

## **‘There’s More Than One of Everything’: Navigating *Fringe*’s cofactual multiverse**

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### **Abstract:**

This article analyzes how viewers of *Fringe* (FOX 2008-2013) make sense of the series’ complex science fictional storyworld. It argues that *Fringe* presents multiple iterations of worlds and characters in a way that encourages ‘cofactual’ interpretation: rather than figuring parallel universes and alternate timelines as ontologically hierarchical, the narrative accommodates all versions of reality and invites viewers to participate in shaping the multiverse. The article offers a close reading of *Fringe*’s complex narrative structure alongside an exploration of how audiences responded to and impacted the series through fannish practices such as vidding and narrative mapping. It concludes that cofactual narration opens up an array of participatory practices that blur the text/paratext distinction and facilitate interactive storyworld building.

**Keywords:** Complex TV, Fandom, Narrative, Paratexts, Counterfactual, Cofactual, Possible Worlds

### **Cofactual Interpretation**

By the time viewers reach the series finale of *Fringe* (FOX 2008-2013), they have travelled across two spatially-distinct universes, three versions of the future, and at least four different timelines, with each world-iteration populated by different versions of the show’s central characters. Through its reinvigoration of science fiction tropes, such as time travel, alternate realities, and temporal resets, *Fringe* asks viewers to re-evaluate typical models of narrative world-building. The series constructs a multiverse comprised of what I deem *cofactual* diegetic worlds. I use the term ‘cofactual’ in contradistinction to the more common narrative term ‘counterfactual’ as a means of emphasizing the plurality and simultaneity of diegetic worlds in *Fringe*. Rather than presenting these worlds as clear alternatives to one another and demanding a hierarchy among them, *Fringe*’s cofactual

system accommodates all world-iterations within its narrative multiverse. Viewer engagement with this cofactual system involves frequent interpretive and affective realignments: the plurality of worlds creates an interplay of narrative ontologies that builds and intensifies as the series protracts across five TV seasons, three comics series, a companion book, and a slew of fan fiction and fan speculation. By continually presenting viewers with ‘what if’ and ‘yes, and’ scenarios, the proliferation of timelines and universes in *Fringe* creates a unique storyworld that invites viewers and fans to participate in a process of cofactual world-building. I argue that cofactuality, as a mode of narrative interpretation, destabilizes storytelling authority by encouraging a non-hierarchical understanding of multiple temporal and spatial iterations within a storyworld.

*Fringe* does not begin as a cofactual narrative. The first season follows a relatively standard *X-Files*-esque procedural format, as FBI agent Olivia Dunham (Anna Torv) investigates bizarre cases involving ‘fringe’ science with the help of Walter Bishop (John Noble) and his son, Peter (Joshua Jackson). Walter is a brilliant scientist who spent 16 years in a mental institution after a self-prescribed lobotomy. He is psychologically unstable and unable to remember much of his past; most importantly, that in 1985, he tore a hole in the fabric of space/time to steal Peter from another universe, and that he conducted traumatic experiments on Olivia as a child using a brain-enhancing drug called Cortexiphan. The dynamics among these three characters form the foundation of *Fringe* on both emotional and plot-based levels: Walter’s actions in 1985 precipitate many – if not all – of the events of the story, while coping with and understanding those actions is the emotional crux of the series for characters and viewers alike. But it is not until the season one finale that we learn of an alternate universe (‘There’s More Than One of Everything’), and it is not until the season two finale (‘Over There’) that we start to explore World 2.<sup>1</sup> Seasons three and four deal with new timelines, and season five takes place in a version of the future that is eventually rewritten by a temporal reset in the series finale. Each world-iteration gives us new character-iterations, and as these layers proliferate, the series shifts away from the procedural format towards the kind of serial storytelling that enables a cofactual narrative system. *Fringe* is thus a prime example of what Jason Mittell calls ‘complex television’ (2012 – 13), mixing episodic and serial formats to tell intricate, long-arc stories that demand attentive audience practices.

My analysis of *Fringe* and my theory of cofactual storytelling leans on the work of two literary narrative theorists: Hilary Dannenberg, who provides a thorough account of counterfactuals in literature; and Marie-Laure Ryan, who links developments in quantum physics to a narrative theory of possible worlds. Ryan and Dannenberg are both invested in the ways that narratives interact with the psychology of daily life and the way in which the mental processes that we use to confront fiction reflect processes of real-world reasoning. As Ryan writes:

In the past few years, many scholars have moved away from regarding narrative as a type of literary discourse to viewing it as a way to organize

human experience, more particularly the type of experience that has to do with agency, problem solving, and interpersonal relations (647).

