

Navigating the Nebula: Audience affect, interactivity, and genre in the age of streaming TV

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Abstract:

Streaming technologies continue to shift audience viewing practices. However, aside from addressing how these developments allow for more complex serialized streaming television, not much work has approached concerns of specific genres that fall under the field of digital streaming. How do emergent and encouraged modes of viewing across various SVOD platforms re-shape how audiences affectively experience and interact with genre and generic texts? What happens to collective audience discourses as the majority of viewers' situated consumption of new serial content becomes increasingly accelerated, adaptable, and individualized? Given the range and diversity of genres and fandoms, which often intersect and overlap despite their current fragmentation across geographies, platforms, and lines of access, why might it be pertinent to reconfigure genre itself as a site or node of affective experience and interactive, collective production? Finally, as studies of streaming television advance within the industry and academia, how might we ponder on a genre-by-genre basis, fandoms' potential need for time and space to collectively process and interact affectively with generic serial texts – in other words, to consider genres and generic texts themselves as key mediative sites between the contexts of production and those of fans' interactivity and communal, affective pleasure? This article draws together threads of commentary from the industry, scholars, and culture writers about SVOD platforms, emergent viewing practices, speculative genres, and fandoms to argue for the centrality of genre in interventions into audience studies. Considering a range of contemporary speculative series, with particular attention paid to the example of Netflix's *Sense8* and its queer fan engagement, I claim that conceptualizations of genre as a matrix of affective experience and collaborative discursive production are key to critical understandings of the audience practices which liberate fandoms and texts from neoliberal constructions of taste communities and curated watch lists.

Keywords: streaming television, genre, fandoms, viewing practices, affective experience, interactivity, digital curation

Introduction

Video streaming platforms and technologies continue to shift what, when, where, and how audiences consume media. Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, HBOGo, and even more recent over-the-top (OTT) streaming video on demand (SVOD) portals such as CBS All Access are slowly overtaking broadcast television as the common place to watch current content. Many media scholars have studied how SVOD libraries and their predecessors of DVD box sets and DVRs have enabled television creators to tell more complex – and arguably more compelling – narratives (Warhol 2014, Mittell 2015, Kelly 2017). Other industry scholars and cultural critics have commented at length on the new material practices, serial release models and modes of viewing that streaming portals afford (Kompere 2002, Lotz 2007/2017, Doyle 2016). Finally, other figures in the field have paid attention to the ways that digital streaming content, industries, and practices have shaped or re-shaped audiences' conceptions of – and the discourse surrounding – television itself (Hills 2002, Cover 2006). However, aside from addressing developments for high-quality television drama in general, few scholars or critics have yet paid much attention to the concerns of specific genres or subgenres that fall under the broad categories of media that stream on TV. Furthermore, most television audience studies have not gone far beyond considering viewers as uniform consumers whom streaming conglomerates are trying to attract toward their content in order to generate subscription or advertising revenue. This article attempts to fill these gaps with critical attention to the vagaries of fans' affective experiences and degrees of interactivity across genre texts and fandoms.

Although Netflix acknowledges that it categorizes users into 'taste communities' to target them with content based on their proprietary algorithms (Roettgers 2017), the company has been rather vague about how they define these categories and how the discourses and affective experiences of audiences and fandoms might take part in contouring them. Netflix Vice President of Original Content, Cindy Holland, has told the press that 'demographics are not a good indicator of what people like to watch' and that this type of content goes 'several layers deeper' than conventional genre categories. As an alternative approach, Netflix has identified around 2,000 'taste communities' into which they situate their more than 130 million subscribers (Lynch 2018). True to the typical market practices of neoliberalism, a large part of Netflix's corporate mission is about 'access, personalization and choice' for its users. Thus, the company compiles and categorizes users' preferences and tastes and employs this data to target its subscribers with new content. At the same time, Netflix still allows users to search for content by established television genre categories, including the speculative category of 'Sci-Fi & Fantasy' or by identity-centered categories such as 'LGBTQIA.' This seemingly puts the agenda of Netflix – and of other SVOD platforms which might follow suit in targeting users by taste – at odds with how audiences

might circumnavigate data-driven pigeonholing to find new content. Furthermore, as Netflix continues to situate its subscribers within increasingly niche, disparate, and individualized communities of ‘taste,’ the company’s practices raise questions about the current status of traditional genre fandoms and communities. Fan-created websites, forums, and message boards, as well other participatory networked subcultures of the past, have functioned as spaces for audiences to collectively engage with genres and texts through emotion-laden frameworks or acts expressing curiosity, excitement, hype, anxiety, anger, frustration, and disappointment – phenomena I refer to as fans’ affective experiences of media content. However, as SVOD media conglomerates release so much new serial content onto platforms where binge-watching becomes the *modus operandi*, we might wonder what happens to the traditional cycles of discourse across fan-centered spaces – virtual or otherwise.

In this article, I want to begin to consider these phenomena and pose questions for future research of genres and fandoms in the era of streaming TV. How do emergent and encouraged modes of viewing across various SVOD platforms re-shape how audiences affectively experience and interact with genre and generic texts? What happens to collective audience discourses as the majority of viewers’ situated consumption of new serial content becomes increasingly accelerated, adaptable, and individualized? Given the range and diversity of genres and fandoms, which often intersect and overlap despite their current fragmentation across geographies, platforms, and lines of access, why might it be pertinent to reconfigure genre itself as a site or node of affective experience and interactive, collective production? Finally, as studies of streaming television advance within the industry and academia, how might we ponder on a genre-by-genre basis, fandoms’ potential need for time and space to collectively process and interact affectively with generic serial texts – in other words, to consider genres and generic texts themselves as key mediative sites between the contexts of production and those of fans’ interactivity and communal, affective pleasure?

I focus on the ‘speculative genres’ (Delaney 1990; Lothian 2018) that enfold the textual clusters of science fiction and fantasy. I do so not only because their increased production budgets, special effects, and textual quality have helped to popularize them, but also because of the longstanding extra-complexity or ‘hyperdiegesis’ of their textual settings, characters, and plot (Hills 2002). I also choose these genres because I am a fan of much of their content. Like many fans of fantasy or science fiction, I am drawn to their potential of coming laden with new invented histories, geographies, and sets of norms, as well as their tendency to invite heightened or even hyperactive audience engagement. In fact, these genres are speculative both in their content and in their fans’ dominant affective experiences in that they can, and do, grip viewers in acts of speculation, along with the pleasures or anxieties they might derive from waiting and wondering. As such, these genres provide ideal case studies for considering their fans’ cycles of discourse, interactive affective experiences, and collective production as part of the matrix of elements that I contend renders genres meaningful to audiences, including myself.

However, given the increasingly fragmented nature of fantasy and science fiction media, one must resort to reading between broad swathes of current cultural discourse about these genres in order to make intertextual connections and claims about their texts and fandoms. Furthermore, this fragmentation requires that one consider the situation of fantasy and science fiction generic works across several streaming platforms in order to survey the various ways in which audiences engage with current serial content. Thus, in order to narrow this task further, I concern myself only with science fiction and fantasy series available as original content on SVOD platforms. Such programs include HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016–), *The OA* (2016–) *Altered Carbon* (2018–), *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018–) and *Umbrella Academy* (2019–); Amazon Prime Video's *The Man in the High Castle* (2015 –); Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–); and CBS All Access's *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017–) and *The Twilight Zone* (2019–). I also want to primarily consider SVOD platforms currently most popular in North America, those being Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu, and HBO Go, paying special attention to their distinct employment of marketing strategies, serial release models, and interfaces which afford and encourage diverse modes of viewing. Therefore, I examine the industry marketing strategies involving these portals' original serial content, briefly analyze the platforms that host these shows, and explore the ways that audiences and fans engage in these texts and contexts to create waves of cultural discourse. By reflecting on additional discourse from popular press, social media, and scholarly engagements with genre fandoms, I draw together various threads of textual and cultural commentary to make new claims about the interwoven nature of genres, generic texts, and audience affect and interactivity. Finally, using Netflix's original series *Sense8* (2015–2018) as a telling example of this phenomenon, I draw attention to its LGBTQIA and sci-fi fandom, noting how queer audiences tend to gravitate toward speculative generic texts and engagement in these fandoms due to their enriched textual potential – albeit not always brought to fruition – for progressive representations of bodies, sexualities, and transcendence beyond the social norms or histories entangled in mimetic realism. Nevertheless, given that Netflix ended *Sense8* with a two-hour finale in 2018 despite fans' fervent efforts to resurrect the show permanently, I endeavor to uncover the problems facing genre fandoms in the streaming era when viewing becomes increasingly individualized and accelerated. My hope here is to present a compelling framework of research, commentary, and examples of generic texts and their fans to highlight how affect and desire can shape audience experiences of genres outside of industry-generated categories and agendas.

