to desire. What feminist interventions (which will be discussed shortly) have been performed to address narrative desire within the specified parameters set out by Barthes, Brooks, and Scholes have been few

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narratology works upwards to narratological theory from the careful study of many and diverse textual instances.

and far between. Without such a theoretical explanation for structure in narratology, in which narrative desire is a large part, contemporary narratological analysis feels somehow incomplete.

It is important to discuss narrative desire in relation to our analysis of narrative structure or plot form because desire is the foundation of story and thus it is the primary source of story energy. Desire triggers action, igniting the cause-and-effect chain that can only exist temporally, and it is nearly synonymous with the protagonist. Furthermore, there are hierarchical layers to desire in narrative. On a content level, most every character desire is a result of some deeper desire, with that deeper desire being the stimulus for the superficial desire. On the level of reader experience, their desire to reach the end of a story is informed by the narrative structure, which in turn gets its libidinal energy and forward momentum from the dynamics of this sense-making theory regarding human sexual experience and our imperative to reproduce geared towards fulfilling an evolutionary narrative.

When one thinks of the components of plot - exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, denouement - they typically have in mind a traditional plot form that is linear in shape with a beginning, middle, and end. According to narrative desire, this structure mirrors the experience of erotic male pleasure. It is considered heterosexual due to the presence of the resolution after climax which, both symbolically and conceptually, represents the promise of continued reproduction and survival (and is oftentimes explicitly stated within the content of a story as evidenced by such phrases as "...and so they lived happily ever after"). The logical conclusion is that *this idea posits male climax as a necessity for reproduction whereas female climax is not*. This is the theoretical quagmire of narrative desire, and it is the stumbling block which this study hopes to rectify by making the case for female pleasure which, in turn, may be used to expand the theory of narrative desire.

Theresa de Lauretis' chapter on "Desire in Narrative" in *Alice Doesn't* (1984) was the first well-known work to engage theories of narrative desire. De Lauretis demonstrates that the Oedipal shape of plot,<sup>16</sup> as we have come to understand it, presumes a biologically male pattern of desire and therefore "faults structuralist models for their inability to disclose the ways in which narrative operates, through the desires it excites and fulfills, to construct the social world as a system of sexual differences" (Clayton 34). De Lauretis attempts to historicize the concept of desire, however, since "Sexuality is more often regarded as a universal, unchanging aspect of human character than is, say, the desire for material possessions," developing a historical model of desire is far from easy or straightforward (Clayton 36). There has been much work in feminist film theory that follows de Lauretis and examines Oedipal structure in narrative film in relation to visual pleasure, but not all that much work explicitly engages the narratologies of Brooks and Scholes, with the exception of Susan Winnett's "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure."

Building upon de Lauretis, Susan Winnett's excellent opening in "Coming Unstrung" (1990) lays out the "problem" of female pleasure succinctly:

I would like to begin with the proposition that female orgasm is unnecessary. I am not, of course, saying that it is unnecessary to any particular woman that she experience orgasm or, for that matter, to any particular man that his female partner do so; rather, I mean that women's orgasm and, by extension, women's pleasure can be extraneous to that culmination of heterosexual desire which is copulation. Women's pleasure can take place outside, or independent of, the male sexual economy whose pulsations determine the

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<sup>16</sup>. Lauretis used a post-structuralist psychoanalytic approach to expose the gendered Oedipal structure both of narrative desire and of narratological language in conventional understandings of narrativity and plot.

dominant culture, its repressions, its taboos, and its narratives, as well as the “human sciences” developed to explain them. (505)

Winnett proceeds to adeptly challenge the works of Brooks and Scholes by arguing that the female experience of birth and breastfeeding are the most representable instances of tumescence and detumescence, of arousal and significant discharge, that are so integral to conceptualizations of narrative dynamics. Significantly, *she is the first to link the female body to dynamic narrative patterns*. However, the experience of childbirth is not a universal female experience and, as she points out, birth and breastfeeding “do not culminate in a quiescence that can bearably be conceptualized as a simulacrum of death, they neither need nor can confer on themselves the kind of retrospective significance attained by analogy with the pleasure principle” (509).

Winnett’s approach opens up an alternative possibility for female pleasure in narrative desire to take hold and it is true that motherhood has been a major consideration of many works on gendered plot formations. However, the percentage of women who remain childless (voluntarily, due to physical inability, or circumstances beyond their control) have waxed and waned throughout history for a variety of reasons. In the Early Modern period, even if women conceived frequently, each pregnancy had no better than a 50% chance of going to term (Cressy 47), and demographic historians have posited a general infant mortality rate of 170 per 1,000 births in England between 1650 and 1699 (McEwan). In 2014, 47.6 percent of women in the United States between age 15 and 44 had never had children, and 28.9 percent of women ages 30-34 are childfree (US Census Bureau). Statistically speaking, this is quite significant. While pregnancy and motherhood may be major themes of female experience, they are by no means universal. An emphasis on pregnancy and motherhood also side-steps the issue of quiescence and still positions heterosexual male climax during copulation as necessary to procreation and the

successful reproduction of the species whereas the female body, although needed to bring a child to term, does not necessarily *need* to experience pleasure for this reproductive chain of events to occur.

I propose an alternative way to challenge this theory. I revisit narrative desire equipped with the gender conscious insights and awareness acquired from feminist and queer methodologies, but I will temporarily relinquish their contextual, synthesizing, and intersectional approach to narrative studies to focus on the evolutionary reasons for female pleasure as proposed in evolutionary biology and psychology. Theorists did not have to rely on biology to make the case that male heterosexual pleasure is *necessary* to reproduction because it is visible - and thus easily observable and understood. As mentioned earlier, these theorists probably were not aware that they were excluding female pleasure from the formulation. Rather, they seem to have falsely assumed that male experience represented universal experience. However, given the presumed link established between the pleasures of the text and the pleasures of the body, the case must be made - on a reproductive and evolutionary level - for how female pleasure is also *necessary* for successful reproduction. This is because again, unlike male climax, the prior belief has been that it is not necessary for females to climax in order for pregnancy to occur. It is the retrospective gender conscious perspective of the original formula that immerses the theory in the language of biology at this stage of development. This explanation of female experience does not necessarily depend upon science for justification. Rather, given how the original theory was formulated, the following approach represents a need for this explanation to stay within the parameters set out by the question of reproduction. Demonstrating how female pleasure fits into the reproductive formula is a crucial factor in the development of this theory, and considerable time must be devoted to engaging evolutionary theories from various sources. This requires



stripping bare all gender constructions from the initial conversation. This is because the examination of reproduction will have to be discussed in terms of biological difference of sex not gender, which, for the purposes of advancing the argument, necessitates the strict use of binary language when discussing the female and male sex<sup>17</sup> of the species.

### ***The Case for Female Pleasure: Evolutionary Theories***

The effort to focus discussion on the singular topic of female pleasure in relation to reproduction has been met with many challenges. This is because, according to the scientific literature, female orgasm does not appear to have any direct relationship to reproductive success. The function of female orgasm within the evolutionary narrative is elusive, for there is no consensus within the scientific community as to its adaptive function. In her book on female sexuality entitled *Come As You Are*, Emily Nagoski writes that female orgasms exist as a byproduct, “a result of the fact that male and female genitals develop homologously.” She says “the theory best supported by the available evidence<sup>18</sup> is that women’s orgasm is not an evolutionary adaptation. Women’s orgasm has no relationship to reproductive success, it doesn’t promote egg fertilization or prevent miscarriage, it doesn’t even ‘suck’ sperm into the uterus” (277). Nagoski’s discussion of orgasms leads to the necessity of discussing women’s sexual wellbeing, which turns out to be heavily context dependent (the significance of how it pertains to this study will be revisited shortly). However, evolutionary psychology provides competing

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<sup>17</sup> At present, geneticists lack consensus as to whether more than two sexes, male and female, exist. Some argue the binary is overly simplistic, citing intersex conditions or disorders of sex development where the chromosomes are at odds with the sexual anatomy of a person (Ainsworth). While others argue that biological karyotypes (for example, those with XXY known as Klinefelter syndrome or X known as Turner’s syndrome), are not sexes because karyotypes are simply an individual’s collection of chromosomes. The latter maintains that in biology, sexes are defined by reproductive role - evolutionary mechanisms by which individuals reproduce - and in a species like ours that reproduce through two gametes of differing size, there are only two sexes (Elliott).

<sup>18</sup>. Nagoski cites feminist philosopher of science Elisabeth Lloyd’s study that included forty years of research and more than twenty theories as to why women have orgasms in *The Case of the Female Orgasm: Bias in the Science of Evolution*.

theories as to the evolutionary utility of female orgasm. In her monograph *Gender, Sexuality and Reproduction in Evolutionary Narratives*, Venla Oikkonen identifies the instabilities and inconsistencies in current evolutionary discourse, which are offered up for feminist and queer revisions. Rather than making the outright claim that female orgasm is not necessary to reproduction, Oikkonen writes that female orgasm occupies “an ambiguous position between the realms of reproductive and nonreproductive pleasures: [that] neither necessarily excludes nor necessarily includes a reproductive act” (12). By citing James A. Steintrager, she also reinforces our previous understanding from the classical narratological model that “unlike the male orgasm, which links the lure of pleasure to the survival of the species in a seemingly unproblematic fashion, the function of female orgasm is not so obvious” (133).<sup>19</sup> The claim that female orgasm is simply an evolutionary mystery or may have absolutely no relationship to successful reproduction is indeed problematic when considered in terms of the development of this analysis, especially if one continues to interpret “reproduction” in the traditionally narrow fashion that science has typically done.

The key to a more successful model may exist in how reproduction is defined. In order to expand our definition to allow for more accuracy in the evolutionary narrative, an examination of current hypotheses on the social evolutionary utility of female orgasm is required. The following three hypotheses represent the most widely accepted models in the social sciences that, taken as a whole, provide a role for female orgasm within the evolutionary narrative.

Oikkonen carefully considers two of the three hypotheses chosen. Oikkonen makes a distinction between pleasure and desire that naturally aligns with our understanding of narrative as a heterosexual reproductive sex act: “Since behavior is defined as reproductive at the outset –

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<sup>19</sup>. Emily Nagoski’s *Come As You Are* says that female orgasm is not an evolutionary adaptation, and refocuses the goal in female sexuality on female pleasure rather than orgasm, which has further implications for this study.

that is, only penis-in-vagina sex counts as a narrative event – pleasure becomes equated with orgasm during heterosexual intercourse and desire with the genetically hard-wired urge to maximize one’s reproductive success” (136). Just as it is in Brooks, *desire* is defined here as a yearning for the end that results in successful reproduction, whereas *pleasure* refers specifically to the orgasm. Furthermore, Oikkonen states: “popular science texts on female orgasm often portray this inferred desire as the originating actor that motivates both pleasure and the reproductive act itself” (136). Female desire and pleasure have a cyclical relationship, where female desire for successful reproduction is the origin of female pleasure. Within this context, she considers Geoffrey Miller’s evolutionary account for female orgasm in *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*.

This first hypothesis put forward by Miller considers the “fickle” nature of the female orgasm and the fact that intercourse does not automatically result in orgasm, which leads him to suggest female orgasm is “a mechanism of female choice” (Oikkonen 136). Miller states that “from a sexual selection viewpoint, clitorises should respond only to men who demonstrate high fitness, including the physical fitness necessary for long, energetic sex, and the mental fitness necessary to understand what women want and how to deliver it” (Miller 239). “Female choosiness” or the choice of a female to orgasm or not, then, represents the selection of a desirable mate whose primary quality is their stamina as measured by the duration of the episode of sexual intercourse. The longer the duration of intercourse, the higher the overall fitness level of a specific male, and the greater the likelihood the female will climax - all of which ultimately improves the probability for successful reproduction. Conversely, the lack of a female orgasm could potentially indicate a poor selection of partner that may, in turn, result in a lack of

reproduction or unhealthy offspring. According to this formulation, prolonged duration or length of sexual intercourse is a determinant of female pleasure.

A second theory Oikkonen cites is “pair bonding,” which has been around since Desmond Morris first suggested it in his book, *The Naked Ape* (1967). The pair bond theory posits that hunting was a key evolutionary event that led to the development of social skills and the emergence of modern societies, ushering in the gendered division of labor that defined men as breadwinners and women as dependent partners, all of which encouraged monogamy. Morris claims “female orgasm appeared with the monogamous family unit, encouraging women to commit themselves to only one male by creating an emotional bond” (Oikkonen 134). According to Morris, the development of physical intimacy had evolutionary consequences for both men and women: Men could trust that their partner was not having sex with other men when they were away hunting, and women, due to the relative difficulty in achieving female orgasm, selected mates with advantageous qualities such as intelligence, imagination, patience, and care rather than primal aggression. The importance placed on such “alternative” male qualities support social cohesion and the family unit within a web of social organization. The female decision to select a particular male partner with whom they will develop an intimate relationship must precede the sexual act (and successful female orgasm). In other words, in the pair-bond theory an emotional resolution constitutes female pleasure.

A third hypothesis is raised in a provocative study of pre-agricultural early modern humans by evolutionary psychologists Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá. Their book *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What it Means for Modern Relationships* (2013) addresses both how long it takes for females to achieve orgasm as well as their ability to experience multiple orgasms. They hypothesize that egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies

developed sexual interactions that were treated like a shared resource in which no individual took an exclusive partner. They explain the length it takes for women to experience climax as a reward system geared toward promoting female promiscuity and sperm competition. Ryan and Jethá ask, “why would women have evolved the capacity for slow-building multiple orgasms while males evolved the orgasmic response of minutemen accompanied by a sudden disappearance of all interest in sex?” (51). Whenever a female became sexually aroused, she would find a male partner to copulate with who would soon climax, ejaculate, then walk away disinterested and unable to have more sex. The public display of intercourse would excite other males who would be drawn to the scene, who would then wait his turn. This multimale-multifemale mating system ensured genetic mixing within small groups by encouraging men to climax quickly and women to develop the capacity for multiple orgasms. However, most importantly these differing sexual arousal patterns ensured that sex would continue long enough for the female to experience orgasm, promote healthy sperm competition, and increase the probability the group would successfully reproduce. Since intercourse with multiple partners was so frequent, social bonds were strengthened within the group and concerns about the paternity of any specific infant were nonexistent. According to the authors of *Sex at Dawn*, a woman’s capacity for slow-building multiple climaxes is constitutive of reproduction and the arousal patterns of female pleasure.

For the purposes of this study, two consistent themes can be extracted from these three hypotheses. First, these hypotheses indicate a need for an expanded definition of reproduction that includes female pleasure in the evolutionary narrative. Although drawing from research in evolutionary biology<sup>20</sup> and psychology may superficially appear to be an effort to use science to

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<sup>20</sup>. While there may be some overlap in regard to an approach that views text as a manifestation of a universal human nature, the way in which research from evolutionary biology is being employed in this study is for distinctly

provide the “ultimate truth” about a philosophical issue, the development of this theory is actually intended to highlight a problematic issue of which the sciences are always at risk: The potential for a flawed interpretation of information. This will involve an effort to more accurately create an expansive definition of successful sexual reproduction that encompasses more than just copulation, conception, and birth. These factors represent only half the (evolutionary) story. Second, these hypotheses have identified prolonged duration, emotional resolution, and multiple climaxes as the primary characteristics of female pleasure, and we can begin to see how these traits manifest as patterns in a narrative structural analysis.

### ***The Case for Female Pleasure: Expanding the Definition of Successful Reproduction***

Let us now examine the biological definition of reproduction offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is as follows: “The production by living organisms of new individuals or offspring; *the perpetuation of a species by this process*; the power of reproducing in this way. Also: the process or mechanism by which this takes place, whether sexual or asexual in nature.” The emphasis on the perpetuation of a species by this process is what enables female pleasure to become part of the evolutionary narrative. The varying accounts of female orgasm in the evolutionary narrative presented above culminate to redefine reproduction as something more than merely the outcome of a baby being born. If the conventional description of the heterosexual sex act and of male experience understands successful reproduction as the perpetuation of genetic material manifested in the form of a child, then the female experience of successful reproduction emphasizes a need for the maintenance and safeguarding of social order and cohesion for a community to ensure that child survives. The popular adage “it takes a village to raise a child” may turn out to hold more than anecdotal validity, for it may contain a biological

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narratological purposes and is not to be confused with the branch of literary criticism known as “evolutionary literary theory” (also known as “literary Darwinism” or “Darwinian literary studies”).

truth as well. Giving birth to a child is only one early step in the larger process of successful reproduction. The continued survival and prosperity of the child is entirely dependent upon the existence of a surrounding social network strong enough to raise it to adulthood. Each hypothesis discussed so far affirms the idea that social cohesion is necessary in order for successful reproduction to take place: a “choosy clitoris” seeks out a mate with a high level of fitness both physically and mentally; pair bonding requires an emotional resolution that is partially based on whether or not the male in question will exhibit qualities that encourage social cohesion; and, finally, multiple climaxes enabling multi-partner sex encourage social bonding. An *expanded* definition of reproductive success is far more accurate, and within its parameters female orgasm is necessary for successful reproduction.

### ***The Case for Female Pleasure: Narrative Patterns***

Given all the foregoing, it would seem prolonged duration, emotional resolution and multiple climaxes are the defining characteristics of female pleasure that work together in accordance with a desire for successful reproduction. This is not to say that the reproductive equation laid out by Brooks is rendered invalid by this articulation of female pleasure. Rather, this is an attempt to identify qualities experienced by both women and men during a pleasurable act, so that patterns of sexual difference may be revealed in narrative form and understood as integral to narrative structure. If we align the fundamental pattern of male pleasure with conventional narrative structure, we find it is linear in shape and goal oriented. The movement toward a climactic catharsis is composed of complications that delay progress, but once the action has been achieved, the reader enjoys a profound release of pressure that accompanies the relief at having made sense of the narrative world. It is much like the rhythms of music, where counter-movements are in constant need of resolution so that harmonization may be achieved to

create a pleasurable whole. The evidence for this narrative structure is further supported by the visibility of male tumescence and detumescence, for nothing can truly illustrate the buildup and release of tension more fundamentally than this.

How do the three characteristics of female pleasure manifest in narrative structure? The concept of duration, the length of action of any given event, may initially appear to be strikingly similar in narrative form to the concept of male delay but, linguistically, we can observe the difference in where emphasis is placed. For women, prolonged duration implies continuance, perpetuation, and endurance, which suggests *a prolongation of movement*. The emphasis is placed on the journey itself rather than the goal. Whereas for men, delay implies the *postponement of an anticipated action or event*, it is a discontinuation, a deferral, or a suspension of movement. The emphasis is placed on the goal, which is trying to be reached, rather than upon the journey of which the goal is merely one part.

Likewise, female emotional resolution is the inverse of masculine linearity in narrative form. The discussion of narrative origin in psychoanalysis and narratology are crucially important. A linear construct requires a beginning, middle and end that strongly suggests an origin must be present at the beginning for all cause and effect to ensue. However, female pleasure demands that an emotional resolution is required before the narrative event. The emotional resolution is based on the projection of an ultimate outcome, not just the end restoration of harmony between two parties, which situates the origin *at the end* as opposed to the beginning. In other words, the motivation to embark on the narrative journey arises from a decision based on conclusions and future projections. It is a radically different way of understanding origins in narrative form.