This phenomenological link between our narrative and lived experiences becomes even stronger in a transmedia environment that blurs the experiential realms of fact and fiction (i.e. we engage with both in the same spaces and often at the same time). Therefore, my analysis of *Fringe* is not only an investigation into the television text; it is an exploration of the paratextual environment that the creators and audiences co-construct across a variety of discursive platforms.<sup>2</sup> The multitude of complex, fully-developed fan cultures in our transmediascape indicates a desire on the part of viewers to establish hubs of shared experience, and those hubs are excellent resources for charting the lived realities of narrative engagement. As I analyze the cofactual narrative system that structures *Fringe*, I will use paratextual evidence to support my claims about the ways that viewers experience and co-construct this ontologically pluralistic storyworld.

Dannenberg describes the counterfactual as those narrative elements which are ‘generated by creating a nonfactual or false *antecedent*. This is done by *mentally mutating* or ‘undoing’ a real-world event in the past to produce an *outcome* or *consequent* contrary to reality’ (111, author’s emphasis). She goes on to point out:

The term *consequent* or *outcome* refers to the result of the alteration farther on down the counterfactual time path. A counterfactual therefore involves a clear contrastive relationship between a real event belonging to a factual world and a hypothetical one that counters this fact (111).

*Fringe* certainly engages in counterfactual tactics along the lines of what Dannenberg describes, but the result of the narrative system as a whole is one of *cofactuality*, in which the lack of any clear ontological hierarchy undermines the ‘contrastive relationship’ among diegetic worlds. Each world-iteration in *Fringe* uses counterfactual thematics and plotting to highlight ontological difference, but those contrasts produce multiplicities of reality rather than definitive oppositions. Furthermore, the cofactual structure of *Fringe* depends upon the proliferation of possible worlds that come into the narrative picture via fan discourse. Dannenberg cites Claude Bremond’s idea that that plot ‘includ[es] virtual events that may be desired or strived for by characters but that never actually occur in the narrative world’ (7). I would extend Bremond’s claim by including the desires of television audiences—every outcome that a viewer can imagine becomes part of the narrative frame, and the more that these possibilities are shared and discussed via social media, the more ‘real’ they become in relation to the text itself. This viewer discourse can have perceptible impact in the storyworld, adding to the cofactual structure of the multiverse and creating a feedback loop between audiences and creators.

My theorization of cofactual thinking works productively with Ryan’s application of possible worlds (PW) theory to narratology. Ryan outlines several premises derived from

quantum physics in order to demonstrate how 'PW theory [...] explains the imaginative experience that we undergo when we immerse ourselves in a fictional world' (646). Writing of the cognitive potential of PW storytelling, Ryan asserts: '[I]t offers new points of view on such fundamental questions as identity, ethical responsibility, and free will; it encourages questions regarding the nature of space and time; it rejuvenates the old theme of the double; and it creates narrative situations which would not be possible in a system of reality limited to one world' (666). *Fringe's* cofactual narrative system is deeply invested in these ontological issues, presenting a complex, layered storyworld that requires different interpretive strategies than those typical of traditional storytelling modes. Ryan notes that

[f]or a text to impose a multiverse cosmology, it must be based on a decision tree or on a diagram with parallel branches [...] and all the branches must possess *equal ontological status*. But this is not sufficient to create situations of narrative entanglement. In order to do so, the text must not only move up and down along the branches, it must also perform lateral jumps from branch to branch, and there should be a consciousness within the narrative multiverse that is aware of the jumping. (656, my emphasis)

Ryan's emphasis on the structural imperatives of PW narratives is useful for understanding how audiences make sense of *Fringe*. The world-iterations in the *Fringe* multiverse operate through a process of informational and affective accumulation: as the story 'moves' and 'jumps' among worlds, the audience situates those worlds and their inhabitants relationally, allowing signification to accrue and bleed across world boundaries.