Launching from Jason Mittell's (2005) understanding of television genres as sites of cultural discourse rather than formalistic categories, I pose a re-conceptualization of genre as a layered matrix comprised of textual clusters, audience affect, and interactivity. Also acknowledging the need for fans' collaborative cycles of discourse to sustain series' vitality and viability, I ultimately promote critical consciousness of the audience strategies that seek – though often unsuccessfully or in contested ways – to liberate fandoms and generic texts such as *Sense8* from formations of taste and algorithmic curation. Considering affect and

interactivity as part and parcel of how audiences can work to construct genres and texts beyond the current neoliberalized logics of algorithmic content curation which promote the illusion of user-flexibility, freedom, personalization, and choice on streaming platforms, I argue these concerns should be taken seriously in future study and production of streaming TV.

‘New’ Frontiers: Audiences’ Shifting Viewing Practices of Streaming TV

Before exploring audience cultures and genres, I think it is pertinent to first briefly recount the shifts in the available and encouraged viewing practices under the auspices of streaming TV. I am interested in how relatively recent changes in audiences’ ways of viewing serial content have in turn affected the ways that they experience media texts and genres. As I previously noted, several scholars have already begun to document and analyze the rapid and monumental changes to television in recent decades. From the VCR to the DVR and DVD box sets and finally to SVOD (subscription video on demand) platforms on the Internet, we have seen shifts not only in the ways that television texts are stored, watched, or re-watched, but also how they are written, produced, and marketed to audiences. Derek Kompare (2002) was one of the first scholars to offer a counter-conceptualization to the notion of television ‘flow’ which Raymond Williams introduced to the field in 1974. Williams refers to flow as ‘the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form’ (86). Instead of fixating on scheduling alone, Williams emphasizes that television scholars should consider a range of other practices, such as advertising slots, paratexts, and sequencing as part of the industry’s way of engaging audiences and stringing them from one program to the next. However, in light of the then-recent forms of digital storage such as DVDs and DVRs, Kompare claims that whereas ‘flow creates large, synchronous audiences over long stretches of time, the file is made directly available to individuals in small packages and on an ad hoc basis’ (4). In combining its three key elements – ‘information, access, and mobility’ – the file is posed as a better conceptualization for the modern age (4). As SVOD has grown in popularity and nearly eclipsed the DVR and DVD (or Blu Ray), the file remains essential for how films or television series are stored and accessed as digital texts. Amanda Lotz (2017), in her *Treatise on Portals*, delineates further distinctions between broadcast or cable channels and streaming ‘portals,’ a term she coins in her work. She observes that ‘nonlinear access’ frees portals from the ‘task of scheduling.’ Thus, portals are more like libraries of curated content ‘based on the identity, vision, and strategy that drive its business model’ (‘Introduction’). In such content libraries, a user can access each film or, in this case, each television episode ad hoc as a discrete file, thus providing users with more flexibility and control, or at least the illusion thereof.

Streaming portals, however, are not entirely bereft of flow. They have ways of almost-seamlessly linking serial episodes together in order to encourage specific modes of viewing and, I would add, certain affective experiences for audiences in both viewership and collective engagement with serial content. The Netflix interface, for example, pulls viewers

from one episode of a series to another in quick succession and with little to no action required of the user. Rebecca Coleman (2018) discusses the intersections of affect, temporality, and contemporary digital media, claiming that 'the flow of Netflix can be seen to create a temporality where the progression from past to present to future is suspended, and nextness or pre-emergence becomes absorbed within a kind of stretched or expanded present' (613). Furthermore, Coleman notes that 'the pacing of how programmes are watched allows viewers to affectively indulge or splurge on programmes, composing repeated scenes of positive affect' (618). Noting that Netflix did not always afford or encourage such modes of viewing, Robyn Warhol (2014) traces the platform's shift from its original interface, which had all episodes filed discretely, to the interface that encourages and facilitates back-to-back viewing. Whereas viewers of traditionally produced and released TV episodes 'might have chosen to pause for a more substantial break,' a Netflix user 'hardly has enough time to stop the video stream before the next installment has begun' (145). Mareike Jenner (2014), too, shares the idea that Netflix 'encourages specific modes of [binge] viewing' and '[teaches] audiences how to watch' it (264). Of course, serial bingeing is not new; it has been around as long as series marathons and DVD box sets. However, with the enormous breadth of original and syndicated serial content now available to Netflix's over-100 million subscribers, it has become an ever more accessible and encouraged way to watch. Thus, Netflix, as well as Amazon Prime Video and Hulu, maintain individual units that can be accessed and stored as files, but their preferred mode of use converges with and hyper-actualizes the flow of older television forms.

Additionally, these platforms are unconstrained by the edifices of broadcast and cable television networks, which contribute further to users' ability to binge-watch serial content. Daily, weekly, or seasonal timetables do not limit the airing or viewing of these shows, and – except in the case of Hulu or OTT platforms like CBS All Access – they also lack built-in commercial segments, episode recaps, and the need for the constant rehashing of developing exposition. These features have led to changes in episode and season lengths, intra-season feedback loops, and, ultimately, to the kinds of stories that can be told. Mittell (2010) has written much about the rise in complex serial television as DVD box sets and DVRs became more accessible to consumers. He notes, 'The ability to watch DVDs on your own time and pace, without commercials or interruptions, helps emphasize the medium's artistic merits over commercial imperatives' ('Serial Boxes'). In other words, 'viewing a DVD edition helps highlight the values of unity, complexity, and clear beginnings and endings, qualities that are hard to discern through the incremental releases of seriality' ('Serial Boxes'). Modes of viewing that are unconstrained by – and unsynchronized with – the scheduling flow provide greater freedom to pause, stop, rewind, fast-forward, and repeat at a pace of one's choosing. Thus overly-complex narratives, which networks might have shied away from producing for fear of losing audiences in the weeks they missed episodes, burgeoned in the 1990s. This trend has only grown in the age of digital storage and streaming where a set of clicks have replaced discs and remotes. JP Kelly (2017) echoes much of what Mittell argues, noting that 'television viewing is no longer strictly linear and

transitory. Instead, content can be stored, manipulated, re-viewed, reconfigured, extended, contracted, and so on' (86). Furthermore, he observes that 'the transition to digital media has also been key in developing the experience of immediacy (or simultaneity) that epitomises a number of contemporary series' (87). Most scholars agree, therefore, that the technological streaming affordances on portals, paired with greater viewing accessibility and flexibility for audiences, have contributed to the rise of increasingly complex serial television content. As I hope to show, this narrative complexity is great news for fandoms' affective engagement, particularly for speculative fandoms, but it also presents challenges when binge-watching becomes the encouraged or preferred mode of viewing streaming TV.

Popular culture writers have also added their voices to conversations about the new narrative and viewing experiences that streaming TV affords. For one, Brian Stelter (2013) in the New York Times notes that when binge-watching becomes the popular way to watch new content, there is 'less reason [for showrunners] to remind viewers what happened in previous episodes,' which expedites exposition and streamlines narrative continuity between episodes. James Poniewozik (2015), also in the Times, even goes so far as to assert that 'the original series that Netflix, Amazon and their ilk release all at once, in full seasons ... are more than simply TV series as we've known them. They're becoming a distinct genre all their own, whose conventions and aesthetics we're just starting to figure out.' Beyond the timetables and flow of broadcast television, original streaming media narratives do not require the same ruptures or breaks for commercials or the next program in the evening lineup; instead, streaming serial narratives can be more seamless, fluid, and dynamic from episode to episode.