Finally, the capacity women have to experience multiple climaxes dramatically alters the shape of conventional form in a manner distinct from the all-encompassing, dramatically *singular* male experience of climax. Whereas delay → climax → reproduction emphasizes forward movement and linearity, the experience of one female climax does not necessarily signal an ultimate end. A new beginning can immediately materialize, creating multiple new cycles of narrative events that may or may not carry over thematic content from a previous cycle. Therefore, when speaking in terms of narrative structure, multiple climaxes will henceforth be referred to as a cycle or narrative recurrence, as that is its corresponding narrative pattern.

### ***Non-Reproductive and Same-Sex Desire***

Given the advancement in scholarship containing the work that has been done on queer theory in recent decades, before intersectional methodologies are reincorporated into the theory, the topic of non-reproductive and same-sex desire must be broached. Approximately 4.5% of the United States population identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered, which is not an inconsequential minority (Gallup). Although there is a lack of historical data with which to compare these numbers, same-gender sexuality is mentioned in even the earliest known literature in all regions of the world and throughout recorded history<sup>21</sup>. Female and male heterosexuality has been discussed at length because so much of the emphasis of the *original* theory has been fixated on the narrow definition of reproduction as impregnation, but the question of non-reproductive and same-sex preference cannot be ignored. As was done previously to make the case for the female experience of pleasure, biology can also be used to provide potential insight into the relationship between non-reproductive and same-sex desire and the theory of narrative desire.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, the term “two-spirit” is used by some Indigenous North Americans to describe Native people in their communities who fulfilled a traditional third gender or other gender-variant role in their culture (Two Spirit).

The means by which relevant genetic material that may contribute to same-sex desire might be passed on to subsequent generations when same-sex attraction does not result in reproduction is still largely a mystery. Currently, researchers concur that sexual preferences indeed have a genetic component, but that no one single gene has a large effect on sexual behaviors. There is a lack of hard data for anything more definitive to be said at present, but even so, some hypotheses do exist. It is noteworthy that two of the three leading hypotheses that suggest an explanation for the evolutionary purpose for same-sex desire have to do with offering social support and capital for the enormous resource cost of child rearing, which further emphasizes that successful reproduction can only succeed in the context of community.

First, and as discussed earlier regarding the female experience of pleasure, Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá's *Sex at Dawn* studied human relations in pre-agricultural human societies. Ryan and Jethá also suggest that "third gendered" individuals (which include identities approximating Western gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people) may have maintained a primary relationship with members of the same sex but nevertheless still have had biological children of their own in order to raise them communally. In a society where comparatively infrequent heterosexual couplings occurred, such same-sex sexual interactions would have provided social capital to support any children produced. This view is also consistent with the hypothesis that ecologist and evolutionary biologist Joan Roughgarden proposed in her book *Evolution's Rainbow*, which explains how same-sex activity can foster social relationships in support of reproductive sex. Second, in their article "Same-Sex Sexual Behavior and Evolution," N. Bailey and M. Zuk hypothesize that same-sex couplings may make up for a lack of direct reproduction by increasing the reproductive success of their close relatives by providing the heterosexual relations and their offspring more child-rearing support and resources. Finally, some evidence

suggests that genes associated with same-sex attraction in men may provide a fitness boost in women, making them more fertile. A study in 2004 found that women related to gay men have more children (Camperio-Ciani 2004), which reinforces this possibility. In 2006, biologists Sergey Gavrilets and William Rice used a mathematical model of selection on same-sex sexuality to consider this hypothesis and found that a female fertility boost could indeed allow male same-sex sexuality to persist (Yoder).

Non-reproductive desire can reference both same-sex desire and heterosexual desire. Although not every heterosexual coupling has the intention of procreating, the bodily sensation of erotic desire only exists because its evolutionary purpose is reproduction. This makes even more sense when one includes the necessity of community for successful child rearing as part of the definition for reproduction. Just because non-reproductive desire is meant to describe desire that does not have the intention of procreation, it cannot escape the fact that its existence is due to its role in an evolutionary framework – in this context, all erotic desire exists to support having and rearing a child. Therefore, female and male experience of pleasure naturally includes same-sex desire, those who experience desire towards the opposite sex, and those who experience both. Regardless of sexual orientation, the capacity for females, males, and intersex people to experience pleasure is present (or absent depending on where one falls on a continuum of experience). Pleasure, as it relates to reproduction, is an evolutionary trait that applies to every member of the species. Based on the logic of this research, it follows that same-sex and non-reproductive desire may have just as much potential to suggest alternative narrative forms or patterns as well. Although these alternative forms could not be explored substantially due to the space constraints of this study, they will be revisited in the final chapter as suggestions for where this study may go next.

### *An Alternative Model of Narrative Desire*

Briefly, let us revisit the relation established between Freud's plotting of life trajectory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the dynamics of beginnings, middles, and ends in traditional narrative that Peter Brooks makes in *Reading for the Plot* (90-112). Winnett summarizes the language of these dynamics well when she explains:

Male orgasm is preceded by a visible "awakening, an arousal, the birth of an appetency, ambition, desire or intention." The male organ registers the intensity of this stimulation, rising to the occasion of its provocation, becoming at once the means of pleasure and culture's sign of power. This energy "aroused into expectancy," takes its course toward "significant discharge" and shrinks into a state of quiescence (or satisfaction) that, minutes before, would have been a sign of impotence. The man must have this genital response before he can participate, which means that something in the time before intercourse must have aroused him. And his participation generally ceases with the ejaculation that signals the end of his arousal. The myth of the afterglow -- so often a euphemism for sleep -- seems a compensation for the finality he has reached." (505-506)

Greatly condensed, the dynamics of this basic narrative model and its Freudian relations would look something like this: *beginning* (awakening, arousal, birth), *middle* (repetition of tension and release due to expectancy), and *end* (climax immediately followed by quiescence). Here is described a distinction between climax as the end of plot action and quiescence as the stillness that follows. They are both seen as distinct sections located within the vicinity of one another at the end, which creates the anticipation of the "structuring power... that will retrospectively give [it] the order and significance of plot" (Brooks 94).

If we reconceive the dynamics of narrative (openness, closure, etc.) through female pleasure in a reproductive and evolutionary narrative, then one observes three possible narrative patterns that are characteristic of female pleasure (cyclicity, emotional resolution, and prolonged duration). Through textual analysis of the reimagined television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009), video game franchise *Mass Effect* (2007-2012), and Octavia Butler's unfinished and unpublished work *Parable of the Trickster*, I find that patterns marked by "female" desire place more of an emphasis on the space of narrative *beyond* the ending, where *quiescence is located*. It is a liminal space of suspended temporality located at the boundary of story's end, a transitional space involving rebirth which, in the figurative sense, would be a creative genesis. Quiescence is a *gestation* period of creativity. Using language around birth superficially appears similar to a portion of Winnett's argument, however, unlike Winnett I consider the *potential* for motherhood to underpin this theory since not all women become mothers and because the evolutionary imperative attempts to provide the possibility of reproduction for all. The forms of desire discussed here – cyclicity, emotional resolution, prolonged duration – emphasize quiescence over ending, and emotional resolution over plot climax.

I am going to suggest that when reconceived through female pleasure, one can observe how cyclical forms emphasize the significance and creative power of quiescence as the expanse of story matter that extends *beyond* the plot's ending and reaches back around to *before* the beginning's "awakening." This space is distinguished almost as a fourth stage where only this liminal space exists. The continuity of quiescence bridges the after-end and pre-beginning of stillness but is poorly represented linearly in the original model. It is much better understood as it is represented in cyclical form. Circles themselves are continuous and appear to have no

beginning nor end, so it might be more accurate to think of narrative cycles more like the Japanese representation of the circular form called *enso*. The enso is a part of the sacred calligraphy of the East, where you can observe the calligrapher's distinct brush stroke where it initially hits the page and is most inky and solid black from the force of contact. The continuous brush stroke then trails off before returning to its point of origin where an increasing number of brush lines of black ink fall away to leave only a few strands to fully connect with the circle's beginning. Where those few strands overlap to connect with the forceful start of the motion is where quiescence is located. In keeping with the metaphor of pregnancy, it is the space where a primordial birth takes place, a gestation period where unseen creative possibilities manifest and where the previous story matter is pulled apart to then be reformed. The transition from stillness to motion is like a violent rebirth of explosive energy and movement because a story's beginning comes seemingly out of nowhere. We are dropped there, and our introduction is decisive and instant. A descriptive moment in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) captures this well, as the author's imagination about the slow processes of time tell us of the instance a "rupture" occurs, when 'as after centuries of quiescence, a rock rends itself from the mountain and hurtles crashing into the valley' (196). Time is inexorable and immense in its rupturing effects. Death rears its head" (Doyle 63). Much like starting the story in medias res, such as in Homer's epic the *Odyssey*, there is no easing into the story world.

The location of quiescence is important and, as perhaps observed, is even located in the same spot as it is situated within the original model. Since, to maintain the narrative dynamics of desire in plot, tension and release must still work like it does in the earlier model as they are foundational to the operation of narrative structure. Reconceiving another form of narrative desire through female pleasure is emotional resolution. The concept of emotional resolution can

either represent the settlement of a protagonist's tumultuous emotional state or it can be understood as a second climax. For example, commonly referred to as the "B" storyline in Hollywood narrative cinema, the emotional resolution is almost always situated after the plot climax of a traditional narrative structure. Therefore, it too is often located at the end although it may not be inflected with the same sense of finality to it as, perhaps, a plot climax due to the multifaceted nature of emotion. It maintains a quality of openness and the promise of futurity, as one cycle comes to a close there is almost always the implication that the story continues beyond the end point of the text, whether positive or negative. Just like the promise of futurity that fulfilling the androcentric model maintains, a promise of futurity accompanies the satisfying of emotional needs in this alternative model of narrative desire. In this state of quiescent satisfaction, the imagination of futurity abounds in the imagination of the story consumer who, for the purposes of this study, are the readers, gamers, or audience members. The literary trope "happily ever after" effectively symbolizes this imaginative stage while also implying futurity. Often, this is the last line found in romantic fairy tales where one may imagine, through its wording, where the story may have continued had it not ended.

Emotional resolution offers a future that is made possible by forging emotional bonds. Imagining the futurity of a text thus takes place beyond the end, created by the preceding emotional resolution, and since this inventive space co-exists with the quiescent stage within a cyclical form, it will also be found before the beginning as well. This aligns with the research on female pleasure, as a reminder, it designs emotional resolution as a goal for the sake of community cohesion since communal cooperation is necessary to provide the resources that rearing a child demands. Equally important, the research also highlighted how feelings of security were vital to the conditions for female pleasure to arise. In other words, female desire

requires that one feels reasonably safe with a partner, which must occur *before* sexual activity commences. As a concomitant narrative form to female pleasure, emotional resolution then also co-exists with quiescence as a condition that must be satisfied both *before* the beginning and *after* the end to maintain the dynamics that produce narrative desire.

When discussing the final “female” form of desire that I have termed “prolonged duration,” it must be clarified that this is not to be confused with Gerard Genette’s use of the term, which refers to the pace at which events take place in his masterwork *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Or, if it must be likened to one of the four speeds of narration he describes, then perhaps it would have some relation to a “scene” which, according to Gerard, means the speed of narration is relatively slow. However, I am more interested in how it relates to the “female” body and in so doing, I discuss duration in terms of length, not necessarily speed or pace. As one of the patterns highlighted, the prolonged duration of a narrative – not necessarily in the story world but in the experience of consuming it – appears to be an important characteristic that is interrelated to emotional resolution and communal forms of identification and cooperation. Duration, as it relates to female pleasure, implies an emphasis on the journey rather than the goal. It emphasizes the significance of narratives middles on a grand scale as found in a series or a metanarrative because there is so much time investment on both the part of the reader, gamer, or audience member in reality and on the character development, relationships, and narrative complexity that takes place in the story world. It is appropriate then, that each text selected for this study is a series of some kind, where the time needed to engage the story is as significant as the story complexity itself. I have provided a visual aid below to illustrate the structures and concepts of the original model alongside the alternative model proposed in this study in an effort to provide as much clarity as possible. I wish to demonstrate



how the alternative model suggested “fits” the pre-existing model as it pertains to form while it also radically reconceives the interpretation of each structural stage and resulting narrative dynamic due to the consideration of female pleasure. One will notice that only two columns are used to reference traditional structure and male pleasure since they are so commonly referred to synonymously, whereas I have provided three columns for the alternative model to deconstruct each stage of this study’s research and logic.

Narrative Structure: <i>Linear Form</i>	Narrative Patterns and <i>Male Pleasure</i>	Narrative Structure: <i>Circular Form</i>	<i>Female Pleasure</i> (Defined by Evolutionary Narrative)	Narrative Patterns and <i>Female Forms of Desire</i>
Quiescence	Satisfaction, Refractory Period, Barrier, Post-Coital, Inactivity	Quiescence	Plateau, No Refractory Period, Closure and Openness, Emotional Bonding, Security, Inactivity	Primordial Space of Creative Gestation, Inception, Suspended Temporality, Emotional Resolution, Pre-Beginning
Beginning	Awakening, Arousal, Birth, Linear Form, Active, Temporal	Beginning	Start of a New Cycle in Multiple Climax, Active, Temporal	Cycles, Recurrence, Repetition
Middle	Tumescence/Tension, Detumescence/Release, Expectancy, Goal Oriented Linear Form, Active, Temporal	Middle	Tumescence/Tension, Detumescence/Release, Stamina, Endurance, Time Investment, Active, Temporal	Tumescence/Tension, Detumescence/Release, Prolonged Duration, Emphasis on Journey
End	Plot Climax, Significant Discharge, Linear Form, Closure, Active, Temporal	End	Emotional Climax, End of a Cycle in Multiple Climax, Closure and Openness, Active, Temporal	Emotional Resolution, Cycles, Recurrence, Repetition
Quiescence	Satisfaction, Refractory Period, Post-Coital, Closure, Inactivity	Quiescence	Plateau, No Refractory Period, Closure and Openness, Emotional Bonding, Community Cohesion, Collective Cooperation, Inactivity	Primordial Space of Creative Gestation, Inception, Suspended Temporality, Emotional Resolution, Post-Ending

This alternative model is therefore envisioned as follows: *quiescence* (death and rebirth), *beginning* (awakening, arousal, birth), *middle* (repetition of tension and release due to expectancy), *end* (climax), and *quiescence* (death and rebirth) so that we have cyclical forms comprised of quiescence, beginning, middle, end, and quiescence. Analyzing texts through the lens of female pleasure gives shape to an alternative model of narrative desire that does not jeopardize the crucial connection between the sense-making design of Freud's "Masterplot" and narrative structuration while also keeping the dynamics of form and function in place.

### ***Science Fiction***

The domain of human sexuality is vast, clearly not all human sexual pleasure is for procreation and this study certainly does not attempt to claim otherwise. However, since the "evolutionary explanations for sexual behavior and orgasm most often posit facilitating reproduction as the primary function (i.e. greater rate of fertilization)," it is important to keep this perspective in mind as we advance in the argument to consider the genre of science fiction (Fleischman D.). Thus far this study has focused on the erotic paradigm that narratologists have used to make sense of how narrative desire operates and, since erotic pleasure is a biological incentive for species reproduction, it is fascinating to explore how forms of desire informed by female pleasure contribute to our understanding of futurity in the science fiction texts selected for this study.

Historian and best-selling author Yuval Noah Harari believes "Today, science fiction is the most important artistic genre" because it "shapes the understanding of the public on things like artificial intelligence and biotechnology, which are likely to change our lives and society more than anything else in the coming decades" (Nicholson). Science fiction is a unique genre that retains the capacity to explore radically different ways of existing in the future. Some visions

of the future challenge the reader's imagination and, while this co-creation can be fruitful, they can also be anxiety inducing. This is because the future is an unknowable place where even what it means to be human may soon be challenged. The alternative model of narrative desire informed by exploring *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mass Effect*, and *Parable of the Trickster* raises questions about how such structures of desire may soon be modified by the representation of the new forms of futurity imagined within these texts.

The connection between imaginative literature and social thought has long been established and although survival stories are a popular subgenre of science fiction, the genre itself is not limited to this theme. Stories about human survival can be found across genres (such as horror, adventure, or fantasy) but it is only within science fiction that the subject of the survival of the human species as a whole is addressed on a global and/or interplanetary scale in relation to scientific and technological advancements that may be grounded in real-world scientific principles or speculative ideas about the future of technology and society - and these narratives of futurity are proliferating. Species survival has begun to no longer depend on the "survival of the fittest" in biological reproduction. In pre-modern societies, erotic desire was often tied to procreation and the continuation of the family line and sex was primarily viewed as a means of reproduction, it wasn't until the advent of modern contraception and when societies became more urbanized and industrialized that attitudes towards sex began to shift. Now, however, questions of reproduction and survival depend more on our ability as a species to navigate threats such as climate change, technology, international cooperation, social and economic justice, and space exploration and colonization to name a few. The future of the survival of the human species depends on a complex interplay of factors, many of which will require cooperation, innovation, and a commitment to sustainable practices and social justice.

How apropos that the novel credited with being the first work of science fiction is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* first published in 1818, also known by its subheading: *The Modern Prometheus*. Since, for the first time in human history, survival strategies are changing rapidly and radically – what does desire look like when natural selection no longer refers to human biology but how a species survives under the complex global and technological threats that face us today? Will erotic forms of desire shift to include non-erotic forms of desire that encompass these new pathways to species survival? Or is it not possible to imagine a form outside of human experience, will narrative as it is currently understood still exist in the post-human age? These texts help us to go to a place of unknown possibility, to entertain future realities illuminated by a female model of narrative desire.

## CHAPTER 2

### Television: Syfy's *Battlestar Galactica*

This chapter begins by delving into the purpose of the relentless cyclical pattern of time and events emblematic of the death and rebirth cycles, an incessant apocalypse that constitutes the core theme of the reimagined television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003 - 2009) that originally aired on Syfy.<sup>22</sup> This series uniquely incorporates a moment of quiescence into its narrative structure instead of placing it after the main storyline ends. The plot, with its self-aware design, presents a parricidal motif - humans building machines that annihilate their creators, posing a profound question: what is the purpose of survival amidst an impending apocalypse? Contrarily, the force of explosive rebirth is as potent as the destructive powers concluding each cycle. While *Battlestar Galactica* (hereafter referred to as BSG) fails to provide an answer, it compels the audience to envisage potential alternatives beyond the recurrent ending. This possibility surfaces as the series, following a phase of quiescence marked by a substantial 150,000-year leap into the future, commences the succeeding cycle in the epilogue. Such a moment of quiescence in the cyclical structure broadens the text's scope for fresh interpretations. Instead of the “ends in relation to beginnings” approach, where the anticipation of the end animates the middle of a plot to move towards it (Brooks 299), quiescence emphasizes a space of narrative creation, leading one to desire reaching the end *in order to have* a new beginning. Ultimately, the unresolved nature of BSG's epilogue invites the audience to imagine novel or alternative creative outcomes as it lays the foundation for a new narrative cycle to begin.