*Fringe* underscores the relationality of world-iterations by deploying repetition-with-difference as a narrative tactic throughout its storyworld. By repeating characters, images, dialogue, objects, even entire plotlines and recontextualizing them in new ways, the narrative draws attention to the links between world-iterations. These repetitions create ontological constants that are essential to cofactual storytelling, providing anchors by which audiences remain invested in the narrative's plural worlds. One of the most emotionally charged examples of a recurring object across the multiverse is the white tulip, which first appears in season two, episode seventeen. 'White Tulip' presents the events of a fringe case in multiple iterations, each time repeating scenes, dialogue, and POVs with difference. Guest star Peter Weller plays astrophysicist Alistair Peck, who discovers a means of practically applying theories of time travel. Peck turns his body into a time machine and attempts to travel back to the day that his fiancée was killed in a car crash in order to thwart her death. Only two episodes earlier, we learned the details of Walter's similarly desperate intervention into the course of nature ('Peter'). Thus, in addition to implementing a complex cofactual structure (especially for a single episode), 'White Tulip' also examines the central moral quandary of the show: what boundaries are we willing to cross to save our loved ones, how do we live with the burdens of our decisions, and how can we be forgiven for our heinous actions? The idea of forgiveness is particularly central to the emotional trajectory of

the series as the moral process with which viewers are able to engage most directly—we may never be faced with the decision to break through space/time to save a version of our child, but we can decide whether to forgive Walter for doing so. Walter tells Alistair his story as a cautionary tale, admitting that he is waiting for ‘God’ to bestow a sign of forgiveness, a white tulip. After the men share this conversation, however, Alistair resets time, erasing the interaction from Walter’s memory. So at the end of the episode, when Walter receives a drawing of a white tulip from Alistair in the mail, he looks upward, teary-eyed, believing that ‘God’ has answered his prayer. This episode’s immediate popularity would motivate showrunner Joel Wyman to expand the mythology of the white tulip, inserting it into other places in the multiverse and allowing it to accrue significations with each new iteration. White tulips would span the text and paratexts, becoming a cherished symbol to be passed back and forth between creators and fans—a mutating feedback loop.

### **Cofactual Attachment Across the Multiverse**

Our emotional bonds to any narrative rest fundamentally upon character relationships: we care about a storyworld only to the extent that we care about its inhabitants. *Fringe*’s use of multiple character sets produces what I call *interdiegetic feeling*, a process through which the viewer’s emotional attachments to one set of character-iterations bleeds through into our feelings towards another set of character-iterations. The narrative utilizes the power of this interdiegetic feeling in a variety of ways, including killing off some character-iterations, adjusting character positions along the protagonist/antagonist divide, and creating romantic tensions among different versions of characters. Furthermore, the emotional spillover from one character set to another allows the narrative to introduce new worlds *in media res* and makes viewers care about those worlds right away. Interdiegetic feeling is thus an important part of how we experience cofactual narration—in particular, how we become emotionally invested in more than one version of a character.

The presence of multiple character sets, however, complicates the audience’s position and their points of identification. The temporalities of knowledge at play in the cofactual dynamics of *Fringe* place the viewer in a uniquely privileged position, and the narrative uses these imbalances of power to address the viewer as the ultimate repository of narrative information. Discrepancies in knowledge—among characters, but especially between character and viewer—complicate truth status in the multiverse by blurring the ontological hierarchy between what we’ve seen and what the characters have experienced. In many cases, the viewer is the sole bearer of knowledge and therefore has access to emotional responses that are unavailable to the characters. While any narrative can place the viewer in a superior position—this was Alfred Hitchcock’s go-to recipe for suspense—the tactic takes on special significance in a cofactual multiverse where the viewer is responsible for shouldering the knowledge of entire world-iterations and organizing them into a narrative whole.

Recall Ryan’s claim that in a PW narrative model, there must be at least one character who is aware of the multiple worlds and is able to transcend world boundaries. In

*Fringe*, multiple characters serve this function at different points in the story. We can think of these characters as viewer surrogates, a common narrative tactic for representing the audience's position.<sup>3</sup> Olivia 1 is one candidate for our primary surrogate; her role as investigator reflects the viewers' desire to uncover the mysteries of the plot. Due to her experience in the Cortexiphan trials, she also possesses the ability to physically cross between worlds. On the other hand, Peter might be the best example of a viewer surrogate, since he is the only singular character in the multiverse (i.e. there's only one of him), and for a time in World 3, he is the sole diegetic bearer of the memories of World 1. Another potential way of locating the position of viewer is through the characters of the Observers, mysterious bald men who are obsessed with documenting events in the multiverse.<sup>4</sup> The Observers' primary function of 'watching' and their position at the literal edge of the visual frame makes an argument for them as viewer surrogates compelling. Eventually, however, we learn that the Observers are a team of scientists from the future, scouting the past for an opportune time to invade. The transition of these characters from passive Observers to active Invaders could be an apt metaphor for participatory fandom, although the fact that the transition turns them into villains complicates this reading. In any case, the key point is that viewer surrogates work differently in a cofactual narrative; they are more complex and unstable, with points of identification shifting across the multiverse. The lack of a stable surrogate character in the series reinforces the necessity of attentive viewing, as audiences must actively navigate the storyworld without a clear diegetic model for responding to the series' cofactual narrativity.