Moreover how users choose to experience the narratives is more 'immersive' and 'user-directed' as they are able to set their own viewing schedules or allow themselves to get caught up in the experience of continual binge-watching (Poniewozik 2015), during which the interface can even begin to efface the marked transitions between episodes. Poniewozik compares the viewer affect involved in these experiences of bingeing to 'video gaming,' in that 'each episode becomes a level to unlock' as viewers might communicate and compete with others via social media to be the first to finish a new season. Therefore, the ability to binge a season or series involves a new contract between the industry and audiences which is independent of week-to-week or hour-by-hour schedules for airing content. Linda Holmes (2015), assessing the state of television in the era of streaming, claims that 'the biggest substantive difference in watching [streaming TV] is the collapse of any expectations about timing.' In many ways, this collapse also alters the ways that audiences interact with, interpret, and evaluate serial seasons of shows, shifting them into a cohesive rather than an episodic work (Holmes 2015). This adds to Poniewozik's assertion that 'how you watch, in some way, affects the story you see.' Narrative timelines themselves have accelerated in viewer experiences far beyond what traditional broadcast models of serial release afforded to them. Episodes, seasons, or entire shows can also be watched, rewatched, and experienced anew, which enables certain genres, once more confined to simpler narratives, to become more detailed and immersive.

Therefore, we see bilateral directions of influence: the new streaming television formats can affect the audiences' viewing patterns, while new functions that allow for binge-watching and rewatching can also affect textual varieties and forms. For science fiction and fantasy narratives in particular, which often require extensive exposition to suture viewers into their diegesis, this can be especially liberating. However, it can also be limiting. The ability to binge entire seasons or series on streaming portals creates a new landscape stripped of much of the anxiety – but also the individual and communal speculative pleasure – of waiting for next week's or next season's narrative developments. For example, last spring HBO released the eighth and final season of *Game of Thrones*, a fantasy show around which millions of fans worldwide have engaged in weekly acts of commiseration or celebration on social media platforms, of musing and theorizing across fan pages or forums, or of making and sharing memes with thoughts and reactions to each episode. Like all of its original content, HBO had released *Game of Thrones* on its premium cable channel as well as on its streaming platforms HBO Go and HBO Now. Much of its content resembles – aside perhaps from markers of quality – the semantics and syntax of many other fantasy series. However, it is arguably the new affordances for viewing, which streaming platforms such as HBO Go allow, that enable serial TV to have increased complexity and experimentation in ways that push the formal or discursive bounds of genre as industries or audiences previously understood them.

For me and many others, actively or passively participating in weekly response and speculation about *Game of Thrones* is an intimate part of the affective experience of the series, yet this is not a phenomenon that can exist in the same way for many other shows in the era of streaming. Given general developments in audience viewing habits and the increase of serial complexity today, I now want to turn to the effects that these phenomena have – psychologically, socially, and culturally – on audiences' affective interactions with original streaming generic content, particularly as an increasing number of audiences consume shows via binge-watching. Many shows do not gain the popularity or notoriety of series like *Game of Thrones* for multiple reasons, not least of these due to a hegemonic determination of what constitutes 'quality' television. However, I want to consider how new fragmented and accelerated modes of viewing contribute to the affective impact of much new serial content for audiences. These phenomena, I argue, also limit series' chances of longevity within the span of audience's attention or the industry's production.

Quarter Impulse or Maximum Warp: Savoring, Bingeing, and Cycles of Fan Discourse

In this section, I want to explore how differing models for releasing serial content on SVOD platforms might compress or expand the windows of audience viewership, interactivity, and discourse within the fandoms interwoven with genre series. I also ask whether the rate at which new episodes, or entire seasons, are released impacts fan communities and their experience of new serial content. In other words, what happens to collective audience

discourses when viewers' situated consumption of new serial content becomes faster and more individualized?

The first consideration involves binge-watching practices which, while comprising a dominant mode of contemporary viewership, are only one of many ways that audiences experience – or are enabled to experience – new serial content within streaming TV. Although Netflix and Amazon almost universally release new seasons of original shows all at once in what is referred to as a 'full-drop' model (Holmes 2015), other platforms that stream original content implement a pace of release more akin to broadcast and cable networks, even though scheduling blocks do not apply to them. This practice pushes back against bingeing and can have implications on audience interactions with new content by extending the waves of cycles of discourse surrounding a show, particularly within certain genre fandoms. In 2015, Hulu's Head of Content, Craig Erwich, made the announcement at the Television Critics Association Summer Press Tour that Hulu would refuse to full-drop original content and instead would keep to the same pacing for its content as their broadcast and cable network partners. Erwich provided a rationale, saying, 'Like you, we value the shared experience and the joy of the water cooler that is television. This will also allow us to get the shows out to our audiences faster, without waiting until full series' completion before releasing it' (Maglio 2015). Therefore, during a season run of an original series on Hulu such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian science fiction drama, those audiences currently up-to-date on the show must wait a week for a new episodic installment. The 'water cooler' that Erwich references involves the discourse that emerges from viewers' collective experiences and reactions to a show, particularly one that enjoys popularity among mass audiences or fandoms. It also refers to the intra-seasonal feedback loop between episodes which allows showrunners to respond to audience expectations and opinions in order to adjust the course of a show mid-stream.

Many scholars and critics have also commented on the discursive cycles and feedback loops, but rarely, if ever, in relation to specific genres. What is currently being debated, and where I want to intervene in this article, is whether the full-drop or the extended release model works better for audiences in viewing original content on these various portals, especially in relation to genres and generic clusters. I need to ask whose interest is served by different modes of viewing – that of the industry, the creators, or the viewers – while I also want to consider how genre fits into this equation. Joe Nocera's (2016) article for the *New York Times* includes comments from Ted Sarandos, chief content officer for Netflix, who remarks, 'Netflix doesn't need to aggregate viewers for advertisers, and it doesn't care when consumers watch their shows, whether it's the day they are released or two years later' ('Can Netflix Survive?'). In other words, Netflix can afford to abandon the cultural 'water cooler' that Hulu seemingly wants to embrace, at least within temporal frameworks of each media series. The textual ties to fandoms, however, are not as easily ignored.

Mareike Jenner (2014) discusses how dependencies on fans leads to the success of certain serial streaming content. She focuses on the fandom of the series *Arrested*

Development, which makes her consideration of streaming practices textually-specific but not genre-specific. She reflects upon the cult following which rallied around the series, especially after it was released to DVD. Since audiences could then binge and repeat seasons, they were able to catch the nuanced, embedded humor in retrospect that was unavailable during the series' first run on Fox in 2003-2006. Jenner contends, then, that 'Netflix's choice of *Arrested Development* seems to consciously draw on the fandom and [its] related viewing practices' (265). Therefore, an understanding of '[t]he practice of binge-watching associated with the DVD culture becomes central' to producing and releasing the show in the way they did (265). She notes a similarity with the single season of the Fox science fiction series *Firefly* (2002-2003), which also attracted a cult following after its DVD release. Jenner thus draws from Mittell's (2015) argument to articulate the idea that 'increasingly complex narrative structures demand our attention in a way scheduled television rarely can' (269). In other words, certain series – because of their complexity and nuance – almost require binge-watching and rewatching as part of audience enjoyment.