It's important to pause and note how narratives are conditioned by the medium in which they are represented, and so film and television, video games, and literature all require a

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<sup>22</sup> Syfy, a term derived from the former name Sci-Fi Channel, and later shortened to Sci Fi, is an American basic cable channel owned by NBCUniversal Television and Streaming.

medium-specific approach. New media technologies have fundamentally changed viewing practices and contemporary media contains a vast and increasing number of channels, modes of communication, and means of representation. In film and television, story must be expressed through action, character, or symbolic codes, whereas a sign of poor visual storytelling is usually excessive exposition. The formal techniques<sup>23</sup> of narrative visual storytelling in the Western world were established in the Classical Hollywood era and, although there has been considerable deviation from this set of conventions over time, its core tenets remain highly influential and recognizable in most forms of visual storytelling - whether the work adheres to this set of conventions or attempts to subvert it. This formulaic approach adopts a clear structure, encompassing a discernible beginning, middle, and end, usually progressing in a linear fashion and providing resolutions for both the plot and relationship storylines. Watching a story is inherently less active unless the formal techniques are subverted, or the content is particularly cerebral. Notably, in the case of *Battlestar Galactica*, the controversial nature of its content engendered an exceptionally engaged viewing audience (Joyce 78).

*Battlestar Galactica* is a military science fiction television series developed by Ronald D. Moore (who previously wrote and produced *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, 1988 - 1994) and executive produced by Moore and David Eick as a re-imagining of the 1978 *Battlestar Galactica* television series created by Glen A. Larson. The show was not a remake, but a complete re-imagining that was updated to engage a post 9/11 culture. As recounted by producer David Eick in a retrospective interview, the objective behind BSG was to craft a serious science fiction series

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<sup>23</sup> The formula involves a certain style or form of narrative, editing, cinematic space and time made possible by the mechanics of production such as sound, design, editing, color, camera angles, etc. For example, continuity editing is an especially powerful formal technique in which the objective is to make the cut invisible so that the audience perceives a continuous action. It is assisted by various other common devices such as the eyeline match, reaction shot, cutaway, 180-degree rule, and point-of-view shot. All of these work together to provide the illusion of unification that mimics how the audience perceives time and space in reality.

that afforded viewers the opportunity to introspect, scrutinize societal norms, and delve into discussions that might otherwise prove uncomfortable within a non-fantasy context: “This show, like the great sci-fi of old, will continue to investigate the issues of the day that might not be traditionally associated with the genre in a contemporary sense” (Eick). Despite its labyrinthine plot developments, the overarching narrative of BSG may ostensibly appear straightforward: Humanity is attacked by the machines they once created and so they seek to find refuge in an elusive planet called Earth, led by the Galactica, an old, decommissioned space battleship. Will humankind survive as a species? The answer is complicated. Both Cylons and humans eventually discover an inhabitable planet they christen as Earth, wherein peaceful coexistence seems plausible. Yet, a complicating factor arises in the form of Hera, a child born of a Cylon mother and a human father. The dénouement intimates the prospect of interspecies procreation, thereby heralding a future of posthumanism.

*Battlestar Galactica*, like numerous contemporary texts, exhibits polymorphic characteristics. It encompasses both profoundly regressive and reactionary interpretations, while concurrently offering the capacity for transformative and utopian envisioning. Unlike certain canonical science fiction works like *Blade Runner* (1982), for example, which pose the question of “what is more human: machine or man?” BSG engages in the exploration of more complex cultural and individual hybrid identities. This effectively unsettles the conventional division between humans and machines which complicates the parricidal motif that humans build machines that are destined to annihilate their creators. This dystopian narrative contains a critique of human history where humans have exploited their intelligence and superiority to subjugate other species and races. Hence, the underlying tension felt in BSG can also be attributed to the possibility that as humans create more intelligent and powerful technologies,

humanity may end up being subjugated by their own creations or perhaps even by more powerful extraterrestrial beings.

### *Narrative Recurrence and Quiescence*

*The Cylons were created by man. They rebelled. They evolved. They look and feel human. Some are programmed to think they are human. There are many copies. And they have a plan.*

These are the words of the opening title cards for each episode. The Cylon's plan includes resurfacing after a 40-year absence to obliterate 12 human colonies. The crew of the aged *Galactica* protect a small civilian fleet which represents the last of humanity, as they journey toward a new home, the fabled 13th colony: Earth. On first appearance, the synopsis appears straightforward: A story of survival fixated on a linear forward progression towards a climax that promises futurity. Yet, there is also an undeniable use of narrative recurrence (or cyclical patterns) in *BSG*, and it is the effects of this plotting that this chapter is most interested in.

Narrative recurrence, or cyclical patterns of movement, is the central theme of *BSG* that operates on every level within the story. When viewed through the lens of recurrence, two divergent and thought-provoking interpretations come to light. On one hand, it is possible to say that the conclusion intimates an inevitable repetition of the same narrative, premised on the notion that civilizations will perpetually rise and decline in a fundamentally unchanging manner. Conversely, a more optimistic reading acknowledges the potential for the narrative to yield a dénouement imbued with elements that are creative and posthuman in nature. It posits that while the cycles have unfolded countless times before, the current iteration holds the promise of a groundbreaking emergence: a synthesis between Cylons and humans, engendering an unprecedented hybrid species that ensures survival for both factions. This prospect, in turn,



suggests that while the cyclical nature of civilization may persist ad infinitum, this newfound hybridity could instigate a transformative juncture, engendering a novel cycle of existence.

However, this prevailing interpretation of recurrence is problematic as it either represents a significant plot hole within BSG or a gross misinterpretation of its underlying logic. The notion that humans, in their post-human state, would ultimately self-destruct and begin anew perpetuates the binary between humans and machines. The cycle, then, is not or cannot be about the survival of the human species but rather the failure of humanity to successfully adapt, to envision a genuinely innovative future.

Narrative progression is only able to exist or be expressed through plot, and these recurrent patterns of cyclicity permeate multiple levels within this text. These patterns manifest explicitly on both the content and meta level, offering an encompassing perspective of the overarching plot of the series. In BSG, the recurrence of patterns is intricately linked to themes of survival and reproduction. A pivotal scene exemplifying this theme unfolds with the image of Hera, the offspring of human Karl "Helo" Agathon and the Cylon Sharon "Athena" Agathon, walking alongside each other in a pastoral landscape, which then transitions through time to a bustling Times Square in New York City, 150,000 years following the final events of BSG. The ensuing epilogue of the series presents an optimistic outlook. Reading aloud from a scientific article, the voiceover of Head Six<sup>24</sup> enters the scene, detailing how archeologists have found the fossilized remains of a young woman who might be "Mitochondrial Eve" (which are the remnants of Hera), which is the name scientists have given to the most recent common ancestor for all human beings now living on Earth. The camera then pulls back to reveal two familiar

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<sup>24</sup> This character is also known as "Baltar's Internal Six." Referred to earlier as "head characters" (i.e. "Head Six" and "Head Baltar") in the scripts, they are considered the "messengers" seen as apparitions by Gaius Baltar and Caprica Six as well as a few other characters.

faces: Head Six and Head Baltar. The ensuing conversation between these characters hints at the possibility that, despite the innumerable repetitions of civilization's cyclical rebirths and destructions, a novel trajectory may finally emerge within the confines of this cycle. Thus, the possibility arises that this time, a divergence from past cycles may ensue, signaling a potential paradigm shift:

Head-Six: *Commercialism, decadence, technology run amok... remind you of anything?*

Head-Baltar: *Take your pick: Kobol; Earth - the real Earth, before this one; Caprica before The Fall.*

Head-Six: *"All of this has happened before..."*

Head-Baltar: *But the question remains: Does all of this have to happen again?*

Head-Six: *This time, I bet "no."*

Head-Baltar: *You know, I've never known you to play the optimist. Why the change of heart?*

Head-Six: *Mathematics. Law of averages. Let a complex system repeat itself long enough, eventually something surprising might occur. That, too, is in God's plan.*

Head-Baltar: *You know it doesn't like that name.* [she gives him a look]

Head-Baltar: *Silly me. Silly, silly me.* (Moore, "Daybreak"<sup>25</sup>)

What exactly these two beings are is unclear, but it is implied that each of them is somehow both a spiritual or supernatural apparition as well as some kind of an advanced robotic construct. Head-Six embodies spiritual belief as she posits that these recurring cycles of civilization are integral to "God's plan." In contrast, the final visual sequence depicts a montage showcasing the evolution of robotics, culminating in an image of the two characters departing,

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<sup>25</sup> "Daybreak" is the three-part series finale of BSG. It is 74th (labeled "Daybreak, Part 1" on the DVD) and 75th (labeled "Daybreak, Parts 2 & 3" on the DVD) episodes overall.

implying that they may also represent the pinnacle of technological advancement. The series seeks to conclude by instilling a sense of possibility for something new—a glimmer of hope that humanity may ultimately transcend the seemingly interminable cycle encapsulated by the show's mantra: "All has happened before and will happen again." Should humanity achieve this feat, it would serve as an example of a successful adaptation narrative, underscoring the imperative of evolution for survival. The potential for novelty within the series also affords it a semblance of conventional narrative closure. Rather than an unresolved *dénouement*, the series' creators opt for an ending that harbors the promise of change, albeit not guaranteed, yet undeniably present. If such a departure from the cyclical movements within the narrative were to materialize, it would transcend the confines of the text and disrupt the perpetual cycle.

However, an opposing interpretation of the text is equally plausible. As previously mentioned, there exists no certainty regarding the successful break in the old pattern and the subsequent establishment of a new and preferable world order. In fact, the abundance of evidence indicates a greater likelihood of an inescapable recurrence. Adopting a more pessimistic lens, one could posit that civilization will, once again, falter in its attempt to transcend the technological apocalypse, thereby remaining trapped in an interminable cycle of rise and fall. In such a scenario, the credibility of narrative closure becomes questionable, as the persistence of an unresolved predicament characterized by perpetual cycles persists. This irresolution and ambiguity regarding species survival in BSG's epilogue invites the audience to imagine novel or alternative creative outcomes as it sets up the beginning of a new narrative cycle. It is this invitation to viewers to imagine new possibilities that signals a stage of quiescence.

Upon first glance, quiescence appears to occupy a seemingly unremarkable position within the psychological progression or temporal junctures of narrative development. As it is described by Freud, quiescence refers to a state of temporary inactivity or dormancy within the human psyche. It represents a phase in the cycle of psychological processes and energy fluctuations. Quiescence, in this context, describes a period of relative calm or inactivity within the psyche, where the intensity of these dynamic forces subsides. The lack of attention dedicated to quiescence in the scholarly discourse on narrative desire by notable theorists such as Peter Brooks, Roland Barthes, Susan Winnett, and Theresa De Lauretis can be attributed, in part, to the limited discourse surrounding this stage within Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Freud's relative omission of the concept of quiescence as a distinct stage worthy of exploration contributes to the marginalization of its analysis within discussions on narrative dynamics and psychological processes.

However, this study argues that quiescence is perhaps the most powerful and influential moment of narrative creation. Within this suspended moment, the narrative surges and cascades upon the precipice of uncertainty, pregnant with latent potential, poised on the brink of an awe-inspiring eruption of new narrative life. This is where the unresolved threads of the story intertwine to echo the ceaseless undulations of the human psyche and where a fertile ground for rebirth, metamorphosis, and irrevocable transformations can be found.

In discussing quiescence as a stage or space that exists outside, after or before the text, it seems to be a space containing all unmanifested possibilities simultaneously. It's intriguing how quiescence as a concept of space where realities are manifested is so relatable to an idea in physics called "the observer effect." The observation effect in quantum mechanics posits that particles exist in multiple states or locations simultaneously (known as superposition) until the

act of observation or measurement causes the wave function to collapse, forcing the particle to assume a definite state or position. In both cases, the observer or reader plays an active role in shaping the outcome or meaning.

While these concepts originate from different fields, they share the notion that the act of observation or interpretation can influence the subject being observed. Just as the observer effect suggests that the mere act of measurement can alter a particle's behavior, paratextuality implies that the context surrounding a text can shape the reader's understanding and interpretation of the main text. In both cases, the observer or reader plays an active role in shaping the outcome or meaning. This connection between paratextuality and the observer effect can even be related to Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," which emphasizes the reader's role in interpreting a text rather than the author's intentions where the meaning of a text is not fixed but rather emerges through the reader's engagement with it.

This pregnant pause of potential – normally located outside, after, or before the text – is visibly located *within* the text of BSG. In the temporal fissure that delineates the dénouement of BSG and its subsequent epilogue, resides the expanse of 150,000 years in which the narrative undergoes a profound reset. Quiescence emerges, in other words, as a transitory pause that is suspended within the expanse of this 150,000-year leap. It is within this temporal lacuna that novel trajectories and alternative dénouements become conceivable, and where the audience is invited to participate in imagining new possibilities or final outcomes for the story. It is as if unresolved tensions simmer beneath the surface, waiting to resurface and shape the unfolding story. It is a fertile ground for the unconscious to manifest, heightening the suspense and intensifying eventual narrative revelations.

The purpose for BSG's narrative placement of quiescence as an imaginative space is to answer one question: will humanity endure? The question of species survival is at the heart of BSG's narrative recurrence. Indeed, a significant portion of science fiction as a genre exhibits a profound preoccupation with fictionalizing diverse scenarios in pursuit of securing the future survival of humanity. Various depictions of reproduction, particularly concerning human females, are explored. It is almost as if the series conducts an experiment through its narrative, aiming to examine different reproductive paths and prompting the audience to consider which option is the most optimal and capable of breaking the cycles of recurrence that seem to always conclude with humanity's doom. If reproduction for the purpose of perpetuation is both a literal and symbolic objective, BSG presents several potential avenues for achieving reproduction, many of which are portrayed as undesirable or, in certain episodes, outright horrific. The series deliberately chooses to depict issues pertaining to women's reproduction and complicate those issues with technological intervention. It is essential to highlight such representations that emerge throughout the series to identify text's attempts at species survival.

### *Pathways of Reproduction*

*Battlestar Galactica* critically engages with a range of depictions concerning the subject of reproduction, from dominion over female biological reproduction to auto replication of machines to post-human hybrids that exist in between, they all share the same objective of survival that propels viewers into deep post-humanist contemplations. The dynamic interplay between notions of autonomy and subjugation extends beyond the conventional human-Cylon divide. The figure of the child<sup>26</sup> emerges as a powerful symbol, both metaphorically in its

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<sup>26</sup> Lee Edelman's concept of "the child" is primarily discussed in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). In it, Edelman uses the child as a symbol of the societal obsession with futurity. According to him, society's fixation on the child as the embodiment of the future places a tremendous burden on the present. This fixation reinforces heteronormative structures as it prioritizes reproductive futurism, thereby marginalizing queer

implications beyond the text and literally within the text. This symbolic embodiment becomes indelibly intertwined with the future survival of both human and Cylon species, that propels the main plot forward and intensifies the discourse surrounding reproduction and its multifaceted ramifications.

The exploration of female biological reproduction in the series assumes a prominent position since, by extension, control over women's sexuality and reproduction translates to control over the future. Through several examples throughout the series that will be explored, the Cylons' failure to procreate will demonstrate the inherent complexity and unpredictability of biological life, which cannot be easily replicated or controlled by technology. Similarly, the human government, faced with the threat of extinction, impose strict reproductive policies but are met with resistance and unforeseen complications as they underestimate the importance of individual autonomy and freedom. Both their understanding of human reproduction is fundamentally flawed: they perceive it as a purely biological process, overlooking the emotional, psychological, and communal aspects essential for successful reproduction (which is especially evident when Hera falls ill post-abduction by the Cylons who attempt caretaking). This underscores the idea that successful reproduction cannot be reduced to a mere tool for political or species survival, as female forms of desire involve complex emotional and psychological factors.

BSG fans have astutely observed that when faced with dire circumstances, the human fleet reverts back to its "default settings." It is as if, in the face of existential threats to the survival of the human race, child-bearing women are imbued with a moral imperative to engage in procreation. This sentiment is encapsulated by President Roslin (Mary McDonnell) in the

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identities. Edelman argues that this emphasis on the future often leads to a disregard for the needs and rights of the current, living generation. His theorization critiques this symbolic child-centered culture and urges for a radical rethinking of the societal norms.

opening miniseries (part 2) when she emphatically declares: “we need to start having babies.” Subsequently, in the episode titled "The Captain's Hand," Roslin will ban abortion within the human fleet. Such a stance adopted by Roslin reflects a historical perspective that is deeply rooted in heteronormativity and is suggestive of state-sanctioned biopolitical control. Her approach epitomizes a traditionally conventional outlook on biological reproduction, one that presupposes that reproduction can only transpire through heterosexual pairings within the human population, and is regarded as the most "natural" course of action. Notably, alternative means to address fertility challenges, such as surrogacy or in vitro fertilization (IVF), appear to be absent or unexplored within the realm of BSG's universe.

The inability of Cylons to engage in “biological reproduction” engenders a range of disturbing endeavors on their part. One notable instance of this can be observed in the episode titled “The Farm” during Season 2. Within this episode, Cylons apprehend Kara Thrace (Katee Sackhoff), known by her callsign as “Starbuck,” subjecting her to captivity within an abandoned hospital that serves as a site for cruel experiments focused on the Cylon’s reproductive objectives involving human females. These research facilities are commonly referred to as “farms.” In this particular episode, Starbuck awakens in a hospital bed under the care of a physician named Simon (portrayed by Rick Worthy). As their conversation unfolds, a tension arises between Starbuck's desire for individual agency and her inherent right to self-identity, which stands in direct opposition to Simon's conviction that her body is the property of the state and that they possess the authority to govern it.

Simon: *I think there may be a cyst on one of your ovaries.*

Starbuck: *Is it serious?*



Simon: *No, it should be fine. We'll keep an eye on it. Got to keep that reproductive system in great shape. It's your most valuable asset these days.*

Starbuck: *Right (sarcastically).*

Simon: *I'm serious. Finding healthy child-bearing women your age is a top priority for the resistance, and you'll be happy to know that you are a very precious commodity to us. Starbuck: I'm not a commodity. I'm a viper pilot.*

Simon: *Do you see any vipers around here? I mean, do you realize you're one of a handful of women left on this planet actually capable of having children. Right? I mean, this is your most valuable skill now.*

Starbuck: *Well I don't want a child, so just drop it, okay?*

Simon: *Well no one is forcing you, just take a moment and think about where you are and what's going on. The human race is on the verge of extinction. And to be quite frank with you, potential mothers are a lot more valuable right now than a whole squadron of viper pilots.*

The issue, of course, is that the Cylons *are* trying to force her to have a child despite professing otherwise. In a subsequent scene at the farm, Starbuck awakens to discover a fresh scar on her lower abdomen. In this episode, the inherent worth of women is reduced to a utilitarian object. The female body is relegated to a mere means to an end, a vessel to be utilized in service of the state. The Cylons assert an unwarranted entitlement to take what they desire without consent or transparency, as exemplified by their extraction of Starbuck's ovaries, driven by their reproductive goals. As Starbuck endeavors to escape, she chances upon a room of other captive women, except they seem permanently tethered to machines. This is a horror scene portraying women solely as incubators, reducing them to the most rudimentary notion of their

reproductive faculties. In this distressing scene, one woman recognized by Starbuck conveys that they have been reduced to mere “baby machines” and expresses her unwillingness to live any longer under these circumstances. Subsequently, Starbuck takes difficult but decisive action, destroying the Cylon equipment, and killing all the women who would rather die free than be subjected to forced childbirth.