As I noted earlier, *Fringe* does not appear as a cofactual narrative from the outset; it builds and accumulates worlds at the same time that it acclimates viewers to the idea of ontological pluralism. Therefore, it is worth looking at how the series 'sells' its cofactual intrusions on the plot. For example, our introduction to World 2 engages in one of the most overt and emotionally charged counterfactual gestures available in the early-21st-century zeitgeist by introducing World 2 as a place where the Twin Towers are still standing. The image establishes similarity and difference between the two worlds and suggests an uncertain transworld ontological relationship. Dannenberg writes of 'upward' and 'downward' counterfactuals: the former refers to a scenario that is understood as better than reality, the latter refers to a scenario that is worse (of course, 'better' and 'worse' are subjective, but we can look to the narrative framing of a counterfactual to determine the intended interpretation). The image of the Twin Towers suggests the possibility of World 2 as an upward counterfactual. Ending season one on this image was a way of inviting viewers to consider all of the possible explanations for this counterfactual scenario. Over the course of the next season, we learn that the attacks on September 11 still occurred in World 2, but the White House was the primary target. This narrative bait-and-switch is one major example of the ways in which World 2 becomes what we could call, extending Dannenberg's terms, a *sideways counterfactual*. It's a world where civilians can take daily flights to the moon, but coffee is a beverage of the past. Cholera is still a dangerous epidemic, but medical advancements can heal a gunshot wound in a matter of hours. Personal technology

is more advanced, but citizens are constantly surveilled via their 'Show Me' identification cards. The concept of the sideways counterfactual invites cofactual interpretation, as the inability to define World 2 as either better or worse than World 1 encourages a game of perpetual comparison and consideration of the simultaneity of these two versions of reality. Any attempt by the viewer to situate this new world into a clear ontological hierarchy is doomed to fail, or at least to require revision as the layers of the cofactual system proliferate.

'Over There,' the two-part finale of season two, extends the counterfactual groundwork of World 2, while also introducing the series' first set of 'characterological counterfactuals' in which we see 'antecedents' to our original set of characters (Dannenberg 120). The opening scene throws the viewer into a process of defamiliarization and *realignment*—we see a cast of new but familiar characters engaging in witty banter and exuding an immediate chemistry that helps establish World 2 as a diegetic whole. This strategy creates ontological realignment and invites interplay between counterfactuality and cofactuality. Particularly in this two-part episode, which alternates between the two worlds and the perspectives of their inhabitants, *simultaneity* becomes key to the ontological status of the narrative. As much as viewers are invested in discovering the differences between the worlds and the reasons for those differences, we are constantly reminded of their similarity and cofactuality. 'Over There' also contains the first use of the 'Redverse' title sequence, which becomes part of a pattern to indicate the primary location of an episode.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, *Fringe's* use of title sequences is an integral part of the cofactual structure, a means of paratextually organizing the narrative. The various title sequences refer to different timelines as well as different spatial locations in the storyworld. These title sequences help frame world-iterations within the narrative, and indeed, many fan-created paratexts deploy the same color-coding system used in the opening sequences. Fans refer to the 'Blueverse,' 'Redverse,' and 'Amberverse' in discussions of *Fringe's* multiple worlds, demonstrating how audiences expand and make use of the show's framing tactics in their interpretive processes.