Bingeing, however, is not without its drawbacks, and I think consideration of these is relevant as they concern audiences' affective experiences of streaming TV. Researchers at the University of Melbourne conducted a study in 2017 to investigate the impact of television viewing schedules and practices on audience retention and emotional experience during and after watching a series (Horvath et al. 2017). The researchers had their participants watch a popular television show 'at the rate of either one episode a week, one episode a day, or all episodes in a single sitting.' Then, at one day, seven days, and 140 days after completing the show, they administered 'perceived comprehension questionnaires and retention tests.' Their findings revealed 'a significant impact of viewing schedule on viewer memory and at least one aspect of perceived comprehension,' in which subjects in the daily or weekly-viewing group tested higher. They also discovered the self-reported enjoyment and satisfaction of the show was reduced among the participants in the binge-watching group (Horvath et al. 2017). Of course, this raises some interesting questions, not only for the industry, but for scholars of audiences. Although the ability to binge and rewatch series has allowed for greater complexity in narratives, and arguably for higher-quality TV, binge-watching a series in its initial viewing might not necessarily generate greater audience enjoyment or retention, which is central to the cohesion and active engagement of fan publics. Furthermore, in the case of hyper-diegetic and extra-complex fantasy and science fiction series, the audience contract with the genres seemingly rests upon the affective retention of their settings, characters, and storylines. This points to one additional key reason – outside of an already-existing subscriber-base drawn to serial content branded as high-quality – why a series like *Game of Thrones* generated continual and increasingly widespread cultural discourse at a level that, as we shall see, other texts in the speculative genres, such as *Sense8*, could not.

To this point, other critiques of the full-drop model and audience binge-consumption of the initial release of original television programming have to do with the ways this limits the discourse and feedback loops operating between fans and content producers. This also

matters to genre as a matrix of affective experience and interactivity. Todd M. Sodano (2012) contends that ‘binging removes viewers from ... paratextual conversations that take place across episodes and in the gaps between them’ (41). Similarly, Sean O’Sullivan (2006) argues that ‘[i]t is in that between-state that we as readers or viewers do most of our interpreting – speculating about plot developments or resolutions, wondering about characters and their choices, luxuriating in the details of the story’s construction’ (123). Finally, Mittell (2010) credits the old broadcast schedule for ‘creating the structure for collective synchronous consumption and providing the time to reflect upon the unfolding narrative world.’ With the semi-loss of a clear temporally-framed critical and popular discourse, he also believes we are witnessing a wane of the ‘forensic fandom ... dependent on simultaneous viewership, with everyone at the same point of the story, enabling a collaborative group process of decoding and engagement’ (‘Serial Boxes’). Mittell has also noted that the reduction of discourse among critics and fans created by full-drop models has eliminated the possibility for an intra-season feedback loop for series and streaming platforms using that model, most notably by Netflix and Amazon.

Cultural critics have also weighed in on the dearth of fan discourse around full-drop shows. Some focus on how showrunners on network television could respond to fan ratings, forums, and social media to ‘course-correct midseason’ in ways that could either ‘improve a show or encourage pandering.’ In the age of full-drop streaming TV, however, these tools are rendered blunt or lost (Poniewozik 2015). Other writers, like Holmes (2015), have commented on how full-drop content limits the ‘ongoing cultural conversations that have been such an important complement to the development of better TV,’ as well as forcing seasons to be completed in their entirety before release. Holmes has also discussed problems related to the short ‘periods of relevance’ – which I call the waves or cycles of discourse – around full-drop shows. She uses Google Trends search tools to illustrate how series being released in their entirety on Netflix, such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013–) and *House of Cards* (2013–2018), experience shorter windows of search popularity than shows like *Mad Men* (2007–2015) and *Empire* (2015–), which were released week-by-week on broadcast or cable networks. Although Holmes notes that Google Trends is imperfect as a research tool due to its imprecise metrics, it does offer a sense of how the ‘mentions’ of a series’ title spikes or drops in popularity among internet users across any window of time post-2004. As such, one can infer how the cycles of fans’ and critics’ discourse surrounding a media text operate in temporal bounds in any given country or across the globe. Holmes further observes that ‘as series proliferate on streaming platforms, those short conversations [among viewers] seem likely to actually worsen the problem of good shows finding it hard to compete for attention.’ This potential problem may explain why we are currently seeing a rise in media events connected to certain serials, particularly for popular fantasy and science fiction shows, in order to keep audiences engaged and discursive cycles active.

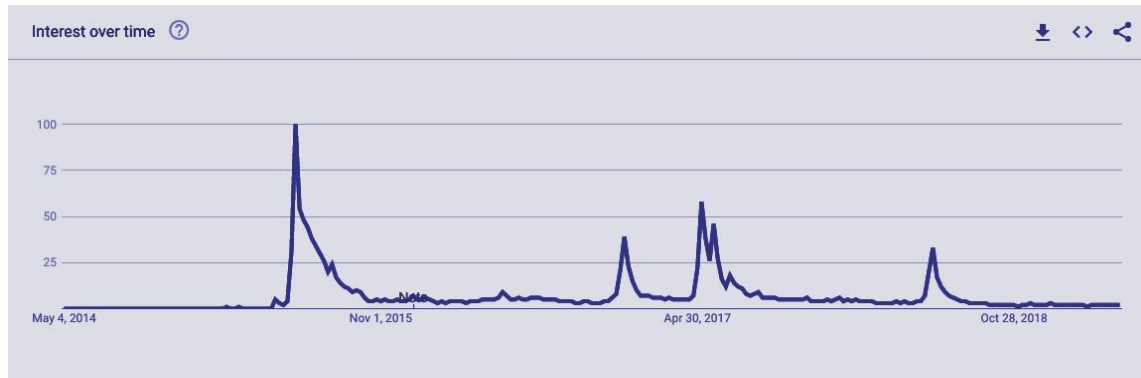


Fig. 1: A Google Trends search for *Sense8* shows the rise in “mentions” for the series over the last five years.

Series like *Sense8* and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* on Netflix, for example, both released special Christmas episodes which created a surge in attention and viewership in between seasons. Once again, searching Google Trends for ‘Sense8’ and ‘Chilling Adventures of Sabrina,’ reveals slight upticks in ‘mentions’ around the holidays in 2016 and 2018, along with spikes around the full-drop release of regular seasons. These continual waves and interactive cycles of discourse help centralize content within audience subcultures and work to prevent genres and their fandoms from splintering or disintegrating entirely.

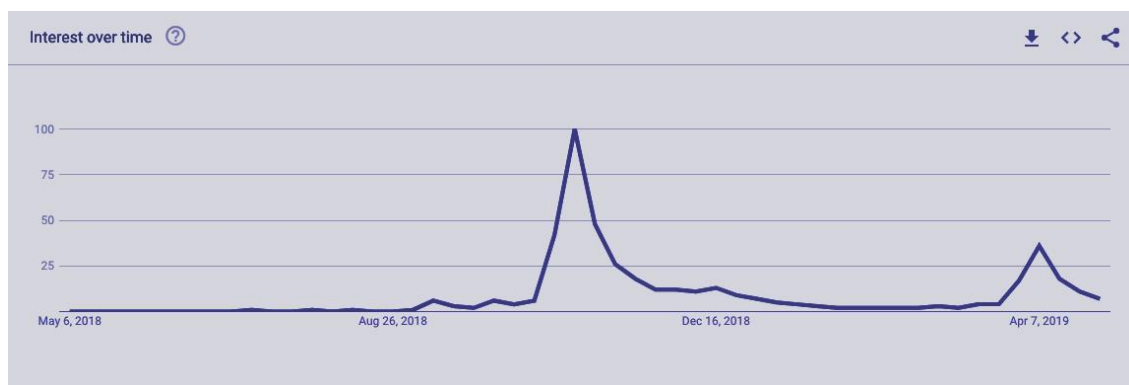


Fig. 2: A Google Trends search for *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* shows the rise in “mentions” for the series over the last twelve months.

However, due to the presence of social media, viewer discourse lives on. Jenner (2014) notes that ‘moments of socialising can happen online as one’s viewing behaviour is shared on Facebook or tweeted. Thus, viewing behaviour (and consumer behaviour) is projected as part of one’s (online) identity and can be commented on by others’ (268). Although not synchronous, viewers can still discuss their experiences. Moreover, Jenner goes on to show how, through social media curation, viewing behaviors and experiences fuse with the self-branding that individuals use to perform socially-conditioned ideas about taste and class:

Thus, what you watch (or rather, what you publicly share about it) may take on a different meaning, in particular as middle-class tastes have strongly gravitated towards

serialised drama with high production values and complex narrative structures, such as *House of Cards*. As such, the blurring of lines between production, distribution and exhibition may only be a logical consequence of a marketplace that panders to consumers who link consumer habits and identity construction (268-269).