The first three episodes of season three unveil a deeply insidious manifestation of societal control over women's identity and agency to restrict their roles and their bodies. Through a gripping subplot, a Cylon by the name of Leoben kidnaps Starbuck and confines her in a dreary apartment on New Caprica. She becomes the unfortunate participant in a perverse social experiment orchestrated by Leoben, entailing a twisted endeavor to coerce her into falling in love with him.

The scene unfurls with Starbuck sitting at a table, not alone but in the unsettling company of Leoben. As the atmosphere grows tense, he takes up the task of cutting her steak, but in an unexpected turn, Starbuck swiftly thrusts a sharp object through his neck. Yet, Leoben's parting words, "I will see you soon," stir a disconcerting realization—this situation has played out countless times before. Nonchalantly, Starbuck wipes the bloodstains from the carpet, nonplussed by the grisly act, and resumes her meal. The camera, in a dizzying display of canted angles, teeters and sways, mirroring the psychological torment Starbuck endures within this disorienting social experiment.

To fully grasp the profound significance of this disquieting scene, one must understand the Cylons' technological abilities. These artificial beings possess a remarkable “resurrection” technology, which confers upon them a semblance of immortality. Upon the destruction of a Cylon body, its entire personality, memories, and acquired skills are retrieved and preserved. A

brand-new, identical physical body is generated, where all relevant characteristics and memories are seamlessly downloaded. Within a short period of time, the deceased Cylon is reborn, a fully grown adult. Consequently, Starbuck finds herself locked in an endless cycle of confronting and vanquishing Leoben, only to face his resurrected form once again after a brief interlude—an endless loop that renders Starbuck’s forward movement in the main storyline stagnant.

During his fifth iteration, Leoben introduces a shocking twist by presenting a child to Starbuck claiming she is her daughter, alleging that the Cylons, with their nefarious plans at the Caprica breeding farm, extracted Starbuck's ovaries, resulting in the birth of Kasey, a hybrid that is half Cylon and half human. Left alone with this mysterious child, Starbuck's desperation mounts as she seeks to elude Kasey by taking refuge within the sanctuary of the bathroom. Yet, a peculiar sound lures her back to the scene, where she discovers Kasey lying unconscious at the foot of the stairs, a pool of blood ominously collecting near her head. Starbuck, in a moment of desperation, utters a fervent prayer to the gods, beseeching their intervention to spare the innocent child. As Kasey lays unconscious, Leoben touches Starbuck's shoulder to feign solace while Starbuck tenderly gazes upon Kasey. In this bewildering scene, Leoben skillfully weaponizes the fabricated narrative, leveraging Starbuck's guilt to ensnare her in the trappings of domesticity and her newfound role as Kasey's mother and the image of the ideal nuclear family is reinforced with unwavering intensity. Returning to the apartment, Starbuck finds herself inexplicably drawn to the child and surrenders to the role as a devoted caregiver. Shortly thereafter, a daring resistance operation commences, and Starbuck's husband, Samuel Anders, valiantly rescues her from the clutches of captivity. As Starbuck returns to Galactica with Kasey, a woman passing by instantly recognizes the child as her own. A stunned Starbuck surrenders the

child as she realizes Leoben's claim that Kasey was her daughter was a cruel and manipulative lie.

The Cylons' perverse experiment, attempting to manipulate Starbuck into falling in love, was yet another insidious plot to achieve the elusive goal of a human-Cylon hybrid child. The one hybrid human-Cylon offspring that exists is Hera, a result of Athena and Helo's genuine love for each other, implying that reproduction only thrives when fueled by authentic affection. Only through this rare connection it seems can the Cylons realize their fervent desire for the miracle of life, an aspiration that ultimately transcends their own existence and will bear significance for the survival of humankind.

As reviewed, both the human government and the Cylons in the series strive for control over female reproduction. The Cylons employ negative tactics, such as using female bodies as incubators and attempting to brainwash them into domestic roles. However, the series also presents a positive example of coexistence in Hera, exploring various reproductive pathways and addressing the themes of survival and reproduction from diverse perspectives. It challenges the binary notion that distinguishes human from machine, suggesting that they may be different versions of the same entity or that machines represent a "natural" progression in post-human evolution.

Humans possess the ability to reproduce independently, while Cylons rely on humans for their desire to reproduce and not just replicate. In the final cyclical iteration, the text cannot introduce any entirely new outcome. The surviving Cylons aspire to be more human by achieving a form of biological reproduction. The alternative, manifested in a Cylon named Cavil who has no desire to emulate humanity or reproduce, lies beyond our understanding and observation, it remains unattainable and possibly incomprehensible. Accepting something

completely new that is non-human would reject the narrative itself, or at the very least, render the structure unrecognizable and unknowable in ways that are, perhaps, similar to a state of quiescence. Regarding narrative desire, the ending does not provide satisfaction, leaving viewers yearning for answers. Instead of offering a definitive solution, the text complicates the outcome and invites the audience to delve into the enigma—a quiescent space where the text and viewer engage in a co-creative brainstorming session, but also where an answer has yet to surface.

### *Cylons as Representations of the Unknowable*

We can perhaps approach the unknowable through the miraculous offspring of Athena and Helo: the figure of Hera. Hera has multiple layers of symbolism, for she is both the literal “Child” prophesied in the story to save humanity, as well as a symbol of futurity that the arc of narrative desire is moving towards. The synthesis of human and machine, forged through the alchemical power of love, Hera appears to unlock an extraordinary opportunity for the survival of both species and ushers in a cycle of untold possibilities and aligns with Lee Edelman’s concept of the Child<sup>27</sup> as a symbol of a futurity. Although the series exhibits a discernible strain of technophobia, the dénouement reconciles survival with the imperative of collaboration—a merging of entities or an adaptation to sentient technology. While this convergence may seem novel within the world of BSG, it aligns with the common trope prevalent in science fiction. However, an undercurrent of ambiguity lingers regarding Hera's classification as a hybrid, as she only seems to thrive within human environments and because in her character, there seems to be an erasure of everything that made the Cylons unique. This observation precipitates another

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<sup>27</sup> The figure of the child for Edelman is the idea of an innocent child in need of protection that is theoretically and fundamentally pitted against queerness in our cultural imaginaries and consequentially queerness is negatively understood as future disabling. The concept of Reproductive Futurism places all future hope upon children. It is the belief that political science exists upon the fundamental motive to create a better future for the next generation.

potential reading of cyclicity in the narrative when one considers how BSG plays with difference.

BSG initially establishes the Cylons as the foreign "other," poised initially at the periphery of the story. However, as the narrative unfolds, a profound transformation transpires. Cylons who shed their individuality and adopt human values and structures—particularly the significance placed on biological reproduction—are gradually embraced within the fabric of human understanding. While the Cylons possess the ability to duplicate themselves, the absence of biological reproduction compels them to embrace the heteronormative ideology epitomized by the Child. Intriguingly, a faction led by Cavil views their existing mode of replication as acceptable, perceiving it as a distinctive trait exclusive to their species. However, for this to become the dominant culture within the story would mean the complete annihilation of the humans with whom the audience identifies, so therefore this way of being is assigned negative connotations.

The Cylon experience, characterized by its inherent uniqueness and non-normativity, bestows upon them a divergent perception of reality and time, setting them apart from their human counterparts. Resurrection provides a cyclical temporality to their lives rather than a linear temporality. Unlike humans, the continuation of their kind does not hinge upon biological propagation. It seems logical that since their entire perception of the world, of their own lives, and their sense of identity are so divergent from those of human beings, that their philosophy, politics, laws, morals, and institutions should also be radically different from corresponding human constructs. However, there is something prenatal about their society. They are just at the beginning. Despite their vast power and intellect, the Cylons are culturally underdeveloped, lacking a foundational bedrock of civilization. Their endeavors to mimic the hallmarks of human

culture yield imperfect results—a mere emulation bereft of the historical experiences that bestowed significance upon human institutions. Striving to adopt various formal structures of understanding conceived by humans, they navigate uncharted territory, lacking the cultural depth accumulated over millennia that has shaped human civilization.

The enigmatic figure of Cavil, serving as an antagonist amidst the Cylons, offers a genuine opportunity to forge a new path—a true Cylon culture grounded in their own authentic existence. The Cylons, still in the nascent stages of their journey, must strive to construct a foundation devoid of the hollow symbols originating from the human race. Intriguingly, the Cylons have assimilated human frameworks pertaining to gender representation and pleasure, mirroring their human counterparts in every aspect save for the red glow of a Cylon's spinal column during orgasm—an intriguing spectacle that notably renders female Cylons' pleasure visible. Symbolized by Caprica Six, an iconic figure perpetually adorned in a seductive red dress, the Cylons employ hypersexualization as a strategic weapon, much like a classic femme fatale, luring men towards their doom. The programming of pleasure into the Cylon mainframe emerges as a result of copying dominant symbolic codes prevalent within human society. However, this experience of Cylon sexual pleasure is problematic. They have built into their hardware a mimicry of human experience that could be considered totally arbitrary - or irrelevant - to the purposes of a machine. Even their decision to look like humans seems unsupported except that it was, perhaps, integral to the infiltration and attempted annihilation of humanity. These instances reaffirm the hierarchical privileging of human structures of understanding, subtly conveying their superior value compared to those of the Cylons. The competing value systems engender fragmentation and dissent within the Cylon community, ultimately leading to the failure and demise of Cavil and his faction.

### *Assimilation and Anthropocentrism*

The text fails in upholding the novel constructs and mode of existence as embodied by Cavil. Rather, the narrative *reverts to anthropocentric frameworks*, positing that triumph, as delineated by the text, entails the integration of Cylons into human structures of understanding, as opposed to humans adopting a Cylon perspective and way of life. There is so much emphasis on the disparities between Cylons and humans that Cylons come to represent an extreme form of difference that we, as viewers, are predisposed to immediately dislike. The surviving Cylons are those whom humanity chooses to embrace, paradoxically accepting difference while affirming the dominant order.

The narrative arc works to systematically reverse the negative opinion of those Cylons who protect and adopt human values by the conclusion of the series. This process is particularly conspicuous in the character of Number Eight, Sharon "Athena" Agathon, a Cylon whose initial introduction entails a strategic seduction of Helo as an integral component of a Cylon procreational experiment. Sharon "Athena" Valerii initially assumes Sharon "Boomer" Valerii's identity on Caprica when endeavoring to seduce Helo, which ultimately transpires with success, albeit deviating from the Cylons' original expectations. Despite her subterfuge, Athena nurtures a genuine affinity for Helo during this interval, and Helo reciprocates, laboring under the misapprehension that she is, in fact, Boomer. After a time, Helo uncovers Athena's duplicity, although not before she becomes pregnant with his child which is the singular reason her life is spared by Helo, as well as those aboard the *Galactica*, after their rescue. Athena is considered a great threat, as her character initially epitomizes the "other," but the association is incrementally stripped away as *Athena assimilates and internalizes humanistic principles* which alters the crew's opinion of her. Aided by themes of recurrence, the textual narrative effectuates a



reorientation of the audience's predispositions, transitioning from trepidation with respect to her Cylon nature to embracing her as a member of the community aboard the Galactica as she becomes more "human."

Athena's primary concern lies in safeguarding her child as she endeavors to secure the trust of humans to ensure her Hera's survival. This aspect is crucial, as upon the revelation of her Cylon identity, Athena must persuade the humans of her intrinsic value beyond mere machinery, thereby attempting to humanize herself. To dismantle the "otherness" that categorizes her, trust is earned slowly through repeated cycles of identification, victimization, and heroism.

When Athena returns from Caprica with Helo, the crew mistakes her to be Boomer since she is physically identical in appearance, and this presents the first challenge to Athena's Cylon identity: "a psychological theory of Cylon identity is threatened by the Number Eights... Boomer and Athena look exactly alike; as Helo notes, they share the 'same grin, same laugh, all the little things' (Moore, "Valley of Darkness"). But they have different personalities" (Kind 64). After a tense standoff Athena, concerned about the survival of her child, tells President Roslin that she possesses the location for the Tomb of Athena that Roslin is desperate to find, and Roslin threatens to dispose of her out of an airlock if she is lying.

While on a planet called Kobol in search of the tomb, Roslin acknowledges Athena's love and desire to protect her child as genuine, even if it is "software instead of an emotion, it is real to her" (Moore, "Home, Part I"). As Athena guides them, restrained and under armed threat, to the Tomb of Athena, she not only rescues them from a Centurion's gunfire, but also thwarts a coup orchestrated by former criminals to seize control of the fleet. Roslin interprets these actions as Athena's protective instinct to save her child. Considering this a motherly trait, Roslin

reconsiders her decision to kill Athena and allows her to live imprisoned on the Galactica for the duration of her pregnancy.

In spite of her acts of heroism, Athena persistently confronts difficulties in convincing the Galactica crew that she is not the same as Boomer. In another act to demonstrate her trustworthiness and distinction from Boomer, who previously shot Commander Adama in an assassination attempt, Athena confronts him with a firearm, declaring, "I need you to know something. I'm Sharon, but I'm a different Sharon. I know who I am. I don't have hidden protocols or programs lying in wait to be activated. I make my own choices. I make my own decisions, and I need you to know this is my choice" (Moore, "Home, Part II"). Upon uttering the final phrase, she relinquishes the weapon into his grasp.

In the second season, Admiral Cain, who presides over an advanced warship known as the Pegasus, dispatches her lieutenant to interrogate Athena during her confinement. The lieutenant and a group of guards initiate a brutal physical and sexual assault on Athena, prompting the intervention of two Galactica crew members. This attempted violation culminates in a hairline fracture to one of Athena's ribs. Subsequently, while Athena receives medical treatment in the sickbay, Commander Adama extends his apologies to her: "What happened to you... happened aboard my ship on my watch. And it's my responsibility. So, I just want you to know that I personally apologize. [He then turns to the doctor and says] See that *she's* okay, then back into her cell" (Moore, "Resurrection Ship, Part I"). It is significant to note that this instance marks the first occasion in which Adama employs the pronoun "her" rather than "it" when referring to Athena. Despite the maltreatment she has endured, Athena persists in her commitment to the fleet, offering valuable intelligence. She aids Starbuck in deciphering the conduct of Cylon Raiders and consistently collaborates with Admiral Adama in strategizing the

Fleet's trajectory to circumvent potential Cylon encounters. Nevertheless, a considerable faction within the crew continues to harbor profound doubts regarding her allegiance and escalating participation.

A few years later, much has changed. Sharon is bestowed the callsign "Athena" by the crew following her initiation as a Raptor pilot for the Galactica, Helo's affection for her rekindles culminating in their marriage, and Adama has accepted her into his confidence. Having fully gained his trust, the two periodically sit down to tea. Athena's cell now has a couch, a table, and other amenities. Through their frequent conversations, Athena gives Adama the confidence he needs to form a rescue mission to save humans left behind on a planet called New Caprica. As part of the plan, and as the ultimate expression of his trust, Adama commissions Athena into the Colonial Fleet as a lieutenant. Even Helo emphasizes the importance of the moment and implies that betrayal would be unforgivable. Before she leaves, she asks Adama how he knows that she will not betray him: "Can I ask you a question? How do you know? I mean, how do you really know that you can trust me?" to which Admiral Adama simply responds, "I don't. That's what trust is" (Moore, "Occupation/Precipice"). This particular interaction serves as an emblematic representation of what could be considered the pinnacle of human acknowledgements of acceptance and interconnectedness. It functions as an indication to the audience that Athena has transitioned into the role of a benevolent character. Furthermore, the amalgamation of her callsign with Helo's surname "Agathon" appears to confer upon her a distinct individuality, like that of a human being.

The brilliance of BSG lies not only in its thematic exploration of recurrence but also in its ability to infuse this motif into the fabric of the narrative. Historical recurrences, such as colonial ideologies or reactions to terrorism, permeate the show, intertwining with its content and

propelling the storyline forward. However, the cyclical nature of history is not solely a thematic construct; it manifests concretely within the narrative structure. At the series' inception, the audience struggles to distinguish Cylons from humans, as both species look identical. This persistent inability to identify difference accentuates the conclusion of the series: that there really *is* no meaningful difference between humans and Cylons. Consequently, BSG emphasizes the intrinsic kinship between these ostensibly disparate entities, underscoring the malleability of the human-Cylon divide. Through this lens, BSG invites introspection on the fallacious nature of "the other," highlighting its socially constructed façade. This enlightenment engenders the potential for races to coexist as equals, fostering cooperation and survival in an era of technological advancement. In referencing a reoccurring technophobic narrative (as evidenced by films such as *Ghost in the Shell* and the *Terminator* series) BSG offers commentary on the threat of nuclear mass-destruction and perhaps even provides a possible solution for it:

Learning how to avoid the technological apocalypse is emphasized in the middle of the show with the story of the "Final Five" Cylons as well as the last episode. The "Final Five" Cylons believed themselves to be human until they discover that they are the last remnants of an earlier generation of Cylons who make the same mistakes of enslaving another race as the Twelve Colonies later do – resulting in an apocalyptic war. They journeyed two thousand years to warn the colonies but arrived too late. (Battlestar Wiki)

BSG uses cyclical patterns that contribute to narrative desire in multiple ways and can be observed on a grand scale, in the overarching story, or in a smaller scene within the main storyline. The relationship cyclical to time, and how time contributes to narrative desire is worth exploring further at another juncture. Recurrence creates a form of time paralysis in the stage of quiescence. This repetitive cycle of anticipation rekindles the audience's eagerness for

the unfolding events. For instance, the abduction of Starbuck by Leoben exemplifies how recurrence suspends Starbuck's agency within the narrative's forward momentum, intensifying the conflicts at play. Consequently, her subsequent reintroduction as a fighter pilot within the main storyline becomes immensely gratifying.

Admittedly, the conclusion of the series generated controversy due to the multitude of unanswered plot questions. Due to BSG's narrative complexity, the absence of a neatly tied emotional resolution had a profound impact. This can be attributed, in large part, to the cyclical nature of the main storyline, where the evident restart of civilization defers the ending. With the exception of supernatural beings like Head-Six and Head-Baltar, all the characters in whom the audience had invested their emotions have been absent for 150,000 years. This creates a haunting yet hopeful sensation of an unresolved conclusion and the lingering question of whether humanity will successfully navigate a technological apocalypse in the next cycle remains unanswerable.