The fan-created paratexts surrounding *Fringe* contribute to the shape of multiverse and are the tangible evidence of audience engagement with cofactual narration. While the experience of cofactuality happens in the space between the text and the paratext, these artifacts demonstrate how viewers make sense of and share those experiences. The sheer proliferation of interpretive paratexts reveals the fandom's intensity of commitment and their desire to participate in world-building. Just as the accumulation of diegetic worlds in *Fringe* produces cofactual narrativity, the accumulation of paratexts produces cofactual interpretation. By looking at patterns across *Fringe's* paratexts, we can see how the emotional stakes of plural worlds manifest in the passion and expressivity of fan work. *Fringe* is not unique in its ability to provoke these kinds of paratextual engagement; the rise of complex storytelling has made these interpretive practices relatively common. The unique storyworld of *Fringe*, however, does make its fan-created paratexts an ideal case study for exploring how paratexts can form productive feedback loops with primary texts

and how audiences translate and express their experiences of cofactual storytelling.

One of the ways in which *Fringe* viewers order the storyworld-as-multiverse is through a process of ‘narrative mapping,’ which Stephen Mamber broadly defines as ‘attempt[s] to represent visually events which unfold over time’ (145). Among the array of fan-created story maps of the *Fringe* multiverse, there are several common denominators worth noting. The first is that these maps follow the kind of branching structure that Ryan argues is indicative of plural world narrative ontology. The maps deploy rhetorical strategies in order to position branches in relation to one another. In some cases, that rhetoric works against the idea of ‘equal ontological status,’ such as when David Ryan Anderson uses ‘Over Here’ and ‘Over There’ to refer to Worlds 1 and 2. Even if this strategy undermines the ethos of ontological equality, the map itself suggests cofactual interpretation through the visual symmetry and textual detail of each branch. Another important element of these maps is their interactive nature. One map utilizes presentation software Prezi’s interface to highlight interactivity, asking the user to ‘click through’ the various stages of the map. When a map is posted online, comment threads allow fans to unpack and analyze the content as a group. Discussion, debate, and disagreement reveal the processual and fluid nature of narrative mapping—there is no single ‘correct’ map of *Fringe*’s multiverse, but together they demonstrate the interpretive work of the show’s fandom and the desire of audiences to engage cofactually with an ontologically pluralistic storyworld.

The central question for *Fringe* viewers as they experience multiple world-iterations is: what difference do differences make? The emotional stakes of plural worlds are vast: do we find excitement, comfort, disappointment, or fear when we participate in the game of ‘what if?’ And at what point does a world-iteration become familiarized to the extent that we can experience it in conjunction with, not opposed to, another world-iteration? These are the questions posed each time *Fringe* introduces a new layer to the storyworld. For example, in the final moments of season two, Olivia 2 replaces Olivia 1 and returns undercover to World 1 with Peter and Walter, introducing the question of what will happen when two versions of our protagonist switch worlds. The fact that season three begins with Olivia 1 in World 2 raises the question of ontological hierarchy in relation to worlds versus characters. Following the characterological realignment in the finale of season two, the decision to begin season three in this way demonstrates two premises: the show is reflecting the viewer’s tendency to privilege character attachment to Olivia 1, and it is delaying the satisfaction of viewer curiosity that would come from seeing Olivia 2 in World 1. The ways that audiences responded to Olivia 2’s infiltration of World 1 demonstrate the complexity of characterological counterfactuals and the influence of fans on how the show would represent these sets of characters. For example, when the second set of characters was first introduced, fan forums began a heated debate over how to refer to these characters. The variety of terms indicates the different ways in which viewers wanted the character sets to relate ontologically to each other. A term like ‘Fauxlivia,’ popular among the fandom, suggests a decidedly negative relationship—if Olivia 2 is ‘fake,’ Olivia 1 is ‘real.’ But terms like ‘Alt-livia’ or ‘B-Olivia,’ also widely used across the fandom, suggest a more

ambiguous relationship—a sideways counterfactual branching of character organization that opens up the possibility of cofactual interpretation.

Season three addresses the emotional possibilities and limits of characterological cofactuality when Peter engages in a sexual relationship with the undercover Olivia 2, forming a triangle of desire with two versions of the same character. This triangle causes the Peter/Olivia relationship to be repeated with difference, and, while watching Peter court the wrong Olivia is upsetting, the affair also allows viewers to indulge in a cheating fantasy. Fan response to this plotline was indeed mixed: some viewers were infuriated that the show could betray the Peter/Olivia 1 pairing, while at least a portion of fans supported the Peter/Olivia 2 relationship. As if responding to this fan debate, the episode 'Subject 13' re-deploys the white tulip, imbuing it with new meaning. In a flashback to 1985, a recently kidnapped Peter meets a young Olivia 1, who is undergoing the Cortexiphan trials in Walter's research facility. This episode is strange in that its events have major impact on the emotional trajectory of the season, but they are never acknowledged by any of the characters. The coincidental childhood meeting of our protagonists in a field of white tulips seems entirely for the sake of the fans. Therefore, this second iteration of white tulips, which decisively claims Peter/Olivia 1 as the series' 'OTP' ('one true pair'), presents a beloved symbol to the fandom, repeated with a different signification: fate. 'Subject 13' thus offers audiences two ontological constants—Peter and Olivia 1's romantic destiny, and white tulips.