Audiences not only engage in the affective experiences of texts and genres such as the high-quality serial drama, but they also use these to navigate into desired or perceived communities of belonging. Weekly posting, sharing, or tweeting reaction to various content on social media during a season's run, such as I noted in the previous section, provide individuals with channels to invest relational capital with friends and followers, as well as wider categories of identificatory belonging.

Alternatively, social media interactions regarding television series have also been capitalized upon by traditional broadcast networks using extended release models. Hye Jin Lee and Mark Andrejevic (2013) examine the ways that networks and series develop marketing strategies which are fully aware of interactive viewing experiences, thus 'fomenting the "fanification" of the audience' (46). They note that conglomerates create specific spaces, mostly online, for 'fans to socialize, bond over their common favorite shows, and enjoy the collective knowledge shared by larger fan communities' (46). Obviously, this has advantages for television marketers. Lee and Andrejevic also credit social media with providing producers with instant viewer reactions and takes in real time, a phenomenon that 'is also playing a role in bringing more people who hope to avoid social spoilers back to live television' (46). This might lead us to focus more attention on how serial texts, and the genres into which audiences place them, are key sites mediating fans and the industry. Even though Netflix and Amazon have been more successful at drawing and recruiting audiences and fans by offering high-quality, ad-free, full-drop bingeing experiences (Parks Associates 2018), allowing fans and texts to exist in extended cycles of discourse and affective interactivity might allow other SVOD platforms, as well as the broadcast networks, to attract viewers with complex, original serial television content.

Interactivity, and most importantly extended interactivity, between audiences, texts, and industries is key to the financial success of networks, producers, and SVOD platforms as well as to the formation of fandoms themselves. Although TV industries have a financial reason for promoting fan discourse to generate interest in shows, it is useful to understand the porous nature between the fan discourse, texts, and the preferred viewing practices which both offer. By looking at a particular fan site, *Television Without Pity*, Mark Andrejevic (2008) argues that understanding 'strategies for promoting, harnessing, and exploiting the productivity of [audience] activity' and seeing how they facilitate the 'celebratory portrayal of the creative, subversive potential of an active audience ... is not to discount or dismiss this potential' (25). Instead, Andrejevic points out how 'creative activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another within the context of the emerging online economy' (25). Fan and social media sites function almost as focus groups, providing producers and writers with feedback loops and imbuing 'the show[s] with the kind of "stickiness" coveted in the online world by creating a virtual community as an added component of the show'

(25). Andrejevic contends, 'Interactivity, in short, allows the viewers to take on the work of finding ways to make a show more interesting' (28). The shows and the fan discourse, in other words, become fused in what Matt Hills (2002) calls a 'just-in-time fandom' of timeliness and community-imposed rituals of participation (141). Similarly, in his work on audience participation and interactivity, Rob Cover (2006) addresses a possible concern that such a melting pot of producers, audiences, and fans might raise. Whereas one might feel anxiety about the loss of an author in such interactive spaces and practices, 'the "control" of these features is part of an ongoing struggle between producer/ consumer or author/audience, and one which may well be reaching a cumulative point in which the distinctions between these two collapse usefully and productively' (155). In addition to benefiting the TV industries, it is also critical to see audience interactivity as a part of the affective experiences and expectations for fan communities positioned in relation to the texts and genres that gel them together in the age of streaming TV. Collective participations can be simply in good fun or they can be fraught, but they can also co-constitute what draws audiences to shows in the first place. Extended release series provide more time for fans to digest the episodes, spread the word by mouth or via social media, and create communities or campaigns around shows, thus boosting the series' potential gravity and momentum.

Complex Worlds in Complex TV: Audience Interactivity and Affect in Fantasy and Science-Fiction Genres

I now have considered how streaming TV has shaped or shifted the ways that audiences can watch new serial content, particularly as it pertains to practices of flexible, individualized viewing patterns. Furthermore, I have highlighted the ways that these patterns vary according to streaming platforms' release models for new serial content, and how this can contribute to the relative compression or expansion of the cycles of audience discourse around shows. Whereas full-drop models for new series encourage binge-watching and flash-pan bursts of cultural conversation, extended release promotes the slow burn that comes with waiting and wondering about what will happen next week. I have also tried to show how the former model presents more challenges for the kinds of continual, collective, and affective audience engagement with new serial content upon which both fandom formations and industry interests depend to some degree.

I now want to explicitly focus on fantasy and science-fiction fandoms in order to reconceptualize genres as affective nodes around which interactive audience communities form. As streaming TV overtakes traditional broadcast and cable networks, and as SVOD platforms encourage individualized, flexible, and accelerated modes of viewing, genres must be conceptualized as sites where collective, sustained fan discourse and affect compete with the illusions of personalization and choice that come from industry-driven curation and promotion of content on streaming platforms. Of course, the forms of affect and interactivity vary by genres and fandoms, so I concentrate on the specific generic texts of fantasy and science fiction to make broader claims about how genres can operate as central

mediative sites between the contexts of production and audience reception. I choose these genres not only because I avidly engage with them as a fan and a scholar, but also because I think they effectively illustrate the ways that viewer expectations pertaining to the genre's world-building, extra-complexity, and hyper-activation of collective affective engagement matters to the fandom and perhaps to the industries that seek to attract them to their original content. More than simply transformative sites of discourse (Mittell 2005), I argue that our understanding of genres must involve negotiated and mediated sets of emotional and social investments in the digital age. Finally, I end by addressing fandoms' need for time and space to collectively process and interact affectively with generic serial texts – a claim with implications for the study of other genres and audiences beyond science fiction and fantasy.

To limit scope in this section, I examine only the original science fiction and fantasy series that have emerged since 2011, because that year HBO premiered its epic fantasy series *Game of Thrones* on both its premium cable channel and OTT service HBO Go. Since then, HBO has also had two science fiction shows, *The Leftovers* (2014–2017) and *Westworld*, available in similar fashion and released the fantasy series *His Dark Materials* (2019–) and the superhero drama *The Watchmen* (2019–) this year. In 2013, Netflix launched its own original content with *House of Cards*, following it up with a plethora of new series, including speculative shows such as *Black Mirror* (2011–), *Sense8*, *Stranger Things*, *The OA*, *Dark* (2017–), *Altered Carbon*, *The Rain* (2018–), *The Innocents* (2018–), *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *The Umbrella Academy*, and multiple Marvel superhero shows. Following Netflix's suit, Amazon Studios began producing its own original series in 2013. Since then it has released the science fiction drama *The Man in the High Castle* and the anthology series *Electric Dreams* (2018–) and has a *Lord of the Rings* serial fantasy drama set to release in 2021. Hulu, once only a video-on-demand hosting site for several partnering networks, has also begun producing original content, two of the more successful of which are science fiction shows: *The Handmaid's Tale* and Marvel's *The Runaways* (2017–). Finally, broadcast network CBS has attempted to revamp and bolster subscribers to its OTT platform, CBS All Access, with the premieres of *Star Trek: Discovery* and *The Twilight Zone*, series which, given that they are only available on the portal instead of on the air, ride on their franchises' pre-existing fan base to draw in subscribers. Thus, considering these major streaming portals and their original science fiction or fantasy serials, I am able to frame this study within five distinct models of production, release, and platform-interface to stake my claims about audiences' affective experiences of genre within these sites. I will pay special attention to the still-active fandom surrounding the Netflix sci-fi series *Sense8* to illustrate how a generic text serves as a site mediating between contexts of production and those of audiences' interactivity and communal, affective pleasure.