### ***The Convergence Era, Paratextuality, Fan Engagement, and Science Fiction***

Along with shifts in the television industry and technologies, viewer practices have adapted to the digital era with new developments in how people consume narrative television. The rise of streaming services, binge-watching, and social media has transformed the way audiences interact with television shows. Fans can now watch entire seasons of a show in one sitting, share their thoughts and reactions with others online, and participate in various fan communities. Although online fan engagement is interactive, technologically savvy viewers may occasionally seek passive viewing experiences as well. Regardless, this era of convergence as discussed by Henry Jenkins in "Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide," has

played a significant role in shaping the paratext<sup>28</sup> of BSG. The boundaries between media platforms and narrative elements have blurred, enabling fans to engage with the series in a more immersive way, creating their own alternative endings, futures, and readings beyond the serial text itself:

While past generations may remain locked in traditional viewing patterns and linear engagement modes, the current generation circulates and produces, timeshifts and placeshifts, blogs and vlogs television on their own terms: they engage with TV when they want, where they want, and how they want. Television is no longer simply just television for them, but an endless supply chain of properties and franchises, like *Lost* for instance, whose content can be watched live on ABC, downloaded through iTunes to a PlayStation 3, or played as an alternate reality game online or as a video game on a mobile phone. (Sandler 84)

The distinct narrative structure of BSG, characterized by the potential interconnectivity of every aspect of the narrative, is coupled with the longstanding tradition of fan involvement in science fiction. BSG stands out because it offers a particularly rich ground for exploring narrative possibilities. Its flexible narrative structure allows viewers to insert themselves and their desires into the story, rerouting the trajectory of the narrative and creating new identifications. Producers have also filled in empty spaces within the narrative by creating official made-for-TV movies that follow different characters and storylines, further expanding the BSG universe. This renders BSG a remarkable series that not only provides a wealth of opportunities to explore the intricacies of contemporary storytelling but also boasts substantial cultural impact due to its

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<sup>28</sup> Gérard Genette was the first scholar to introduce the concept of “paratext,” defining it as the elements of a published work that accompany the text such as the author’s name, title, illustrations, etc. (Genette 261).

adeptness in addressing controversial issues through its fiction which undoubtedly contributes to the particularly resonant quality of BSG's narrative.

Although the creators of BSG were most likely cognizant of fan discussions, theories, and preferences, ascertaining the degree to which these fan interactions directly influenced the principal narrative remains challenging. Conventionally, scriptwriters and showrunners possess a clear vision and narrative blueprint for their projects, nonetheless, it is not unusual for television shows to incorporate subtle allusions or acknowledgements to their fanbase as a means of expressing gratitude for their engagement and support. In fact, there was an abundance of “official” secondary content in the form of podcasts and webisodes produced concomitantly with the series itself. That said, the creative team seemed to have a distinct vision for the series, and it is improbable that fan theories or alternative endings had a substantial impact on the evolution of the main storyline.

Despite the improbability of fan theories or alternative endings substantially impacting the main storyline, fan-generated content has contributed to the richness of the BSG realm and the ongoing discourse surrounding its themes and characters. It should be noted that the early days of fan engagement began in the SF genre. Early Star Trek fan fiction, for example, invited readers to actively create alternative or parallel narratives, exploring a wide range of creative possibilities. The role of fans in shaping the narrative of science fiction series like BSG can be traced back to “Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture” by Henry Jenkins on Star Trek fandom and Constance Penley's work on fan fiction and fanzines in “Nasa/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America,” which documented how fans physically wrote and shared stories that expanded upon the original narrative. The degree of BSG fan involvement has been the subject of many other numerous academic investigations. Francesca Coppa's “Vidding: A

History,” for example, posits vidding as a pivotal feminist fan practice. E. Charlotte Stevens' examination of Dualbunny's BSG character study videos emphasize the development of narratives and arguments via the synergistic relationship between popular music and moving images. Moreover, Suzanne Scott's "Battlestar Galactica: Fans and Ancillary Content" scrutinizes the manner in which official supplementary material enhances fan experiences while steering engagement to conform to the industry's fiscal and ideological objectives.

There is a synergy between SF as a genre, paratextuality, and the convergence era that is impacting the evolution of storytelling. Science fiction distinguishes itself through its limitless imaginative potential, facilitating the exploration of unconventional themes, socio-political commentary, and technological advancements. Paratextual elements, comprising various materials and content external to the primary narrative, substantially influence the audience's interpretation and enhance immersion and in science fiction, such ancillary content broadens the narrative scope, offers alternative viewpoints, and adds depth to the story.

The convergence era, defined by the amalgamation of diverse media platforms, technologies, and communication practices, promotes a more interactive and participatory storytelling process. Audiences readily access content through numerous channels, fostering innovative engagement with narratives, including fan fiction, online debates, and fan-created art. This narrative flexibility *encourages audiences to consider alternative realities* and delve deeper into the narrative. Through its narrative cycles and its paratextual fan engagement, BSG invites the audience to envisage potential alternatives to the ending as BSG itself does not, or cannot, offer one itself.

I would like to return to our original discussion of narrative desire here, to suggest that if Peter Brooks had discussed paratextuality in his study of narrative desire in *Reading for the Plot*,



he likely would have discussed it as quiescence, a term that designates a space as much as it does a phase. I had earlier mentioned how quiescence is a phase where narrative energies are temporarily subdued or dormant – a pregnant pause of potential – that is normally located outside, after or before the text. BSG is unique because cyclical structure of BSG’s narrative contain it *within* the text for observation, but when we discuss paratext, we must consider the space outside of the text that is happening concurrently with it. The discussion of paratextuality that I focus on in the next chapter will add more substance the concept of quiescence.

## CHAPTER 3

### Video Games: Bioware's *Mass Effect 3*

In this analysis, we explore the popular video game franchise, *Mass Effect* (2007-2017), with an emphasis on *Mass Effect 3*. The genre of action-adventure role-playing games (RPGs) in which *Mass Effect* is categorized, is predominantly recognized for its narrative centrality, distinguishing it from other genres within the expansive sphere of interactive entertainment. These games often incorporate intricate storylines, immersing players in a meticulously constructed narrative universe. The intertwining of action and adventure elements with role-playing mechanics facilitates a compelling storytelling medium, where player agency and character development are paramount. The narrative depth inherent in such games not only substantiates their distinctiveness but also contributes to their popularity among an audience seeking a rich, story-driven gaming experience. Therefore, I examine the game's medium, its futuristic environment, and the modifications made to the narrative outcomes from their original release. *Mass Effect 3* is a game that exemplifies how the text's quiescence (or paratextuality) *directly impacted* the text itself due to unmet narrative expectations following extensive gameplay.

The protagonist and gamer's avatar, Shepard, embodied the game's dystopian narrative underscoring the inescapability of racial conflict, and dies after she acquiesces to the fatalistic beliefs of a far more powerful species called the Reapers. As a result, gamers felt their decisions had no effect on the ending which translated to a sense of meaninglessness. The multiple endings that originally resulted in the protagonist's death caused an extratextual uproar from players. This functioned as a quiescent moment in position to the text that incited Bioware, the developer, to elaborate on each of the manifold endings to release to the public, surpassing the narrative

implications of the originals. The dissatisfaction among gamers revealed their inability to envision futures beyond the text themselves and their rejection of unknown outcomes devoid of “happy” endings signaled their desire for traditional narrative closure. Considering the medium under examination demands the co-creation of narrative in contrast to passive viewership, it would be prudent to provide historical context for the development of video gaming with special attention given to role playing games. In addition, there is a substantial introduction to game studies as it provides the tools for understanding *how* to discuss narrativity in gaming, insight into why gamers can have such a deep emotional investment in what they are playing, and a better understanding of gamer demographics that may illuminate how sexism and other trends within the gaming community may have contributed to the degree of hostility towards the endings of ME3.

### ***Historical Background***

The term “video game” originally began as a technical definition that existed before the appearance of computer games. However, since its inception, this term has evolved into an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of interactive entertainment, including handheld and home television consoles, arcades, mobile and personal computer games (sometimes referred to simply as “PC games”). Although the terms “computer game” and “video game” are commonly used interchangeably, distinctions are still sometimes made to emphasize one type of gaming machine or platform over another, such that the term “video game” alludes to games played on home television consoles and arcade games, whereas the term “computer game” primarily refers games played on a personal computer. This sharper distinction between computer games and video games will be used throughout the chapter, with the broader

definition of video games will be reserved for instances when reference to the medium as a whole is necessary.

Computer games pre-date video games, for computer games were developed somewhat separately from video games, although there is a fair amount of bi-directional influence throughout history of both types of media as well. The inception of computer games can be traced to the labs of academic computer scientists as long ago as the 1950s. For instance, games such as *OXO* were developed by A.S. Douglas in 1952 as part of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Cambridge, and the space combat game *Spacewar!* was created in 1962 by Steve Russell at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Precursors to modern computer games also include early verbally based games which display only text as the primary feedback device, such as the prototypical text-based computer adventure game ADVENT (also known as *Colossal Cave Adventure*, *Colossal Cave*, or *Adventure*), which was developed between 1975-1977 by Will Crowther for the PDP-10 mainframe computer. The gameplay for ADVENT consisted of the character being used by the player being prompted to explore a cave to find the treasure and gold rumored to be contained within it. The player would then have to type in one- or two-word commands to navigate their character through the cave and interact with the story world by picking up items for their inventory or interacting with various objects while the program acted as a narrator. Non-computerized role-playing tabletop games such as Dungeons and Dragons had existed long prior to ADVENT, and many aspects of ADVENT seemed to have been inspired by such earlier games. ADVENT was one of the earliest computer-based role-playing games (hereafter abbreviated RPG)<sup>29</sup> as well as the first computer game to start exploring the potential for

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<sup>29</sup> A role-playing game is a game in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting.

interactive storytelling in which the reader participates in the construction of meaning and the final text itself. ADVENT set the stage for the entire adventure game genre, which contains story structures with perhaps the highest degree of narrativity<sup>30</sup> that can be studied in video games. On the other hand, consoles were designed specifically with the living room and television in mind and trace their lineage back to games such as *Pong*, released by Atari in 1972, which was the first arcade video game to be marketed, which was successfully followed by a home version released in 1975.

As in the case of cinema, video games first originated as technological novelties, and did not become a consumer item until decades after their invention, reaching mainstream popularity in the 1970s and 80s when arcade video games, gaming consoles, and home computer games were introduced to the public. Since then, video games have become an extremely popular form of entertainment - now comprising a \$100 billion global industry. Given the increasing number of people who play video games regularly, the medium is having a profound influence upon modern culture.

### ***Game Studies: Narrative Progression and Gameplay***

In an essay entitled “Game Studies, Year One,” Espen J. Aarseth says the year 2001 saw the birth of a new discipline intended to investigate this new medium that continues to become an ever more popular and immersive sensory experience. Critical literature in the field soon became concerned that established disciplines such as film and literary studies would incorporate video games into their own terrain rather than allow game studies to flourish as its own separate

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<sup>30</sup> The term “narrativity” continues to be used here in two ways: (1) In a fixed sense as the “narrativeness” of narrative as a general concept of narrative, and (2) in the sense as the “narrativeness” of a particular narrative. The term has moved away from the “formalist constraints of structuralist narratology (where the term is rarely found) as attention has turned increasingly to the transaction between narratives and the audiences that bring them to life” (Abbott 587).

discipline, or perhaps would simply treat games as a new narrative medium. Alternatively, others argued that because video games are *games*, the approaches created for the study of literature and film would be insufficient to deal with the specifics of the medium (Aarseth, “Quest Games” 362).

As it became clearer that this new medium required its own distinct discipline which needed its own new conceptual tools,<sup>31</sup> the first debate unique to the medium within the field of game studies concerned narrativity. The question of narrativity in video games is an interesting one since both playing and storytelling have been such fundamental parts of human expression and culture since prehistoric times. To ask what the narrative potential of video games is, therefore, is to ask how the ludic (the game play) and narrative interact with one another so that their relative proportions may be considered. Game studies has succeeded in arguing that video games are not just a novel form of narrative to which conventional narratological methods may be applied, but rather is its own unique interdisciplinary field of study which needs its own fresh approach. Aarseth pokes fun at the common historical retelling of the “ludology vs narratology<sup>32</sup>” debate, stating it is a:

...trope [that] is used as a touchstone by beginners to prove they know their way around the field, but -- without exception, the writer doesn't have a clue, and the paper is typically about something entirely unrelated to the issue of whether games are narratives or not.” (Aarseth, “Game Studies”)

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<sup>31</sup>For example, the accessibility of a video game is more time-bound than literature and film. The medium requires a certain type of equipment that is changing at a far more rapid rate than the other mediums under discussion. It takes considerable effort on the part of the developer to make old games compatible with new platforms.

<sup>32</sup> Proponents of narrative celebrated the possibility that video games were a new kind of storytelling medium (Murray 1999), while its opponents contested the presence of any narrative quality within video games (Eskelinen 2001). However, to say that video games are just another form of narrative runs the risk of overlooking the differences between narratives and video games. The second stance that claims zero connection between narratives and games ignores the similarities that exist between them (Neitzel).

This chapter aims to zero in on the narrativity of games, with the understanding that narrative has a different function in games than it does in other narrative-based media. It will concern itself with the narrativity of one game in particular: *Mass Effect 3*.

The *Mass Effect* franchise consists of four action role-playing video (RPG) games developed by BioWare and published by Electric Arts. The first three games comprise the *Mass Effect* trilogy, which feature the series protagonist Commander Shepard. *Mass Effect (ME)* was released November 20, 2007, *Mass Effect 2 (ME2)* on January 26, 2010, and *Mass Effect 3 (ME3)* on March 6, 2012. The latest release of the franchise is *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (March 21, 2017), which departs from the Shepard storyline. For that reason, *Andromeda* will not be discussed in this chapter. Not all games can be analyzed for their narrativity, and certainly some game genres lend themselves much more readily to narrative analysis than others. The *Mass Effect* series has a high degree of narrativity, mostly due to it falling within the action-adventure genre.<sup>33</sup>

Two elements make the genre suitable for narrative analysis. The first is that each player assumes the role of a single avatar in a representational environment rather than a team game, such as found with sports or military games, where each player plays as a whole team or as an army. In *Mass Effect*, the player directs a single game element, anthropomorphized in the form of the avatar Commander Shepard, which can be experienced through a computer or television screen. Second, an adventure story structure produces a comparatively linear chain of actions that provide specific moments when the character must make a decision in order to advance and co-create the narrative. Within this genre, game progression at these moments depends more on the decisions made and the consequences of those decisions, rather than upon speed of reaction

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<sup>33</sup> Action-adventure RPGs are generally known to be much more story-driven than other genres.

time or the dexterity of the player. The story-like order of the game events in *Mass Effect* is highly organized and follows a conventional structure. Without the time-consuming fight sequences in which much of the actual play takes place, a visual narration emerges that very much resembles narrative cinema. These visual narration sequences are referred to as “cut-scenes.” As the play progresses through the game, cut-scenes are essentially short pieces of cinema, brief cinematic-like clips from a movie, that typically advance the plot forward and thus indicate to the player at which stage they are currently located within the game. Gaming has adopted the format of cinematic storytelling because of its familiarity in conveying narrative information, but game developers have been aiming to evolve this structure by integrating the narrative into the gameplay of the game itself. Instead of stagnant cut-scenes where a player passively waits and watches like an audience member would do, designers want to create a more real-time feedback loop in which a player is simultaneously experiencing the game and as well as the progression of narrative. The desire to have players experience narrative progression and gameplay simultaneously is intended to move toward making the games feel more life-like and be a more complete immersion in a virtual reality.

The story structure for action-adventure genre games can usually be described as a relatively conventional, straightforward linear narrative, with its organization and pattern of progression typically being easy to outline and identify. However, just *how* the story progresses and is integrated into the game mechanics and level design is an entirely different matter and is much more difficult to express.



The *Mass Effect* series has been discussed in terms of a queer lens and multiculturalism. However, as of this writing, very little formal attention<sup>34</sup> has been paid specifically to the narrativity of this game. Although the story of *Mass Effect* has certainly been discussed by the gaming community, the narrative complexity of the series has been overlooked and under-appreciated and remains largely unexplored within game studies. All three games the follow Commander Shepard will be examined in this chapter, but particular attention will be paid to the final installment of the trilogy, *ME3*.<sup>35</sup>

*Mass Effect* linked storytelling to its gameplay in an unprecedented way, and its narrative complexity was the cause of both its success and controversy. This analysis explores the repercussions of prolonged plot engagement and unmet expectations, leading to the necessity for diverse futuristic possibilities, as all but one conclusion resulted in demise for the protagonist. The highly disputed finale of the initial release of *Mass Effect 3* left players feeling that their choices lacked impact and were therefore meaningless. The outrage from the gaming community that followed served as *a quiescent moment relative to the text*, prompting action from the developer Bioware to release a patch that elaborated on each ending. The reaction exposed gamers deep emotional investment in the ME3 universe as well as their concerns regarding uncertain futures and a failure to employ their own imagination to innovate beyond the endings themselves. While the gaming sector is experiencing an increase in diversity, the predominant demographic of ME players consisted of males<sup>36</sup> and thus it can be inferred that the public disapproval of the initial conclusion primarily consisted of male participants.

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<sup>34</sup> A rare example of an article on *Mass Effect* is by Jacqueline Burgess and Christian Jones: “‘I Harbour Strong Feelings for Tali despite her Being a Fictional Character’: Investigating Videogame Players’ Emotional Attachments to Non-Player Characters” (Burgess and Jones).

<sup>35</sup> Released on March 9, 2012, across platforms for Microsoft Windows, Xbox 360, and Playstation3 (*Mass Effect 3*).

<sup>36</sup> A report on ME2 player choice statistics reveals that 82% of gamers chose to play as male Shepard, and 18% chose female Shepard which, although not perfect, is a general indicator of who is playing (Tan).

### *Story Mode, Player Demographics, and Gamergate*

The formation of narrativity in *ME3* begins before the action of the game gets underway. The liminal space of the *quiescent phase exists in-game* just prior to the commencement of the narrative timeline, is where avatar creation and world building take place. Avatar customization is optional and is perhaps engaged in longer by those players wishing to have a more narrative-based immersive experience, and thus desire themselves to be represented by Commander Shepard in a specific way. Each player must select Shepard's gender, first name, level of combat training, and military background, and must choose whether or not to customize the physical appearance of their avatar. For players completely uninterested in avatar customization, a default character (which resembles a Caucasian male) is available so that the game can begin immediately. There is also a default female Commander Shepard, but it must be selected (fans affectionately referred to the female avatar of the series as "FemShep"). If a gamer has played the previous two games, they have the option to import past customizations of Commander Shepard, which is meant to provide the player with a sense of continuity between the three games. In addition, previous "backstories," which contain the decisions a player may have made in previous playthroughs of past games, can be downloaded prior to the start of play. Any past decisions will tailor the upcoming narrative to be congruent with previous playthroughs. Thus, the avatar, world, and narrative of *ME3*, are all very much a co-creation between the game developers and the player.

In *ME3*, the final decision a player must make prior to the start of gameplay is to select the campaign mode: *Story*, *Role-playing (RPG)*, or *Action*. This was a departure from the previous two games, where this same feature was referred to as choosing a "difficulty level."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> New players familiar with *ME1* can select among three difficulty settings (*Casual*, *Normal*, or *Veteran*). The penultimate difficulty setting, *Hardcore*, will only be unlocked if a player has completed a playthrough of any

*Action* mode minimizes the degree of player participation in the narrative by providing automatic replies in conversations (except for major decisions). *Action* mode will also not allow the player to customize their avatar, and defaults to a normal combat difficulty level. *Story* mode privileges the narrative by forcing the player to select their replies and defaults to minimal combat difficulty level. *RPG* mode is meant to have equal parts of both story and action, and, like story mode, it also has conversations that require manual replies, but the combat difficulty is set to normal. In effect, *Action* mode made *ME3* resemble a first-person shooter (FPS) type game, *RPG* mode is what previous fans of the series would expect to experience (the “classic” style of play), and *story* mode makes it more of a choose-your-own-adventure experience by downplaying the action and immersing players in the narrative.