Despite the fact that 'Subject 13' enforces Peter and Olivia's OTP status, elements of the paratextual realm destabilize that position. 'Vidding' is a process through which fans mash-up scenes and images from a text and set the re-organized bits to music, then post their work on YouTube or another content-sharing site. There are a wide range of *Fringe* vids, including an entire subgenre that addresses the Peter/Olivia 1/Olivia 2 love triangle. These vids range in their approach to the triangle, some highlighting key moments in both relationships, some privileging one relationship over the other. Those that 'ship'<sup>6</sup> Peter/Olivia 2 are strong evidence of the series' success in representing characterological cofactuality: in almost any other alternate-universe story, the 'other' versions of characters are understood as evil twins. But even though Olivia 2 commits questionable acts during her undercover mission in World 1, fans interpreted her as a complex and sympathetic character, worthy of paratextual attention. In addition, some of these vids underscore the similarities between the two Olivias, while others emphasize their differences, evidence of fans' differing modes of evaluating ontological plurality at the level of character. These paratextual engagements with multiple character sets reveal a range of audience desires; and, like the proliferation of narrative mappings, the sheer number of vids indicates the fandom's commitment.

In addition to narrative mappings and vids, there are a multitude of other fan-created *Fringe* paratexts. Wikis, blogs, Twitter accounts, Facebook groups, sub-Reddits, and podcasts all give a sense of the accumulative nature of interpretive work and narrative play. These 'unofficial' paratexts operate alongside 'official' ones like comic books, merchandise,

interviews, and DVD special features; and the ways that fans experience paratextual elements in a media matrix often dissolves traditional markers of authority or canonicity. I argue that the entire discursive field surrounding *Fringe* contributes to the meaning of the text—even a simple conversation about the show can be a powerful paratext. In looking at how relatively mundane audience practices function paratextually, I am expanding Gray's categories of paratexts to account for the multitude of factors that contribute to our understanding of narratives. The influence of paratexts on any storyworld can be powerful; but as I've demonstrated in this section, the paratextual realm is especially crucial to the interpretation and enjoyment of *Fringe's* cofactual multiverse. Furthermore, the series creators allowed aspects of the paratextual realm to flow back into the narrative, sustaining the feedback loop that powered *Fringe's* accumulative storyworld.

### **Love Letters**

The more that *Fringe* abandoned its procedural storytelling format, the more the show's ratings plummeted. Complex cofactual narration is not particularly conducive to network TV and its notoriously casual audiences. In seasons three and four, the *Fringe* fandom remained intense and committed, but relatively small by FOX's standards. As the series' fate hung in the balance and fans campaigned for its renewal, season four's 'Letters of Transit' aired. This episode jumps to 2036 to reveal a dystopic future where the Observers have taken control of the world, and Olivia and Peter's daughter, Etta, is a leader of the resistance movement. The episode's title is an evocative concept in the cofactual system; referring to government papers needed to travel in 2036, 'letters of transit' might also signify the tools necessary to navigate the *Fringe* multiverse. Wyman positioned 'Letters of Transit' as the generative episode for the events of the final season: it introduced a new layer to the multiverse that fans could theorize and anticipate during the hiatus between seasons four and five.

In the months leading up to the final season, the media buzz surrounding *Fringe* highlighted the role of fan support in the show's renewal, and Wyman declared season five 'a love letter' to the fans (Sunu). The metaphor of the letter is an apt choice in light of the role that letters play in the multiverse, and it also positions the feedback loop between creators and fans as a conduit of passion. In the Summer before season five aired, the *Fringe* cast appeared with Wyman at San Diego International Comic Con, the largest and most widely mediatized fan convention in the world—the veritable mecca of nerd culture. The panel was anticipating the show's final season and celebrating the series' unlikely renewal. After the actors and showrunner took the stage, the moderator gestured to the audience, who all (several hundred) simultaneously held up identical white tulip drawings that mimicked the image from the eponymous episode. The fans' gesture was a complete surprise to the stars on stage, who reacted with delight and, in an interesting role reversal, took pictures of the audience with their phones. In this moment, the fans appropriated a symbol from the text and presented it back to the creators, in the form of a collective love letter, with all its layers of signification, including a new meaning—thank you.