Each of the five major streaming portals I address has a relatively unique form of revenue, content accumulation or production, and release for original serial content. Therefore, each also has a unique relationship with its audiences. HBO Go operates on an ad-free subscription model to host original serial television content as well as original and

syndicated films, all of which also air ad-free on their premium cable network. Although previous serial content is available to binge-watch, new content only emerges week-by-week within a current season's run. Hulu and CBS All Access have similar release and storage models for most of their original content, but they both interrupt much of their programming – in ways that also contour their narrative arcs – with advertising segments as a way of gaining revenue in addition to subscriptions. Furthermore, these platforms' original content is not available on any other broadcast or cable network in the United States. Finally, Netflix and Amazon Prime Video rely mainly on subscription fees, but they typically follow the full-drop model for releasing new seasons of original serial content. Thus, we have five different streaming portals with varying revenue streams, which affect the types of content they can produce. Additionally, each has distinct interfaces, distribution models, and encouraged modes of viewing. The differing release windows and strategies for original serial content influence audience engagement, interactivity, and affective experiences of the texts. In the case of speculative generic texts, I argue that this set of investments and mediated negotiations in the digital age have become part of genres and how audiences understand and relate to them.

Of course, audiences have always had conversations with fellow fans, and writers in the popular press have also participated in the ongoing discourse during and between seasons of a series' runtime. Considering fan practices in the 1970s and 1980s, Henry Jenkins' (1992) auto-ethnographic work *Textual Poachers* defines an active media fandom, specifically a loosely-knit and broadly defined group comprised mostly of female fans which, especially in pre-digital decades, embraced multiple media texts with specific styles of consumption and interpretation. He defines media fandom as 'a particular mode of reception' in which 'viewer activism' is encouraged. As an 'interpretive [and alternative social] community,' the fandom engages in 'particular traditions of cultural production' (1-2). As we continue into the digital age of media saturation, however, this once relatively cohesive fandom has divided, becoming increasingly fragmented, but still imbricated and intersectional. Hills (2002), for example, in exploring alt.tv.X-Files, a fan site for *The X-Files*, develops the notion of fandom, specifically the fandom of speculative genres, as a 'community of imagination' rather than as an 'imagined community' (142). He articulates this distinction, describing it as a community which, 'rather than merely imagining itself as coexistent in empty clocked time, constitutes itself precisely through a common affective engagement, and thereby through a common respect for a specific potential space' (142). In other words, fans or social media sites function as points where audiences can distill 'narratives of anticipation and speculation, narratives of information, dissemination and status, narratives of detection, and narratives of conspiracy' (142). Thus, the 'defining coincidence' of communities of imagination is one of *affective* experience (142, emphasis mine). However, Hills notes that this is a community that 'constantly threatens to fragment' (142) because affect, more than ritual or routine, binds them. Broadening Hills's assessment of the *X-Files* fandom on one particular site, I want to conceive of all fandoms, but especially

those centered on speculative genres, as communities of imagination and affective experience and labor.

In fact, research shows that science fiction fandoms in particular perceive the greatest sense of belonging and care, and I attribute this to the extra-complexity of its co-constitutive texts. Building on McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theoretical framework of communities, Obst, Zinciewicz, and Smith (2002) acknowledge that any psychological sense of community (PSOC) requires 'Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection' (89). Moreover, they note that 'within traditional PSOC research, where considerable work has been done on territorial or geographic communities, less research has looked in depth at PSOC within communities of interest' (92). Therefore, they applied the PSOC framework to science fiction (SF) fandom, 'a community with membership from all over the world, yet one that is clearly aware of its own identity and history,' and one which interacts both face-to-face and in online spaces (92). Accounting for a variety of interactive means, they discovered that 'no significant differences emerged in the PSOC of those whose major contact was text-based rather than face-to-face suggest[ing] that regular face-to-face contact is not essential to the development and maintenance of PSOC' (99). Furthermore, from their findings they speculate that 'perhaps rather than technology breaking down communities, communities themselves are evolving in meaning and spirit, in line with technologic and societal trends' (99). Additionally, they discovered that in the SF fandom, the traits of 'Conscious Identification' and 'Belonging' were the highest predictors of a PSOC, which, was high overall within the fandom (115). Like many fandoms, speculative, interactive, and collaborative discourses are a part of the expectation for affective experience, providing a context for the text that is viewed and a sense of community to audiences. However, science fiction and fantasy texts are hyper-complex in their world-building and thus promote increased audience interactivity and imaginative engagements, as well as certain modes of viewing that extend beyond the scope of the screen. Weighing the pros and cons of mobility, flexibility, and bingeing specifically as they pertain to science-fiction and fantasy serial television, I want to consider how modes of viewing that allow for sustained collective attention, interactivity, and speculation lend themselves to the hyper-activation of a community's affective engagement in these genres.

Science fiction and fantasy fans, moreover, have always constituted a highly active public. In his work on SF fandom in the age of complex TV, Charles Tryon (2008) uses the continual revival of the *Star Trek* franchise as evidence. He also discusses the activism of *Firefly* fans and the 'frak parties' or collective viewing associated with *Battlestar Gallactica* (309). Moreover, he explores fans' long tradition of rewriting episodes, producing fanfiction, and engaging in fan sites (309-310). Tryon concludes that 'SFTV [science fiction television] audiences are already actively involved in this rather science fictional process of reimagining our relationship with television and, along with it, reimagining ourselves' (312). One need not look far nor deep into current works of original streaming content to find examples of science fiction and fantasy occupying both active spaces for popular cultural discourse and

hyper-actualized levels of fan interaction. Barely scratching the surface of original speculative generic content, users can stream series such as *Stranger Things*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Game of Thrones*, or *Star Trek: Discovery* – each on a different one of the five most popular platforms in the US. As I previously discussed, each of these five platforms has a different release model and interface for its content which encourages particular modes of viewing and thus temporally-specific bursts of discourse. For example, when a new season of *Stranger Things* drops on Netflix, it is marketed as a media event, thus encouraging immediate fast-paced bingeing to stay abreast of – and to avoid spoilers in – the subsequent wave of discourse in the news, popular press, and on social media and fan sites. A series like *Game of Thrones*, however, releases week-by-week, thereby giving time for the fans and critics to mull, ponder, and speculate about the season over the course of weeks and months. Matt Hills (2002) writes in his work on fan cultures about the growth of this new level of fan engagement afforded by the rise of Internet fan sites, discussion boards, and social media devoted to specific television shows.

However, one might caution against viewing such audience interactivity solely in optimistic ways. In dialogue with Hills's writing, Tryon (2008) articulates how audience interactivity and participation in these spaces work to create communities of productive activation and co-production, which on the surface can present as utopian projects. Tryon notes how these practices provide other avenues for allowing audiences, particularly fans of science fiction television, 'to engage with the stories and with each other in new ways, often accelerating the development of fan cultures' (308). However, these activities also work to make them 'more aware of their status as producers as well as consumers of media' (308). Seen differently, the industry-level production diverts fan-level production toward bolstering certain series' economic viability and sustainability.

Industry or showrunner logics, however, cannot entirely co-opt audience interactivity and production. In fact, a lot of fan engagement occurs in spaces and through tactics that push back against industry efforts to channel fans' labor. Alexis Lothian (2018) studies these audience practices and strategies in her work on queer fans of speculative fiction in the digital age. She notes that 'as shifting technologies open up new possibilities for cultural production, the affordances of digital media have themselves opened spaces for new kinds of speculative cultural production' (chap. 6). She identifies 'vidding' as such a relatively new form of digital production in which audiences mash-up and remix pre-existing video content to create queer(er) narrative possibilities. While any viewer can vid, queer audiences in particular gravitate toward speculative generic texts and engagement in these fandoms because of the potential for greater representations and transcendence of histories, norms, or realities beyond what exists. Accordingly, Lothian claims that, 'through the processes of juxtaposition, repetition, and audiovisual suturing by which they make meaning within their subcultural community, vids have the capacity not only to comment on science fiction cultures but also to reinscribe, reimagine, and queer media histories and temporalities' (chap. 6). Embedded especially in speculative fandoms are a set of affective investments in worlds, characters, and storylines depicted both in – and in between – the

texts. As Lothian asserts, '[T]he televisual affordance of seriality allows viewers to make creative use of the space between episodes, supplementing and challenging the world a series builds. Perhaps for this reason, televisual science fiction is recognized as a significant site for social and political speculation' (chap. 6). However, 'the serial temporalities of television' also 'place creative fandom's interventions into continual obsolescence –at least until shows end and all new creation becomes equally unauthorized' (chap. 6) in that it diverges from what is considered the show's canon. Such unauthorized and interstitial audience practices on the periphery to the canonical serial content liberate fandoms from media producers' tactics to harness their labor.