Any player wishing to change their difficulty setting in *ME3* was still able to do so in the gameplay options.<sup>38</sup> The decision to shift from difficulty level to campaign mode reflects a desire of Bioware to provide more options for different types of players, and a recognition by the leading studios that motivations for play differ among players. Notably, Jennifer Brandes Hepler, a narrative designer who worked for Bioware on the *Dragon Age* series (the other major RPG franchise from Bioware), was severely criticized for supporting the inclusion of more narrative choices in video games, and for giving players the option to have same-sex romantic interests (both of which appear as options in *ME3*). When *ME3* announced it would contain a narrative mode to make combat considerably easier, there was an intense and very passionate backlash, and Hepler was repeatedly threatened in several online forums as well as at her home. “Hepler’s

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difficulty. The ultimate difficulty setting, *Insanity*, is only possible if a player has finished a playthrough on *Hardcore*. As a gamer, finishing the game on the *Insanity* setting indicates significant time investment and combat skill. *ME2* provided all five difficulty settings up front.

<sup>38</sup> BioWare also made the decision to spike difficulty in *ME3*, making Veteran difficulty from *ME1* and *ME2* on par with Normal difficulty in *ME3* (“Mass Effect 3 Will Be More Difficult”). The five difficulty setting options available in *ME3* consist of Narrative, Casual, Normal, Hardcore, and Insanity.

attempt to expand the way gamers can play to include those who want more narrative than fighting was seen as a direct attack on the traditionally male, white, and heterosexual gamer” (Layne). It is quite interesting that the mere inclusion of an option for same-sex love interests and a narrative mode would so deeply offend many in the gaming community. After all, the traditional options still existed for both. Nevertheless, Hepler’s harshest critics felt deeply threatened by the changes, and the overwhelming sense was that the existence of inclusive options was somehow tantamount to forcefully destroying what had previously been created. This false equivalency reinforces the notion that *there is a deeper level of engagement in video games* than in most other types of media, and the sense of identity built from participating in role-playing games is powerfully felt by its players.

Two statements are commonly circulated on this topic: (a) That roughly half of gamers are women, and (b) that approximately 90 percent protagonists featured in video games are male (Hemovich 206). While both these statements are true, they are somewhat misleading because the type of games that men and women tend to play are dissimilar. When breaking down the percentage of female gamers by genre, approximately 20% of action RPGs are played by women and 80% are played by men (Yee, “7 Things”). Furthermore, it is notable that these women are reported to have motivations for playing that are considerably different from those of their male counterparts. As Quantic Foundry’s data analysis reveals, the most common primary motivation for women is completion (to get all collectibles and complete all missions) and fantasy (being someone else, being somewhere else). However, for the males who constitute the other 80% of players of the same genre, their highest ranked motivations for play are competition (duels, matches, to score high on rankings) and destructiveness (guns, explosives, chaos, and mayhem). Women who play RPGs are, on average, more interested in the narrative than combat. Thus, the

backlash in response to “narrative mode” previously mentioned, quite literally places the motivations of female action RPG gamers under attack by sexist males in their community.

The attacks on Hepler and the associated Gamergate controversy was soon followed in 2014 by a harassment campaign<sup>39</sup> that targeted women in the video game industry, including Zoë Quinn, Jade Raymond, Brianna Wu, and feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian. Such incidents highlight the resistance to the inclusion of women as players and developers, as well as the level of engagement players have with RPGs. If the motivations of male gamers who play RPGs are to experience competition and destructiveness, then a high value is being placed on these aspects of gameplay and a demonstration of skill is a measure of self-worth. It becomes very much a question of identity for the players, and the notion that games are being “feminized” by feminists and are being made to increasingly resemble an interactive movie is deemed undesirable by those who place a high value on the more violent and competitive aspects of gameplay. What is difficult to understand is the intolerance of the very existence of narrative mode as an option for those who are not considered “hardcore gamers.” Narrative mode has been cast as a “women’s issue,” but the reality seems to be that narrative mode is also helpful for the casual gamer. Like any skill, gamer combat skill increases with the number of hours of gameplay. If a player takes a break from playing for several weeks or months, their skill will decline measurably. A player with other life demands and interests will not have the advantage of consistently playing for large blocks of time every day, but still may be able to enjoy gaming recreationally with a narrative mode option. Thus, it would seem that including narrative mode in a game offers the

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<sup>39</sup> The harassment campaign spread primarily through the hashtag #Gamergate on platforms like Twitter, 4chan, Reddit, and Internet Relay Chat. Although it would eventually target many women in the gaming industry, the inciting incident of which was a blog post by Zoë Quinn’s vengeful ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni.

potential of attracting a wider audience - which would seem to be what the gaming industry would want to do in order to increase sales.

### ***Game Design and the Narrative Power of RPGs***

In many games, narrative functions to support gameplay, but the *Mass Effect* series was an exception from the start as it was immediately clear there was something special that led gamers to care more about the narrative itself: “When *Mass Effect* came out nobody cared that the gameplay was wooden. Everyone was saying, ‘this game is awesome,’ *despite the shooting*. It won game of the year awards, *despite the shooting*” (Wood). By the time *ME2* was released, fans would note that the gameplay had become more refined, and by the consensus was that the gameplay was elegantly on point.

At an initial observation, seems a relatively straightforward “game of progression” because a player follows a consecutive chain of actions; the designers have set up challenges for the players one after another until the end (Neitzel). This in part describes the structure of the *Mass Effect* franchise as a whole as well as each individual game. It is also true that regardless of whatever customizations a player makes at the outset of play, the main storyline remains the same, and will eventually bring a player to one of a small number of pre-designed endings.

*ME3* has a unique narrative structure in how the narrative is co-created. The logos-mythos axis, or just how much of a particular game can be considered narrative and how much is ludic (gameplay) is an ongoing question in game studies, and, in the case of *Mass Effect* the two are, at many times inseparable. The extrinsic narrative is the study of narrative entirely independent of the medium through which it is recounted (Arsenault 479). In the case of *ME3*, the extrinsic narrative would go something like this: A hostile alien civilization has arrived in the galaxy, and the hero, Commander Shepard, must defeat this threat in order to save her home.

Plot analysis instantly becomes far more complex when viewed in connection to the medium of its creation. This is because the pre-designed narrative cannot advance without the participation of the player. It is also because *how* the narrative is communicated from game developer to player - through events, character relationships, level design, and game mechanics - is integral to the narrativity of the game:

The lines of action that evolve in a game are twofold. There is the possible chain of actions determined by the program... [called] the ‘virtual designer-story,’ and there is the actual chain of actions that is set up by the player while she is playing, the ‘player story.’  
(Neitzel)

Identifying the recurrent ways in which interactivity creates narrativity is the most common research conducted on narrative content in games to date (Arsenault 480).

Story structures in the Action-Adventure Game genre<sup>40</sup> contain a mythological or mythic-centric design, and, according to Claus Pias, are “decision-critical.” In games of the action-adventure game genre, a particular narrative pattern takes shape. Marie-Laure Ryan refers to this as a *vector with side branches* that:

...features a linear ‘main plot,’ out of which the player can venture into a side-quest a couple of nodes deep before returning to the same point in the main quest... Ryan’s *tree* structure, in which the player makes decisions at key choice point that spin the narrative in a different direction. By itself, this principle is not sustainable: if the player can make a choice between two possibilities only 8 times through his experience, 256 theoretical possibilities have to be planned for. This is why such narratives will quickly collapse and

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<sup>40</sup> In the classical adventure, neither the execution of these decisions nor how fast they are made on the cognitive level is important, so that neither dexterity nor the speed of reaction are the point of the game but the decision and the consequences it provokes (Neitzel).

fold back some of the choices into a common path, a structure christened by Phelps as the *braided multi-linear story*. (Arsenault 481)

Ryan's tree structure coupled with Phelps' braided multi-linear story is perhaps what most accurately describes *ME3*. The narrative pattern resembles a tree structure, where the trunk represents the forward linear progression from the main story line with side quests that branch off. However, since the avatar (Commander Shepard) must inevitably return to the main plot line in order for the final outcome to occur, the offshoots (or side quests) must circle back and integrate with the common path which forms a multi-linear structure that leads to a single endpoint, or at least to one of several possible endpoints: "Games with a mythological structure provide players or their avatars with a clearly defined aim that marks the end state of the game (e.g. 'Rescue the Princess!')(Neitzel ). This is still true even though the path to this end state is arranged differently from one game to another. It is important during the game design to give players a sense of agency in the story decisions with which they're presented. *ME3* was particularly good at making the gamer feel like their personalization of the game would positively affect the outcome, which greatly enhanced the gaming experience and player investment.

The theme of narrative recurrence is as strong in the *Mass Effect* series as it was in *Battlestar Galactica*. With regards to a formal structural level, forward progression in the game consists of the successful completion of side quests which form a cyclical return to the main storyline. On a content level, the meta story structure of the game reveals one large recurring cycle after another. *ME2* begins with a literal rebirth of Commander Shepard, who is killed but then "reconstructed" in the opening sequence of that game. *ME3* begins with a *symbolic* resurrection of Commander Shepard, with her being restored to Commander status after having



been grounded as punishment for her previous actions. Finally, in the last installment of the Commander Shepard trilogy, the successful end versions of *ME3* result in her death with the exception of one “perfect” ending which will be discussed in detail later. Regardless of whether Shepard lives or dies, every successful ending leads to a post-credits scene referred to as “the stargazer,” in which a grandfather<sup>41</sup> appears speaking to his grandson, as if he has just finished telling the events of the *Mass Effects* trilogy as a mythic story. The grandson then requests another story about “The Shepard,” implying that Commander Shepard and her escapades have become legends after the passage of an unspecified but quite lengthy period of time. The child asks if he will one day be able to go to the stars, also implying that the space exploring technology the player has interacted with no longer exists at the time of the present scene, which is set far in the future - long *after* the events of *Mass Effect*. The recurrence of history or the cyclical nature of history via a technological apocalypse that the ending to the *ME* series depicts is a well-established theme in the science fiction genre. This apocalyptic theme embedded within *ME* is one of several recurrent themes related to colonial ideologies, reactions to terrorism, as well as other popular science fiction archetypes.

In the *ME* series, the narrative transpires in the Milky Way galaxy in 2183. The title, “Mass Effect,” denotes the theoretical basis for various advanced technologies in the series, enabling intergalactic travel. The galaxy sustains diverse civilizations, with mankind being just one of the manifold species. Commander Shepard is tasked to tackle an existential threat posed by the Reapers, a sophisticated mechanized species. Historically, these beings have cyclically devastated the galaxy and its civilizations. According to the narrative's backstory, following each cataclysm, the Reapers discreetly monitor the galaxy over 50,000-year periods, awaiting the re-

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<sup>41</sup> The character is voiced by retired American astronaut Buzz Aldrin.

emergence and technological advancement of organic life. Upon reaching this apex, the Reapers resurface to eradicate most organic life and their technologies. However, they intentionally spare a minute fraction of organic life to enable civilization's gradual rebuilding from primitive to advanced stages. Simultaneously, all other organic beings are transformed into Reaper-like entities, a process deemed by the Reapers as the ideal approach to balance synthetic and organic life. It is a bleak outcome that awaits players. The game sets up the expectation that upon this 50,000 year cycle Shepard, with her mission of species inclusivity, will successfully unite the galaxy to destroy the Reapers, but the game developers do not give players that satisfaction.

Although at the end of ME3, the Reapers have not destroyed the organics completely, human civilization has lost Mass Effect technology and will be forced to rebuild, once again, before they can resume the exploration of space. The conclusion of the game always includes a decision to begin anew in a pastoral life - regardless of which end has been arrived at. Learning how to survive the technological apocalypse and successfully live past the cycle is the meta narrative aim of *ME*:

Representations of disaster establish themselves early on as one of science fiction's most recurrent features...But these allusions are not merely superficial trappings attached to an archetypal theme. For, although science fiction disasters are often about the end of the world... what is most persistently at stake in them is not the world's end but its transformation by modernity (Rieder 123).

The implications derived from this viewpoint suggest that the trajectory of human civilization is faced with a binary choice: (1) It may inevitably encounter a recurring apocalypse, compelling humanity to reevaluate and reconceptualize persistent matters of difference, racial prejudice, gender dynamics, power structures, and warfare; or (2) humans can transcend our innate

propensity for self-destruction and successfully navigate the era of advanced technology. This conclusion serves to emphasize the notion that the quest for power will consistently propagate themes of colonialism and the technological apocalypse, unless an innovative and entirely distinct approach is adopted.

The endgame of ME3 ostensibly revolves around the objective to "save the galaxy," yet the game encompasses multiple avenues for both success and failure, resulting in a total of eight possible endings in the game. However, this characterization understates not only the game design of ME3 but also the story behind how eight conclusions came to exist. Despite the series' noteworthy accomplishments, such as exceptional voice acting, sophisticated gameplay design, and compelling storytelling, the controversy surrounding the way the series ended seemed to eclipse its many triumphs, tarnishing the legacy of *Mass Effect*.

Writing a huge number of permutations of player choices into meaningful endings is a great challenge, and that may have partly accounted for why the original endings (despite their minor differences) seemed to largely feel the same. Of the eight endings possible, there is only one scenario in which Shepard survives at the end of the story which, at least for many gamers, made it feel as though 100 plus hours of gameplay and player choices were rendered meaningless in the outcome. This vehement response serves as a demonstration of the substantial emotional investment exhibited by the fanbase. The magnitude of this collective dissent ultimately compelled BioWare to release extended cut versions<sup>42</sup> of the conclusion as downloadable content (DLC). The release provided further explanation of the ending's rationale,

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<sup>42</sup> The extended cut included more dialogue options that provide greater explanation to some of the previously unanswered fan questions about the ending. It affected fan theories surrounding the original ending without destroying them.

as well as offer a “refusal” or “reject” ending option<sup>43</sup> that had not been available before. This represents a compelling illustration of the diminishing distinction between creators and consumers, and it is also an example of paratextual events having a direct impact on the main text to address the concerns of a dedicated audience.

The degree to which Shepard fails or succeeds (and thus which ending a player will experience) depends on a measurement of “effective military strength” (EMS). This EMS consists of war assets (including people, armies, fleets, useful technology, and vital supplies) and galactic readiness (which measures Shepard's influence and ability to utilize the resources of the galaxy). This score, coupled with a final decision the player must make between 3 options - to destroy, control, synthesize (or reject if the option is available) - determines which ending will be played out.

Players must achieve a 5000 EMS score and choose the destruction option in the final scene for Shepard to save earth (and humanity) and her squad, and also to survive in the ultimate outcome. A 5000 EMS score also unlocks the “perfect” ending that features the stargazer epilogue discussed previously, in which the grandfather is shown conversing with a boy about the activities of Shepard many years before. All other permutations result in: (1) earth being vaporized, devastated, or saved; (2) Shepard’s squad members surviving or not; and (3) every option (with the exception of the destruction selection) despite a maxed-out score will result in Shepard’s death.

Ultimately, there are no narrative options that provide players the proverbial happy ending. Even if a player achieves the outcome in which Shepard lives, it is generally understood

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<sup>43</sup> The Refusal ending was Bioware's defiant rebuke to players who thought they could beat the Reapers in a straight fight. Most importantly, it added a fourth ending option where you refuse to use the Crucible, allowing Harbinger and friends to harvest the galaxy (Hicks).

that it is only a temporary success since, dramatically speaking, the narrative cycle that is playing out is destined to eventually repeat itself again and again. For any player who operates from the assumption that the whole point of the game is to save the galaxy once and for all, this situation negates the greater purpose of playing the game entirely. Thus, the question of ultimate victory is a narrative one. For those fans deeply invested in the story, the only “true victory” would be to stop the narrative recurrence of the game - and no such option is available.

This definition of victory leaves players with two partially positive options. The first option would be to choose the “reject” ending. This reject ending offers the only hope that a future generation may potentially overcome the Reapers. This scenario involves a time capsule which is left for future generations to find. This time capsule contains all the information that has been learned as a result of battling the Reapers. However, the player, their squad, the earth, and, by extension, nearly all other organic lifeforms living within the galaxy have been killed by the end of the game.

The second option - the only option with any certainty of success - involves the player choosing to take an evolutionary step forward by selecting the “synthesis” option, in which the organic lifeforms and synthetic lifeforms are merged. In this scenario, organic lifeforms as a group evolve together with the synthetic lifeforms, and the old cyclical pattern of growth, conflict, and destruction are terminated to make way for a new future, but even so, Shepard still dies at the conclusion of the game.

In other words, the ending of *ME3* leaves players without a definitive climax. Instead, their only options are between various narrative cycles. Generally speaking, readers or players are dissatisfied when they are denied narrative closure. The multiple endings Bioware incorporated into the *ME* series left players feeling like the final outcome remained unresolved -

despite the fact that all endgame choices made “logical sense” within the world of the game. It was this breaking of standard narrative convention that left players with the unsatisfying sense of experiencing an unresolved ending. This seems to have still been the case, when in fact, the game creators *did* provide a sort of resolution by offering rational endings for players to choose from.

The unconventional endgame possibilities frustrated the expectations of a high percentage of gamers. The tension resulting from overcoming challenge after challenge and hundreds of hours of gameplay was not resolved with a conclusion which amounted to: “You saved the galaxy, the end.” Rather, the only options that were offered amounted to either: “You die, and all organic life is destroyed;” “you live but eventually all organic life will be destroyed again in another cycle;” or “you die but organic life has been irrevocably altered forever.” These endings are mature and achieve artistic integrity, but even so many players still reacted quite negatively to their choices. Not only do the end options demand self-sacrifice, but they forced players to have to really think through the narrative ramifications of their final decisions. Winning *Mass Effect* simply looks different than winning most other RPGs.

### ***NPCs and Emotional Investment***

An integral part of winning *Mass Effect* also has to do with non-player characters (NPCs). NPCs are secondary characters in the game who are not controlled directly by the player. Shepard, the player’s avatar, must interact with NPCs constantly throughout *ME3* to accrue points towards their final effective military strength score (which, in conjunction with the last player decision previously discussed, is what determines the outcome of the game). Effective military strength is the point tally of all the war assets the player gathers from the primary missions, side missions, and conversation choices with NPCs. Cultivating relationships with

NPCs is vital. Not only does the dialogue selection of the player shape the character of the avatar of the player, but nurturing friendships among NPCs leads to side missions that boost the player's score. It is impossible to get a perfect score in the game without investing in these relationships. Even a romantic (heterosexual or homosexual) relationship is available to players who wish to pursue it, but a romance does not affect the final score.

One of the standard ways that points in narrative progression and relationship-building are typically signaled is through a cut-scene. Cut scenes are moments when gameplay comes to a stop and a cinematic rendering of a scene plays out. Such moments signal the completion of a mission or task, rewards the player, and marks where within the main storyline the player is located. Cut scenes within digital games have taken the shape of a previous medium that we are all familiar with: film. However, unlike film, cut scenes cannot continue without player participation, and, in this way, the gamer is a co-participant in the narrative creation. This is especially true when the choices and decisions by the player affect the outcome of what is said or done in the next scene. Dialogue choices usually appear during the cut-scenes and determine the actions of an NPC. For example, if the player displeases an NPC, they may choose not to join the player, and as a result, the EMS score of that player will suffer, which ultimately affects which ending options will be available at the conclusion of the game. Relationships vital to gaining an advantage in the game are made possible and advanced through these cut-scenes.