Since Wyman and the other writers knew that season five would definitely be the last of the series, all 13 episodes are invested in building feelings of closure. The season begins where 'Letters of Transit' left off, with Walter, Peter, and Olivia teamed up with Etta in 2036 to fight in the resistance against the Observer/Invaders. Thus, the show creates a massive temporal gap in the viewers' narrative knowledge. Our characters, too, are out of time/place/world, as they have been stuck in amber since 2015 (the old-fashioned way to time travel). The season orchestrates a scavenger hunt, in which the characters navigate the future of World 3 with the ultimate goal of rewriting history to create World 4. These episodes are especially filled with Easter Eggs, allusions, and paratextual gestures. A strong advertising campaign leading up to and during the original run of season five and the fan support that accompanied it worked together to construct an atmosphere of shared anticipation that framed the stakes of closure in this cofactual storyworld.

One major characteristic of the season five love letter is that it recalls many elements from the series and appropriates them in ways that reward the careful viewing of an attentive fan. This onslaught of recall is designed to appeal to a particular set of viewer emotions: the satisfaction of recognition, the pride of commitment, and the pleasure of re-familiarization. Furthermore, each specific recall has the potential to reignite a previous response that is linked to a particular narrative element. In short, the love letter draws from the entire cofactual system and asks viewers to engage with layers of significance as they prepare for the end of the series. The recalls also create visual instantiations of cofactuality: as elements from various nodes in the cofactual system appear onscreen simultaneously, ontological plurality operates through oscillating processes of familiarization, defamiliarization, and re-familiarization, leveling the narrative's plural worlds by highlighting ontological constants. The integration of elements from across the cofactual system into season five embodies the goal of a love letter: invoking memory to induce emotion. But by placing those elements in new scenarios, reorganizing and reordering their significance, the cofactual layering becomes more complex.

The series finale, 'An Enemy of Fate,' ends where season five began, in a park on a sunny afternoon in 2015. This idyllic scene was one of the most repeated motifs of the season, as we see Olivia, Peter, and Etta's remembered experience of the perfect moment that was stolen away when the Observers invaded.<sup>7</sup> We see the now-familiar scene repeated a final time, but repeated with difference: the Observers do not come lumbering over the horizon as buildings collapse, but instead a young Etta leaps into her father's arms, and he spins her around as Olivia looks on with contentment. This overly predictable and simplistic heteronormative happy ending is, in proper *Fringe* style, subsequently undermined by the final scene. When the family returns home, we see Peter alone in the kitchen of their house, where he finds a letter from Walter in a stack of mail. He opens the envelope to find only a drawing of a white tulip.<sup>8</sup> He stares at the paper, then shoots a knowing glance directly into the camera and at the viewer, and then a quick cut-to-black ends the series finale.

The white tulip thus takes on yet another signification in its final diegetic iteration—

memory. Peter's look of recognition upon receiving the tulip suggests that the symbol has the power to evoke memories that he should not have access to; the tulip also invites interdiegetic recall on the part of the viewer and reinforces the object as an ontological constant, validating the plural worlds of the series. This moment also reasserts the imbalance of knowledge between viewer and character, positioning the viewer as both repository and relayer of knowledge: when Peter looks into the camera, it is as if he is asking the viewer to confirm something he should not be capable of knowing. Finally, Walter's gift of the white tulip to Peter—in the form of a (love) letter—becomes a gift to the viewers, a return gesture to the fans who had presented white tulips to the cast at Comic Con months earlier. Thus, the white tulip accumulates rather than displaces meanings with each new iteration, this time connoting all of its previous significations. The white tulip retains its power as a diegetic symbol of forgiveness, love, and fate, but to the viewer it also says *thank you* and *remember*.