The Netflix original sci-fi series *Sense8* provides an especially suggestive example of how the affective engagement and interactivity of fans can operate in opposition to industry agendas. The series features eight psychically-linked characters – or sensates – from around the globe who channel each other's bodies and minds to battle a corporation hunting them for experimentation. In my previous writing about *Sense8* (2019), I focused largely on the show's queer appeal. I claim that 'according to the logic of the show, the characters' virtual, mental intimacies matter just as much, if not more, than bodily ones,' thus blurring, if not completing eliminating, 'the notion of an essentialized or socially inscribed sexual orientations or identities' (50). Instead, the series offers up 'a shifting, mutable queer sexuality which transcends both. Slippages in and between various characters' consciousnesses take place across time, space, bodies, and identities, arguably queering everything in between' (50). Additionally, the politics and themes of the show open it up to being mostly well-received by queer audiences, as well as other sci-fi fans. In fact, the most vocal viewers of this show primarily hail from the LGBTQIA community.



Fig. 3: The psychically-linked sensate "cluster" of *Sense8* (2015-2018). Credit: Netflix.

Although there are critiques of *Sense8*'s presentation of a global imaginary infused with neocolonialism and cosmopolitanism, popular press sites and social media abound with discourses addressing its progressive representations of identity, spectator experiences of identification, and desire for the forms of intimacy enjoyed by the characters. Several

popular hashtags have been attached to fan discourse, such as #iamawe , #wearetheglobalcluster, and #bravelikesense8. To this day, the presence of *Sense8*'s fandom extends across social media platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, mostly from die-hard fans re-watching the series or latecomers on their first run through. Some of the more enduring hashtags such as #iamawe or #sense8love get attached to posts that are often about the users' love of the show or about their own collectivities of belonging, especially among queer-identified users. There are even fan sites, such as Sense8united.com, devoted to connecting strangers around the world with their own clusters to form intimate connections. Moreover, the fandom resonates with identification for both characters and the narrative, even as the level of discursive speculation has decreased since the series' cancellation.



Fig. 4: A *Sense8* fan's tweet is one among several illustrating the perceived collective intimacies and affect surrounding the series and its fandom.

Affective investment in the series emerges in much of the popular press as well. In an article on the *Daily Beast*, for example, Samantha Allen (2017) attests that seeing the transgender character Nomi (Jamie Clayton) and her partner Amanita (Freema Agyeman) in the series provided 'the first time [she] ever saw a love that looks like [hers] onscreen' and also a way of being seen by the series. Allen also echoes that the series 'renders that border between fiction and reality beautifully blurry' by 'using its science fiction premise to literalize the

power of love and acceptance.’ Especially in the United States’ divided political climate – only deepened in digital spaces – this desire for recognition, affirmation, and belonging becomes palpable.

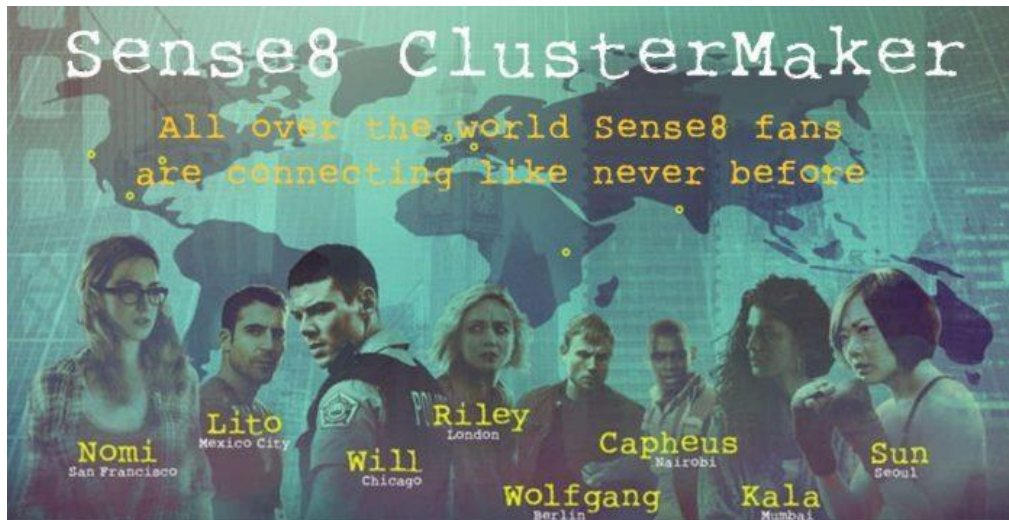


Fig. 5: Sense8united.com invites fans of the series to find their own “cluster” among other users around the world (<http://sense8united.com/clustermaker/>)

Netflix’s announcement about cancelling the series during Pride of 2017 sent ripples through the fandom. According to Netflix’s chief content officer, Ted Sarandos, the series was cancelled for its high cost of production, nearly \$9 million per episode, without the numbers of viewers to match (Holloway 2017). Writing for *Wired*, Emma Grey Ellis (2018) attributes the relatively low viewership to sci-fi shows’ historically difficult sell. She notes that ‘they’re hard to sum up in a logline – or even explain at length. Describing the show efficiently – say, “a group of eight people from around the world suddenly find themselves psychically linked and pursued by the agents of a shadowy corporation bent on destroying them” – captures only what makes the show flashy, and none of what makes it lovable.’ In other words, instead of promoting the subjective, affective qualities of a series, as fans often do to others, industries like Netflix attempt to lure potential audiences by simplifying plot. In the case of many shows which fall within the speculative genres, this proves difficult to do. Grey contends that this was one reason why ‘before the rise of streaming services, *speculatis unconventionalis* was almost always relegated to some little-watched “death slot,” where there were no expectations of selling ads like a four-quadrant hit.’ However, she claims that ‘the internet has no death slots, and it makes them irrelevant,’ a point on which I disagree. In an instance where the successful promotion of a series like *Sense8* relies on either algorithms or fan discourse, their long-term viability is not a guarantee. Moreover, since fan discourse comes laden with affective investment, fans can essentially sell what data or algorithms cannot. Audiences are able to situate themselves – within in fandoms, within affect – in ways that data and ‘taste communities’ cannot as successfully accomplish.



Fig. 6: In the two weeks after Netflix's announcement to cancel *Sense8*, Twitter fans respond to their subsequent reply that the series was cancelled because its budget was too high and its audience too small. (14 June 2017).

After the announcement of *Sense8*'s cancellation, it is unsurprising – given the fandom's level of interactivity and investment – that they only increased in their activism, in effect mobilizing to push for the show's renewal. New hashtags emerged such as “#bringbacksense8,” “#renewsense8,” and “#sensatesforever” which spread quickly through English-speaking virtual communities. “#OperationFlipFlop” – another hashtag these communities used to evoke a moment from the series when the character Lito (Miguel Silvestre) drunkenly calls his boyfriend Hernando (Alfonso Herrera) and laments the loss of a flip flop – spread awareness of a widespread movement to get thousands of single flip flops sent via snail mail to the Netflix headquarters. Fan activism also generated a Change.org petition that quickly garnered over half a million signatures. Within a matter of a single month, the fandom surrounding the show succeeded in pressuring Netflix to approve a two-hour finale, which was released in the summer of 2018.

Although many fans are still pushing for Netflix or another SVOD platform to renew *Sense8* for the long-term, it is plausible that the queer sci-fi fandom which the series reinvigorated and mobilized could also migrate to other generic works. On the one hand, the speculative genres show no sign of falling in popularity, and new serials might increasingly attract fans and build discourse. On the other hand, however, streaming platform flexibility, fastness, and on-demand viewing practices could keep cycles of discourse short. In the case of Netflix's full-drop model for its serial content, perhaps a show like *Sense8* did not have enough time to build traction before it was cancelled. Even then, as the fans' affective and interactive labors succeeded in getting it briefly renewed, they had to take on the burden of creating hype and generating interest in the show.