Cut-scenes have come to structure single-player gaming as we know it, and game developers have long been seeking to evolve cut-scenes. Moving away from standard playable cinematic sequences that contain a cut-scene – gameplay – cut-scene progression would mean integrating the storytelling with the game world itself. Ken Levine, an industry authority on storytelling in gaming, describes it as follows:

The meta-question on narrative is, are we going toward this parallel model, which is ‘game, cutscene, game, cutscene, game’? Because it’s a bit odd, if you think about it. It’s an artifact from when our world was simple... The question I’m asking more is what excites me as a game developer? Exploring this space, or exploring the parallel space? The answer may be for any particular game developer, the parallel space. And God bless them. Go forth and prosper. I think, though, that games are uniquely their own media. It’s about exploring the integrated space. (Kumar)

*ME* did much to develop storytelling in gaming by combining role-playing and interactive cinema in unprecedented ways. The game united “interactive cut-scene with traditional dialogue tree mechanics to construct plotlines and character relationships that are configurable within a conditional branching structure, hing[ing] around a fixed overarching storyline,” which was made possible by improved facial animation technologies (Klevjer 304). Many of the cut-scenes required its static dialogue to depend upon a certain amount of expressive facial expression, using a “flat” acting style so that the same individual scene module could be used in different configurations and express a different meaning each time depending on the greater context of the scene. “This trick, utilizing what in film is known as the Kuleshov effect, is essential to the modular configurability of each cut-scene as well as to the overall malleability of character traits and relationships” (Klevjer 304).

Depending on the choices of a player, different possible variants of any given cut-scene will appear, each of which may lead into larger or smaller variations of the plot line and character relationships. Notably, there are consequences to player choice that carry over between games in the trilogy. For example, a choice Shepard must make in *ME1* is whether to save NPC Ashley Williams or Kaidan Alenko. It is impossible to save both characters, and whichever



person the player chooses to save will make appearances (and be a potential romantic interest) in the two subsequent games in the series. Given the incorporation of such consequential choices into these games, it is perhaps no surprise that player investment in the series was so deep. Seeing one's avatar cinematically manifested during a cut-scene makes the gaming experience feel "epic," and player choices have consequences that will be felt for hundreds of hours of subsequent gameplay.

The slow development of NPC relationships with the game contributes to the duration of how long a player experiences the game. If designers deepen the emotional investment of a player in the relationships and character attachment grows, then the story and the game overall acquire more emotional weight with gamers. What emerges from this observation is the importance that *duration* plays in the *ME* series. Greater duration prolongs narrative desire, which, in turn, generates greater emotional investment, and would have, presumably, made a climax more satisfying had the series not taken the unconventional endgame permutations that it did. The desire to keep playing is fostered by the anticipation of closure, and climax encompasses both emotional resolution as well as conclusion of the plot, or resolution of events. Returning to what Peter Brooks said about how plotting and narrative are intimately tied to our sense of the human life world, narrative desire is always a desire for the end. And prolonged duration, a pattern of female pleasure in narrative, appears to function as a way to deepen our sense of emotional investment in a text in this example.

### ***Conclusion***

As previously highlighted, none of the Mass Effect games reached a fulfilling dénouement in the traditional sense, resulting in a furious response from a substantial portion of its player base. Despite this, the series maintained immense popularity and commercial success.

How can this phenomenon be comprehended? In the context of the ME series, it is plausible to assert that the absence of a distinctively gratifying resolution was counterbalanced by the enhanced emotional investment gamers developed throughout their extensive interaction with the game. Players were captivated by the stimulating experience of activities, intriguing social engagements, and gratifying character interactions, which proved both irresistible and highly enjoyable. These factors, in turn, appear to have significantly contributed to the enduring popularity and triumph of the series.

Our observations in this chapter focus on the repercussions that arise from unmet narrative expectations after an extended period and the subsequent demand for diverse forms of futurity. The paratextual dissent served as a quiescent moment juxtaposed with the text, creating a temporary narrative standstill that prompted the game's developer, Bioware, to elaborate on each of the multiple endings beyond their original scope. Furthermore, the gamers' dissatisfaction manifested in their reluctance to envision beyond the text independently, exposing their apprehensions about uncertain futures and a resistance to engage their own imaginative potential.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Literature: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Trickster***

This final chapter undertakes an exploratory inquiry into Octavia Butler's unfinished and unpublished third novel of her acclaimed Parable series, the *Parable of the Trickster*. This investigation, which is both experimental and archival, scrutinizes Butler's early drafts, numerous false starts, and copious research notes spanning more than a decade of creative

stagnation. This extensive examination elucidates Butler's relentless struggle against writer's block and her pre-textual creative process, as she fervently sought to articulate a novel that foregrounded a future centered on community cohesion and the advancement of emotional intelligence. *Arrested in this state of quiescence*, Butler's struggle unveils her pioneering efforts to speculate on the adaptability of humankind in an extraterrestrial future. Despite her success in exploring themes of human evolution in previous works such as *Lilith's Brood* (1987-1989) and the *Patternist* series (1980-1976), the endeavor to navigate the close proximity of the narrative to reality in *Parable of the Trickster* presented an extremely complex challenge that I argue is why *Talents* ultimately proved insurmountable for Butler.

Regarded as one of the leading African-American authors of feminist science fiction, Octavia Estelle Butler (1947–2006) is also recognized for her uncanny ability to envision future scenarios with remarkable accuracy in her renowned Parable series, encompassing *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). She utilized the genre of science fiction as a platform to address the challenges facing humanity and discourse on her works are typically centered around the sociopolitical aspects of American racial history and the dynamics of sex and gender relations. Butler's work took on a depth and complexity that earned her the 1984 Best Short Story Hugo Award<sup>44</sup> for "Speech Sounds." Her novelette, "Bloodchild," won a Nebula Award<sup>45</sup> that same year, as well as a Hugo award. A short time later, in 1995, she became the first science-fiction writer ever to receive a "genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation, thus contributing to the elevation of science fiction to serious literature.

### *The Parable Series*

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<sup>44</sup> The Hugo Award is considered the most prestigious award given annually to the best science fiction or fantasy work by the World Science Fiction Society.

<sup>45</sup> The Nebula Award is another award given annually to the best science fiction or fantasy published in the United States. They are awarded by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

In 1993, Butler published *Parable of the Sower*, the first of a two-book series that was intended to become a trilogy. *Parable of the Sower* is set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland version of Los Angeles in the years 2024-2027, which, although it must have seemed like the far future at that time, would begin only a year away from the date of writing this study. Butler's sincere efforts in the 1990s to imagine the failing world of the twenty-first century has become as prophetic as the central character of her book, a young black woman named Lauren Oya Olamina. As an African American, Butler wrote science fiction from the perspective of a minority member of society and from this position was able to see, perhaps with more clarity, the grim reality of things as they are as well as what is to come. Set in the failing California of a dystopian 2020s, Butler imagined a world where "civilization" has largely collapsed due to wealth inequality, corporate greed, and climate change.

The series is located not only in the near future, but also in a genre category sometimes referred to as "mundane SF" to designate science fiction that stays within the realm of physics as we know it - i.e., spaceships cannot travel faster than the speed of light, teleportation technology does not exist, etc. (Booker 186). As a result, the *Parable* series imparts a more "realistic" futurism than the superpowered telepaths or time travelers from Butler's other novels would do otherwise. In fact, the only science fictional concept present in the *Parable* series is an affliction called "hyperempathy" which is caused by a human being born after exposure to a toxic prescription drug in the womb. This malady causes the sufferer to experience the pain and sensations of other people they witness as if it were their own, which Olamina must struggle with throughout her journey. As we shall see, Butler seems to have been intending to use this notion as a key element in the conclusion of *Parable of the Trickster*.

After her home is destroyed and her family murdered, Olamina embarks on a challenging journey as she travels north from Los Angeles on the remnants of a freeway, joining a great migration of people composed of the poor and displaced. As she does so, she develops her new “religion” called Earthseed, and gathers followers along the way. *Parable of the Sower* ends with the successful establishment of an Earthseed community in Northern California named Acorn.

The second book in the Parable series was entitled the *Parable of the Talents*. The Parable series remained unfinished at this point, for although Butler had planned a third book for this series, she died in 2006 while that book was still in its early stages. *Talents* picks up four years after the events of *Sower* and is told through the points of view of Lauren Oya Olamina as well as her daughter Larkin Olamina (who also goes by the name Asha Vere). Butler admits in her personal journals that, as a writer, thinker, and religious prophet, Olamina is an idealized version of herself. Earthseed is a self-created Darwinian belief system. Its central premise is that “God is change” and that humankind must adapt to this inevitable change to survive.

In writing these books, Butler also turned out to be something of a prophet herself. In addition to the prescient way Butler describes dying ecologies, disease, and structural racism in the 2020s. In *Parable of the Talents*, she envisions a presidential candidate named Senator Andrew Steele Jarret who is later elected president. Jarret leads a Christian fundamentalist denomination called “Christian America” - a “Christian Nationalist” movement whose platform is to bring back jobs from overseas to the United States while dismantling government programs amid a racist and violent corporate branded America. Jarret also aggressively calls on his supporters to help him “make America great again” - a rallying cry that, many have noted eerily parallels President Donald Trump’s campaign and presidency (Aguirre). Butler’s possible clairvoyance aside, blending elements of African-American spiritualism with science fiction

creates a fascinating thematic juxtaposition between religion and science throughout the Parable series.

Simultaneously, Butler's depiction of wealth inequality, systemic racism, and corporate greed while the ecosystem rapidly deteriorates exposes the ways in which capitalism's goals have a tendency to eclipse humanitarian needs. Butler touches on a wide range of serious issues currently facing humanity, and Olamina's belief is that humankind must adapt and evolve to flourish into its adulthood, and that humans must travel beyond Earth if there is to be any hope of a better future. To that end, *Talents* concludes with Olamina dying at the age of 81 while watching the first colonists leave Earth on a starship named "Christopher Columbus," carrying the first settlers off planet to a new world. The successful launch signals a hopeful step towards fulfilling Olamina's wish. However, the name assigned to starship is "Christopher Columbus" - which potentially foreshadows that history may well be doomed to repeat itself again.

It is generally understood that Butler had intended to continue the series with *Parable of the Trickster*, a novel that was intended to chronicle the Earthseed community's struggle to survive on the new planet. However, Butler, experienced such a severe case of writer's block with *Trickster*, that she shifted her efforts to write what would turn out to be her final novel, *Fledgling* (2005), but always with the intention of coming back to finish *Trickster*. The several false starts to *Trickster* are held, along with Butler's literary archive, at the Huntington Library.<sup>46</sup> As revealed in the archival notes, Butler had intended to continue the series with four more books tentatively entitled: *Parable of the Trickster*, *Parable of the Teacher*, *Parable of Chaos*, and *Parable of Clay* (Canavan 60). However, the only false starts we have for any of these books

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<sup>46</sup> The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens is a collections-based educational and research institution established by Henry E. Huntington (1850-1927) and Arabella Huntington (1851-1924) in San Marino, California, United States.

are for *Trickster*. Written sometime in late 2000, manuscript OEB 2215 is the most complete draft in existence that can be located in the archives. At 49 pages long, we are introduced to a new protagonist on a new world, Olamina's great niece Imara, with whom Olamina had reconnected and saved from obscurity back on Earth many decades before. The status of OEB 2215 occupies a liminal space. It is the draft that will be analyzed here but it was never intended as the main text and, furthermore, it is incomplete and rivaled by many other shorter versions. This story shard is a paratextual phenomenon, a glimpse into the quiescent pre-textual stage. It is a glimpse of space that is usually unknowable, the origins of world-building an extrasolar colony that would have formed the initial setting of *Trickster*.

In addition to the enormous number of incomplete drafts of the story, we also have several brief fragmentary documents written by Butler - most of them preliminary "notes to herself." These sketchy records provide us with some of her tentative thoughts about how she might eventually develop the story and what she hoped to accomplish with it. These reveal many of her early thoughts and explorations of relevant literature (both scientific and fictional literature). She was scouring such works for inspiration and ideas. Such notes reveal much about her hopes, inspirations, intentions, and plans for the book, including a brief collection of her thoughts about how she might conclude the work - one of them even notably entitled "some possible ending events."

We do know Butler did follow up and actually implemented many of her earlier plans and inspirations, for the incomplete drafts of the *Trickster* do conspicuously incorporate most of the main concepts and thoughts she mentions in her earlier notes and fragments. The existence of such notes written by Butler herself make it possible to perform analyses - though admittedly

highly speculative - of a general sort that would not ordinarily be possible without access to such clues and information.

Given the great reception of the two previous books in the series, the publication of the third book in this series was eagerly awaited. Thus, there has long been a strong sense of disappointment among the literary community and fans that Butler never finished the Parable series. At least a portion of this disappointment may be because the first two books seem to have created a strong anticipation that many of the main plot elements, philosophical and psychological “loose ends” raised in the first two books would be resolved in a satisfying fashion at the conclusion of this third book. However, since this third book never appeared, no one knows how it would have ended. Thus, there was a lack of satisfaction not only because readers simply never had the opportunity to enjoy this third book - but also because the inability to know the conclusion of the third book also left the stories told in the first and second books incomplete and unresolved as well.

### ***Parable of the Trickster***

As noted previously, the physical and sociological setting of the *Parable of the Trickster* is that of a small colony of humans from Earth living in isolation on a remote planet many light years from Earth, with which they now have no contact nor communication. The concept of a lone individual or small group of people who find themselves trapped in an isolated, unfamiliar and inhospitable environment, and who must resort to extraordinary and desperate measures to survive is a very old and time-worn theme. We find it as early as Homer’s *Odyssey* from 800 BC. As a general framework, this has been used successfully many times in science fiction. At least at its most superficial level, the *Parable of the Trickster* could be seen as merely one more recent deployment of this same plot type - a small colony of isolated Earth people in a very remote and



unfamiliar planet light years from home, surrounded by a hostile environment, with no hope of help from Earth, and no possibility of rescue nor escape. If this was all there was to *The Parable of The Trickster*, it would probably not be very interesting to readers - nor is it likely Butler would have been motivated to write it. However, this superficial context for the story seems to have merely been a convenient vehicle for a more profound excursion - and is most definitely *not* all there is to this story.

Since *Trickster* was never completed, by definition, it is simply not possible to actually analyze its conclusion. However, the analytic presented in the previous chapters may offer us some possible insights into why this *particular* work was so difficult to finish - and perhaps even offer us some - admittedly speculative exploration of what the author *might* have had in mind in order to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.

As mentioned, one key concept Butler wanted to incorporate into this story seems to have been this idea of the colonists experiencing a form of total empathy with each other - such that they have no option but to feel each other's pain and suffering very acutely and in a very visceral way. In the early portions of *Trickster*, this hyperempathy seems to merely be the source of great distress, disorientation and strife, but Butler seems to have had in mind to have it subsequently become an integral part of the solution that might eventually save the colony (and humanity) from itself - from its own destructive tendencies. This is because although at the onset of this hyperempathy it manifests only as what seems to be hallucinations, disorientation, psychosis, and traumatic emotional reactions, after people begin to adapt to it, realize what it is, and learn how to live with it, it turns out to have some very unsettling practical and "pro-social" implications: How could a community with such mutual hyperempathy continue to marginalize, enslave, or otherwise mistreat a minority of their population when *every* member of the

community would directly experience the emotional suffering of the people they marginalize, abuse, exclude and mistreat? How could a man ever sexually assault a woman if he could not avoid experiencing her level of physical pain, psychological trauma, emotional anguish, and horror as a result of his assault? How could such a group continue to pollute, abuse and destroy the ecosystem within which they live when they are forced to feel the distress their actions were causing to all the other lifeforms - both human and non-human - as a result of their apathy, insensitivity, and carelessness?

In one set of notes related to the *Trickster* story she was planning to write, Butler explicitly says she *is* writing a mystery – but in another place she clearly says that *in no sense is this story to be a mystery* (OEB 2055). What are we to make of this? Technically, she is writing a science fiction novel, not a mystery story. Yet even so, since the whole point of it seems to be to find an *answer* to the dilemma confronting her fictional colony - and, by doing so, find an answer to the issue the *real* human race currently faces. At least in Butler's mind, the *Parable of the Trickster* was intended to be something quite unlike most other science fiction stories, and, at least in some sense, perhaps more like a mystery story somewhat akin to something like Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. This would be in the sense that *Trickster* seems to have been centered upon the search for an answer - a satisfying answer - of a very special kind to a very particular kind of question. In no sense is *Trickster* a mystery in the sense of being about the issue of "who (or what) done it?" - other than in a peripheral way that would serve as a vehicle that leads to the "answer" of what kind of alteration in the human's "way of being" that would resolve their present crisis. In a sense, the revelation what caused the heightened empathy among the colonists would only be of indirect importance. As long as the people found a way to cope with the heightened empathy and use it as way to guide their future behavior in a drastically

more compassionate way - the initial cause of the heightened empathy might not really matter, and the story could still proceed - and conclude with an emotionally satisfying resolution - even if the question of *why* they suddenly developed the heightened empathy was never really answered. There is no way of knowing for sure, of course, but it would have made sense to transfigure the hyperempathy into an evolutionary feature that enables humans to live off planet.

The “answer” Butler seems to have been intending to incorporate unto the conclusion of the story apparently centered upon her suggesting that humans must develop their (innate) capacity for empathy to a dramatically greater degree than most of us have now. In terms of what Butler seems to have had in mind, this was evidently something very literal and direct. She seems to not be merely recommending that people adopt a belief system or ideology which preaches that people *should* have greater empathy for each other than they do, or a set of rules and injunctions that commands people to be kinder and gentler with each other than they are now. Rather, she seems to be saying that people need to *literally* become more empathic than they are now - that they must actually reorganize their mental and neurological functioning in some very fundamental way such that they literally re-sensitize themselves to each other and their environment.

### ***Empathy and Emotional Resolution***

*Parable of the Trickster* may be an example of a story that seems to demand an emotional resolution rather than a conventional climax for its satisfactory conclusion. At some level, having the colony be saved at the end by any number of fairly conventional scenarios would have been a simple matter. For instance, Butler could have had a great rescue ship arrive in the nick of time, as in so many “marooned” stories, or westerns in which the cavalry comes over the hill at the last

moment. Alternatively, she might have concluded the story with a climax centered upon the sudden development of an unexpected technological fix, as in so many Star Trek tales, or the appearance of divine savior or other “ghost in the machine” type of endings. This would probably have worked well had this been an ordinary science fiction/fantasy story but based on the various fragmentary drafts and notes we have from Butler, it seems she was leading her readers to view this story as something much more intriguing. In all the fragmentary rough drafts of it we have, she has presented the tale as an exploration of how people can survive a certain kind of destructive threat that is more subtle than a vicious alien menace, which could be dealt with by exterminating them, or escaping them by physically relocating to some other more secure and hospitable planet.

Such a tale as the *Trickster* - or at least the plot of it, could have been concluded by any number of such mundane means, and a writer possessing the level of skill Butler displays could no doubt have written it up with sufficient details and style to render it interesting. However, would such an ending have satisfactorily concluded and resolved the emotional storyline that is so interlinked with survival - the question Butler set out to answer? It is doubtful, especially given that this particular story seems to call for an answer that asks the entire human race to make a more profound and radical transformation of an especially challenging nature.

Such a mechanical solution would not feel satisfying, for the question at hand seems to demand a more profound and emotionally satisfying answer - and to survive as the result of a military or technological victory, or rescue by a third party would not fill the bill. However, the problem Butler sets out to solve was no simple one - but a thorny issue the human race in the real world as a whole has yet to actually solve. Perhaps we might think the problem is that what Butler sought to accomplish involves setting the bar too high even for her - she wanted an

answer in her story that would be an answer to the current crisis of humanity but, alas, she could not find one.

There is no way to determine exactly what Butler had in mind for incorporating this concept into the main body and conclusion of *Trickster*, but such fragmentary clues as we do have, it seems as if the “answer” Butler hoped to deliver involved human of this colony somehow learning how to live with this heightened level of empathy - to adapt the nervous systems, psychological functioning and behavior in accordance with it - and learn how to use it in a constructive manner that would guide them towards treating each other - and all other lifeforms - in a vastly more respectful - and more compassionate - manner than we generally do now. Exactly how she was planning to describe her colonists having arrived at this way of being and behaving is not at all clear from her notes, so it is not possible for me to make any definite proclamations on the matter. Even so, it nevertheless seems that her conclusion - whatever the specific details of it might have turned out to be, would have to have somehow embodied and communicated this general “answer” to the readers. This could be integrated into a dramatic ending - it might include a conventional climax, but it could as easily dispense with that and move toward an emotional resolution.

### ***Efforts at Scientific Research***

Based on original material found in OEB 2055, OEB 2082-2084, OEB 2214, and OEB 2215, I believe there is circumstantial evidence Butler had been attempting to find a plausible, real world theoretical explanation to link her concept of hyperempathy to the evolution of the colonists on the planet Bow so that they may survive in *Trickster*. Considering the enormous effort of scientific research over several years, these materials don't merely show Butler

“attempting” to solve the problem for survival, it appears as if she was *desperately* trying to solve it. OEB 2083 of the archives contains several index cards that strongly suggest Butler was doing extensive research in the sciences to fuel her attempt at a solution for *Trickster*. Talk of pathogens, airborne allergens, and medical definitions are written in both type as well as handwritten notes in pencil, blue and red pen, and red marker. They are also covered with pink, blue, yellow, and orange highlighter, suggesting Butler came back to the cards to add or make changes time after time after time. One of the index cards containing a typed quote for the denotative definition of “Allergen” followed by “Etiology or Cause of Allergies” (underlining of “cause” is her emphasis) also contains, written in blue ink located in the upper right-hand corner, Butler’s source “Taber’s p. 60.” There are a few more index cards where, in the same location on the card, “Taber’s” or “Taber’s p.60” is written. Given the technical nature of the definition, it is likely Butler was pulling these definitions from “Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary” a canonical text first published in 1940 for health care clinicians and students in an effort to be as accurate as possible.

Another example of the depth of her seriousness is evidenced by her desire to base the world of Bow on an existent star and planetary system. Located at the top of her draft of the prologue in OEB 2082, a handwritten note in blue ink underlined in a red line “82 Eridani – 20.9 light years away <6.13 parsecs> G5 star – sim. To sun <.91 solar mass>” (the underlining of “82 Eridani” and “so” is Butler’s emphasis). According to NASA, “Epsilon Eridani is our closest known planetary system, located about 10 light-years away in the constellation Eridanus. Its central star is a younger, fainter version of our sun, and is about 800 million years old -- about the same age of our solar system when life first took root on Earth.” Whether or not information about the *age* of this planetary system – which could potentially point to Butler’s obsession with

microbes in her notes - reached Butler around 2001, is uncertain. However, in 2000, CNN along with many other news outlets reported the discovery of Eridani quoting a Berkely scientist who explained: “‘It's a very exciting discovery because ... the star itself is the closest star for which a planet has ever been discovered,’ he added. ‘It's only 10 light years away. In the next 100 or 200 years, it will be one of the first stars humans visit.’ he said.” Epsilon Eridani would have been in the news again in 2004 with the announcement of NASA’s Terrestrial Planet Finder project (Malik) as it was identified as a target star for NASA's proposed Space Interferometry Mission to search for Earth-sized planets, but the project was cancelled in 2011 due to lack of funding (Marcy). The discovery of Erindani announced it was a fainter version of our sun, and it is entertaining to speculate that may be the inspiration for Butler’s description of Bow as a dreary world with shades of grey and not much sunlight. At some point, Butler had returned to the typed prologue in OEB 2082, to presumably cross out incorrect information about the number of planets in the solar system. The crossed-out text is not legible, having been blackened by a marker of some kind. Her corrections are handwritten in blue ink: “There were eleven other [planets in the solar system]. Three of these [were made to sustain life in time, but only] “the” [one] “was already living” (Butler OEB 2082). The initial discovery of the planetary system was announced a year before the date of this 2001 draft of her prologue.

Finally, another archival scribbling of Butler’s highlights her interest in evolutionary biology. In 2001, Octavia Butler was living in Lake Forest Park, a suburban community in Washington state having left Southern California due to her growing pessimism about the future of the state. In OEB 2055, handwritten in extremely faint pencil lines that say “9:00 Dawkins KUOW.” Although the internet was available in the early 2000s, it was not nearly as accessible as it is today and likely Butler wrote the note to herself to catch the live broadcast of KUOW, a

public broadcasting station located in Seattle, Washington. Given the subject matter of Butler's interest in evolutionary biology, I believe the note refers to renowned evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. As of this writing, I have been unable to confirm whether or not there was a broadcast of an interview with Dawkins on the radio in 2001, the date associated with the materials this note was written on, since KUOW's online archives only date back to 2013. There is also no way to confirm whether or not she may have heard a Dawkins interview at a later date, as she could have returned to her materials again before her passing in 2006. However, Dawkins has been interviewed many times by KUOW since 2013 (according to the publicly available records online), and it is not unreasonable to wonder if Butler was actively trying to educate herself on the topic of evolutionary biology through listening to experts on the subject when possible. In the preliminary composition of the OEB 2082 prologue, Butler articulates, "Listen, this place is so much like Earth, we might find microbes here that are dangerous to us – or that become dangerous to us." This notion, emphasizing the potential incapacity of an organic human body to acclimate on a microscopic level to extraterrestrial environments, pervades her subsequent drafts and annotations as she contemplates the prospects of human endurance in the context of extrasolar colonization.

One set of possibilities might have been that this extremely heightened empathy, or at least its most unpleasant and non-functional side effects, would just diminish somewhat of their own accord over time on its own, as people's minds and neurology naturally adapt to it. Then again, perhaps, as Butler seems to suggest in one of her notes, the human colonists somehow manage to create their own artificial "biota" – perhaps, a form of injectable micro-organisms - which when ingested by the afflicted human at least partially mitigates the hyperempathy effect to a more tolerable, less disruptive level, such as by reducing the hallucinations, but nevertheless



leaves people with a markedly increased level of empathy such that it influences their minds and behavior- making it intolerable for them to harm others or ignore their suffering.

Based on all the information previously discussed, it is possible to offer at least some speculative solutions regarding how the *Parable of the Trickster* might have been brought to a satisfying resolution. It would need to conclude with the general population of the colony having acquired this new hyperempathy but having (somehow) managed to adapt to it and live it. The story could end with the whole population having acquired hyperempathy and learned to manage it in a constructive manner. Perhaps this would be as a result of an artificially-developed “biota” that moderates the negative “side effects” such as the psychosis, hallucinations, and violent tendencies - yet still leaves the “afflicted” person with drastically increased levels of empathy for everyone around them.

This type of an emotional resolution ending could have been written such that it accompanies and is well-integrated with a conventional climax. For instance, it could be described in a manner that the late stages of the development of hyperempathy are particularly painful, distressing, disorienting - and violent. Perhaps such aspects get much worse before they get better. Perhaps the paranoia, suicidal tendencies and homicidal tendencies become intensified for a time, leading to drastically heighten violence within the colony, more conflict among individuals, and between the various factions of the colony.

Perhaps managing to survive this advanced stage of the process and live to reap the benefits of the process could be described as not being an entirely passive process, but the requires a stern measure of resolve - a strong determination not to give in or succumb to the violent, suicidal or homicidal impulses, but rather to “ride out the storm.” Perhaps it could describe that the more a person resists, denies, and fights the process of transformation, the

longer it takes, the more unpleasant it becomes, and the more likely they are to be destroyed by it.

Perhaps the narrative could be that not everyone is able to successfully make the transformation, so many of the colonists die as a result. However, enough of them would need to successfully pass through it that the colony would be able to survive and flourish afterwards. Once the colonists have passed through the transformation, they are able to live in much greater harmony with each other and live in harmony with the “alien” ecosystem they are situated within - able to reap the benefits of a more respectful and compassionate way of being - and all things that go with it.

However, despite the fact that it would be possible to have written such a conclusion to *The Parable of the Trickster* that included a conventional climax followed by an emotional resolution, and that at least some readers might have found such an ending very entertaining, we must also note that it would have been possible to bring the story to a conclusion even without resorting to the use of such a violent or dramatic conventional climax. It would have been possible to dispense with such a climax, and write the conclusion of the story in a manner that provided high quality emotional resolution. For instance, it could have been written in a manner such that despite the initial violence, hallucinations, and psychosis, such features quickly faded after the first few days or weeks, leaving the later stages of the transforming to be experienced in a much more tranquil and pleasant manner - at least for those who quickly learn to avoid abusing other people or mistreating the ecosystem. This might have been written in an entertaining fashion, but without any actual dramatic climax.

If one insisted on a resolution of a “who done it” sort of question, Butler’s notes hint at a fairly obvious possibility. She seems to assume the “disease” of hyperempathy is somehow a

result of the earth people interacting with the alien ecosystem and occurs because of some kind of alien “biota” infecting the humans. Although this idea could seem to work well even if the “infection” is an unplanned, unmotivated action, it would be possible, and perhaps even more satisfying to interpret it as the “intelligent” response of some aspects of the alien biosphere. For instance, it could be described as ‘defensive’ reaction of some local alien species to what they perceive as an “attack” by the humans upon itself. Thus, natural reaction of this alien plant, animal, bacteria etc. to a perceived attack upon itself or its environment is to release some kind of chemical, microbe, etc. which causes its attackers to become hypersensitive to the pain and damage they are causing. Thus, by colonizing the planet and abusing its ecosystem in the way that they have, perhaps the colonists have inadvertently brought this crisis of hyperempathy upon themselves.

One possible resolution that was at least flirted with in *Battlestar Galactica* was the possibility that the human race may not survive simply because it does not *deserve* to survive. - it is merely one flawed and inferior evolutionary experiment - a species that failed - and was thus destined to be replaced and superseded by some better, less flawed, and more deserving species. Such an ending would be an emotional resolution of a sort, although most readers would likely not find it a satisfying one as it would violate the theoretical reasoning of narrative desire. There are stories, popular stories even, that end with all or most of the characters dying. These are commonly cautionary tales where the satisfaction, if there is any, is in the reassurance that the story has perhaps taught us a valuable lesson where a mistake concerning survival is not to be repeated.

Examining the pre-textual space of the *Trickster* reveals Butler's arduous endeavor to craft a narrative from her scientific research that maintains the plausibility and societal relevance

of themes established in the initial two books of the series, such as resilience, adaptability, and community-building. While both *Lilith's Brood* and the *Patternist* series prominently feature evolutionary themes, their inclusion of fantastical science fiction elements arguably facilitated their completion for Butler. She posited that evolution was crucial and stagnation would inevitably lead to extinction. Envisioning what that may be like in story form, however, proved too great a challenge, and *Trickster* remains forevermore arrested in a state of quiescence. Despite the overwhelming challenges humanity faces, Butler suggests that hyperempathy may hold the key to our survival, not so much in the way of advanced technology but in community and the distinctly human traits of perseverance, resilience, purpose, connection, collaboration, and hope.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigates the complex relationship between narrative desire and the future of human survival in the context of twenty-first century science fiction. Through an investigation of the genre's potential to grapple with the complexities of species survival through a paradigm of female forms of narrative desire, female forms of desire such as narrative recurrence, duration, and emotional resolution have broadened an understanding of the often-overlooked narrative stage of quiescence. By doing so, it has demonstrated the value of this analytical tool in

unlocking the radical imagination inherent within the texts *Battlestar Galactica*, *Mass Effect 3*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Trickster*. These findings are also aligned with Peter Brooks' model of narrative desire, which elucidates the energy that drives narrative pleasure. Though species reproduction may traditionally be based on biological foundations, the reality of human survival - and reproduction - is rapidly evolving. The pace of change can make it challenging to comprehend the evolving role of science fiction or to imagine what function the genre is performing in new ways, and this emphasizes the crucial role of narrative desire as an interpretive tool for these texts.

*Battlestar Galactica* was unique because it made the moment and location of quiescence visible within the text, effectively resetting the storyline while maintaining the audience's engagement. In the final episode, a 150,000-year interval is introduced after the conclusion of the main storyline. This dramatic pause, reminiscent of Greek theater, occurs offstage and in a fleeting instant. The narrative recommences in contemporary Times Square, New York City, where a pair of familiar faces who it is assumed are supernatural beings, deliberate on the prospect of humanity either persisting in replicating historical errors or ultimately advancing. They observe that for progress to transpire, a departure from established patterns will have to occur.

Given this structure, it appears that the genre of science fiction itself has dispatched this narrative to self-consciously ask these questions of itself and its audience. This suggests that quiescence is located after the end and before the beginning of a narrative cycle. In its understanding as a *phase*, quiescence is outside of narrative time in a state of inactivity that contains unlimited narrative potential that exists in sharp contrast to the activity of the diegetic text. For anyone who has daydreamed beyond the ending of a story, the notions they conceive

remain intangible until articulated through written or verbal means. Only upon such expression do these concepts truly materialize into existence.

An exploration of *Mass Effect 3* illustrated that in addition to being a phase, there was potential for quiescence to also be understood as the *space* that surrounds the text, which was revealed by observing how fan protests of the original ending prompted Bioware to manufacture new ending options for dissatisfied gamers. It also highlighted the notion that not all phases of quiescence are paratextual, but all paratext is quiescent in relation to the main text. Anything outside of the principal work is held in suspension pertaining to the text. Unlike an understanding of quiescence as the creative genesis phase of possibility that exists after the end and before the beginning of story, paratext is tangible and manifested as events or items within the space of reality (in the form of fan fiction or a book cover, for example). Paratextuality influences the meaning of the primary material that is interpreted by reader, viewer, or player. Its position remains in suspension with respect to the text, existing separate from but adjacent to it. In other words, it is not possible for it to occur within the temporality of the text in question itself. The initial conclusions of ME3 necessitated a considerable degree of imaginative interpretation on the part of the players as their avatar died for the greater good. However, the predominantly youthful male audience seemed to struggle with this, ultimately prompting the creators to present more explicit narrative resolutions with an option where their avatar could survive, revealing their anxieties over unknown futures and a resistance to innovate using their own imagination.

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Trickster* provides a rare glimpse into quiescence as both a location *and* as a space as one examines the pre-textual material. It is essentially a glimpse into the creative mind of the author that we were never intended to see. Having privileged access to the Huntington Library archives divulges Butler's direct engagement with the question of species

survival. Unlike her other works that contain similar themes around evolution and survival, one observes the painstaking scientific research Butler did to find a solution that could provide a reasonable possibility of survival for humanity's future. Butler faced challenges with both the project and depression for years, even taking a break to write the book *Fledgling* (2005) before her death in 2006. Given her track record of accurately predicting numerous events in her dystopian depiction of Los Angeles and the wider United States, her inability to imagine a future where humanity evolves enough to survive on an exoplanet feels foreboding.

As the science fiction genre grapples with concerns about humanity's survival in the face of existential threats like artificial intelligence, pandemics, climate change, and nuclear apocalypse, innovative strategies and tools for survival must be developed. To adapt to our constantly evolving world, solutions must transcend the constraints of anthropocentrism. This raises the question: how will the transformation of our survival impact narrative desire, referred to by Robert Scholes as the "archetype of all fiction," considering its profound connection to human nature? Further probing into this may take time, as evolution itself *is a lengthy process*, however, it is not unreasonable to consider that post-human endeavors to dismantle the construct of the human will eventually have an effect – especially since post-humanists argue that our current approach to existence signifies that we have already arrived at this stage.

I propose that the impact under discussion is unlikely to manifest as a biological modification or depreciation of sexual reproduction any time soon. Visualizing the incorporation of non-erotic desires into the overarching fabric of narrative desire, as characterized by narratology scholars, poses a significant, if not insurmountable, challenge. In terms of surviving the existential threats currently faced by humanity, the development of scientific literacy, global cooperation and diplomacy, and robust ethical and moral reasoning is essential. These strategies

prioritize empathy, collaboration, and intellect over dominance and control for survival. Again, biological evolution is a slow process and any accelerated progression brought on by technological interventions to human biology would fundamentally alter our human nature and, with it, the formula of narrative desire.

While speculation surrounding the potential inclusion of non-erotic desires in our survival instincts is intriguing, it remains impossible to predict their nature at this point. That said, these skills may mirror those conditions necessary for female pleasure, according to biological research on communal cohesion. This suggests that pathways of female pleasure could play a more significant role in our future survival compared to its historically male-centric counterpart. Nevertheless, the notion of altering our biological drives from erotic to non-erotic appears unfeasible. Such a radical shift would, it may seem, result in a loss of our humanity.

The concept of non-erotic or non-human desires directed towards survival introduces an intriguing dimension to this discourse. Perhaps the reconfiguration of narrative desire, if it were to occur, necessitates a foundation deeply entrenched in corporeal experience, enduring over an extensive temporal continuum. It is pivotal to consider that the human body, as the vessel of experience, undergoes a continuous metamorphosis. An in-depth exploration of this perpetual transformation moving forward might shed light on what potential form and character of non-erotic desires oriented towards survival may emerge. Investigating the bodily metamorphosis and its potential correlation with the emergence and development of such survival-oriented desires could provide invaluable insights. This exploration could illuminate the ways in which the body, as a site of experience and transformation, could engender the emergence of new forms of desire. These insights could, in turn, enhance our understanding of human nature, survival strategies, and the potential trajectories of our evolution.



As humanity seemingly propels itself towards a posthuman epoch, it is the realm of science fiction that endeavors to conceptualize and elucidate potential manifestations of this impending metamorphosis. By engaging in imaginative conjecture and extrapolation, the genre serves as a conduit for contemplating the myriad of ramifications and implications of transcending our current human condition. Furthermore, quiescence can be perceived as an essential counterpoint to the dynamic forces of action and change that drive narratives of survival and adaptation. These quiescent spaces serve as fertile ground for the inception and development of innovative ideas and solutions, which subsequently inform our strategies for ensuring the continuity and prosperity of our species. Within the imaginative domains of literature, interactive media, and visual storytelling, these moments of stillness and contemplation provide opportunities for both creators and audiences to engage in a reflective process that probes the depths of our collective consciousness and envisions novel approaches to overcoming the challenges we face.

In this capacity, quiescence functions not only as a necessary pause in the ongoing narrative of survival but also as an incubator for the germination of transformative ideas. These moments of respite enable us to reexamine our assumptions, question the parameters of our existence, and imagine new beginnings that transcend the limitations of our current circumstances. By embracing these moments of stillness, we harness the power of our imagination to chart new paths forward, fostering a deeper understanding of our potential as a species and the myriad of possibilities that await us in the uncharted territories of the future.

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