Fig. 7: A Twitter fan posts about their participation in ‘Operation Flip Flop,’ one of the campaigns to fight for *Sense8*’s renewal after its initial cancellation after its second season (8 June 2018).

Looking at the queer sci-fi fandom surrounding the Netflix series *Sense8*, along with the affective investments, interactivity, and social media activism of those involved, one can see not only how the genre of science fiction can offer representations of alternative identities or narrative identification to attract fans to television series but how it also affords a layer of complexity and a fan community which encourages even greater interactivity and co-production. A matrix of reasons related to Netflix’s failure to promote the series, its perceived financial burden, and the platform’s release model all proved to be placed at odds with the desires of a hyper-involved and invested fandom that centered around a queer sci-fi generic text. Alternatively, a speculative series like *Game of Thrones* was able to appeal to viewers already in the fantasy fan-base, but fans also had the windows of seasons as well as the length of the entire series to generate discourse that helped suture in new viewers between each of its eight seasons. These intra- and inter-seasonal windows are crucial to the long-term success of shows, particularly in the speculative genres. Without them, media industries like Netflix have to turn to transmedia marketing campaigns and special roll-out events for shows like *Stranger Things* to sustain active fan interest and discourse. *Sense8*, however, did not get the necessary duration and structuring of time demanded by its genre. Based on this example, I argue that it is pertinent to re-configure genre itself as a crucial node of affective experience and interactive, collective production mediating between industries and fandoms, whose affective experiences of viewing and interacting shape and re-shape genres themselves.



Fig. 8: In less than one month after announcing Sense8's cancellation in 2017, Netflix responds to fan activism to renew the series for a two-hour finale installment in 2018 (28 June 2017).

It is important to note that fandoms have always necessitated collectivity and affective investment. Although being an individual fan involves simply being 'in a position of emotional excess' (Lothian 2018, chap. 6) about a particular text, cluster, or genre, it also means being 'invested to the point of identifying oneself with an object, a community, a text, or a theory, offering up love and labor to build a world around it' (chap. 6). Thus, according to Lothian, 'the term "fandom" names a shared space as well as an *affective* relationship. To be in fandom can mean to participate in a *collective* conversation organized not around any given media text but through the practices of transformative engagement with cultural production' (chap. 6, emphasis mine). Audience fandoms, often inextricably tied to genres, are just as much about what the experiences of viewing and interacting can collectively do as much as what they mean. However, as streaming media platforms afford and encourage new flexible and relatively uninhibited modes of viewing for audiences, this genre work can become far more fragmented and truncated in its cycles of discourse. I hope

my work here can raise more questions about what new affective experiences, speculative pleasures, and collective labors we as scholars might conceive and study in this new, nebulous era of streaming television.

Conclusion: Pushing Back Against Curation and Taste

To end, I believe a personal anecdote might help illustrate what happens to audience fandoms as new viewing practices for serial content become normalized in the era of streaming TV. I recently binge-watched all seven seasons of *True Blood* (2008-2014) on HBO Go. I had seen the series before, having kept up on every episode as or shortly after it aired. My partner, however, had never had the pleasure of meeting the citizens of Bon Temps, Louisiana, the fictional setting of the fantasy series. I distinctly remember at one point about halfway through the series he turned to me and noted, 'The characters change so quickly in this show'. In that moment, I completely agreed with him that Sookie, Jason, Jessica, and the rest all seemed to flit from one relationship to the next without much build-up or backstory. Beyond this being a critique which many people might offer up of the series' subpar screenwriting and gender politics, though, I did seem to remember the show taking much longer for its characters' passions for each other to develop and wane and for alliances between them to shift.

That is because it did. After all, not only did I – like other fans – have to wait a week between each episode, but we had to wait months between seasons and years for the series to run from start to finish. In that time, we had conversations, read articles and blogs about the show, held the characters and storylines in memory, and spent time thinking about what would happen next. In other words, I, like other fans of the show, were engaging in active and interactive viewership. *True Blood* is, of course, not the only series that strung viewers along across its seasons by allowing speculative fan discourse and hype to fester around and cannibalize the tidbits released to the press. That is, in fact, the way that most fictional television has worked since serial dramas emerged, and later overtook, episodic anthologies in the 1950s and 1960s. Traditional broadcast and cable networks attempt to recruit and maintain viewers through compelling characters and narrative arcs that stretch over episodes and often between seasons or the entire series, and they encourage productive fan interactivity and discourse. However, in scattered, relatively individualized bubbles of binge-watching, where can and do audiences or fandoms collectively gather to engage socially and affectively with genre content? Are we witnessing the dearth of fandoms as audiences become fragmented into increasingly narrower niche taste communities where platforms target viewers with algorithmically-individualized content? What remains of the collective speculative pleasure – the world-building and extensions, adaptations, musings, debates, etc. – within genre-centered publics?

Netflix, more than other portals, has been successful in targeting these fandoms, and all audiences, with relatively niche content. Despite keeping a tight lock on proprietary data about its algorithms and viewing data, Netflix has not been shy about discussing how it uses its technologies to attract and retain audiences. Joe Nocera (2016) notes that Netflix, with

its recommendation algorithms and accumulated big data about consumers, possesses not only the ability to fund original content but also to successfully channel it toward the right niche audiences. In an Association for Computing Machinery trade journal, Netflix reports on how it has to hook users with interesting content within a matter of seconds or risk losing them to other avenues of entertainment. Therefore, their algorithms work toward personalization which ‘enables [them] to find an audience even for relatively niche videos that would not make sense for broadcast TV models because their audiences would be too small to support significant advertising revenue, or to occupy a broadcast or cable channel time slot’ (Gomez-Uribe and Hunt 2015). The service allows for several algorithms working in tandem to offer up content relevant to individual viewers based on their taste profiles. Netflix’s ‘taste communities’ describe the imbricated collectives of interest to which their subscribers across the globe belong. In another press interview with Todd Yellin, Netflix’s Vice President of Product, Janko Roettgers (2017) reports on how the company formerly believed that subscriber’s viewing interests were nationally specific. However, their data showed this was not the case. Instead, Netflix has assessed 1,300 taste communities based on viewing behavior instead of nationality, language, and other factors (‘How Netflix Wants to Rule the World’). Using the term ‘community’ to create an intense level of personalization, Netflix thereby interpellates its users into collectives that might not fit so neatly with their self-identified communities of belonging.

One of my interventions here, however, has been to interrogate how the affective experiences and collective labor of such communities push back against the neoliberal technologies and capitalist strategies which target and engage them. Audiences’ collective fandoms often go hand-in-hand with genres and generic texts, and genre fandoms can exist outside of the algorithmically-determined taste communities of streaming platforms like Netflix. Fully realizing that users will not disconnect from Netflix or other portals – nor am I suggesting they should – I simply want to re-conceptualize a site of co-production between TV industries and fans. Within this site, I re-center streaming TV texts and genres themselves, suggesting that we need to consider the ways they lend themselves to preferred modes of viewing and discursive formations of fan communities. In other words, through a case like that of *Sense8*, I want to offer up the possibility of defining genres by the work they accomplish and how audiences use them affectively and socially. Mittell (2005) lays the foundations for such a reconceptualization of genre. By calling them ‘discursive categories’ (12), he offers a more fluid, dynamic understanding of genre than that posed by the structuralist film genre theory of Rick Altman (1984) and Thomas Schatz (1981). Mittell’s notion, instead, is that ‘genres actually form and change over time – out of the specific cultural practices of industries and audiences, not out of macro-structures’ (14). It is such dynamic cultural practices among industries, audiences, and texts that I have tried to expand upon in this article – here, however, audiences long devoted to certain genres may resist new industrial overtures that attempt to reshape their communities and televisual experiences. By redefining genre as co-constitutive with audience interactivity and affect, we may begin to better navigate the nebula of streaming TV.

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