This final cofactual turn in the series begs the question, did the year 2036, as we just witnessed it, actually happen? My answer, of course, is yes. In a cofactual system, everything that happens actually happens. The events of season five spawned the creation of World 4, and so this new cofactual layer rests atop—but does not erase—the struggles of World 3 (just as World 3 did not erase the significance of World 1). The ontology of a cofactual system thus departs from other examples of plural world narratives. Writing of time travel plotting, Catherine Gallagher argues that 'the [...] proliferation of plot possibilities diminishes the consequentiality of any particular track. Just as a river divides and loses force if it splits into branches when nearing the sea, the narrative that bifurcates as the result of crisis inevitability sacrifices dynamic power' (18). While Gallagher is correct that investment in plural worlds has its limits, the depth of each world in *Fringe* demonstrates that audiences can and will form deep attachments to multiple world-iterations and character-iterations within a single narrative.<sup>9</sup> Just as everything that happens actually happens, everything that the viewer feels actually feels. Furthermore, I propose that oftentimes, as is the case with *Fringe* season five, cofactual intrusions can amplify the emotional stakes of a given world-iteration: viewers must hold on to their experience of that future world, because the characters may not be able to do so.

## Endings

Fan cultures are interpretive communities, but they are also emotional collectives that thrive on reporting, reliving, and reconfiguring their relationships to narrative worlds. As a fandom shares the experience of a storyworld, and as that storyworld moves towards an end, closure becomes a communal process that unfolds over time and repeats with difference upon rewatching and re-engaging with the narrative via social media. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode asserts that 'We cannot [...] be denied an end; it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end' (23). While it is true that books must end, because their psychical boundaries contain them, television creates a different narrative ontology, in which end-points are not necessarily conducive to closure. Of course,

all shows eventually stop producing episodes, but the tendency to forego clear plot endings allows televisual narratives to extend into paratextual realms. In his landmark study *Television Culture*, John Fiske recognizes that '[w]hile we can certainly see in [television] forces of closure, these are met by the opposing desires of its audiences to exploit its writerly potential' (98). I posit that the desire for closure and the desire for narrative continuation are not at all opposed in contemporary (especially transmedia) television: the 'writerly potential' is a given, and narrative non-endings, like that which *Fringe* offers, are a conscious embracing of that fact to encourage ongoing storyworlds.

In her discussion of PW narratives, Ryan writes that 'movement does not end when all conflicts are resolved, for conflict is a permanent state of any universe, but when all the remaining conflicts cease to be productive because their experiencer is no longer willing or able to take steps toward their resolution' (649-650). If we consider the proliferation of possible worlds that occurs not just diegetically in *Fringe*, but extra-diegetically with fan discourse and other paratexts, then Ryan's emphasis on the role of the 'experiencer' as the determinant of narrative endings allows for the possibility of infinitely continuous, cofactual texts. That is, as long as viewers continue to engage with *Fringe*, the storyworld remains in process, active. The dynamics of closure in a cofactual system are therefore always invested in narrative potentiality, an invitation to the fan community to keep the wheels of plot spinning indefinitely. As Joshua Jackson states in a 'Farewell to *Fringe*' featurette, '[W]hile we're going off the air, and our contribution to the *Fringe* world is coming to an end, [...] [the story] becomes a possession of everybody who stuck with it for all those years. And they can do with it as they please.' As Jackson speaks these lines, the featurette overlays images of the white tulip, reinforcing its status as shared object between fans and creators.

The paratextual power of the white tulip resonates through the companion book titled *September's Notebook* that would become available shortly after the finale air date. *September's Notebook* is the ultimate collector's item for *Fringe* fans: a three-dimensional, tactile extension of the multiverse, it includes several removable inserts, such as propaganda posters from the dystopic 2036, classified documents from Fringe Division, and the envelope in which Walter received the first white tulip in World 1. A copy of the physical book actually appears in the eleventh episode of season five ('The Boy Must Live'), effectively blurring the ontological hierarchy between text and paratext. In other words, the presence of the paratext within the show validates the authenticity of the book in relation to *Fringe's* narrative canon, and vice versa. Thus, the resistance to ontological hierarchy within the TV series is reflected in a similar dissolution of hierarchy among the nodes of the transmedia narrative. Furthermore, the existence of the book validates the entire cofactual system: despite the fact that September (and the other Observers) are supposedly deleted by Walter's final sacrifice, the book confirms the persistence of all prior world iterations. In 'The Boy Must Live,' September explains that he had taken the white tulip from World 1 and given it to Walter after the invasion as a sign of hope that they could defeat the Observers. He then hands Walter the envelope, but the tulip is missing. Walter doesn't remember what he'd done with the tulip, but the viewer learns the answer at the end of 'An Enemy of Fate'—

the white tulip was not in its envelope because Walter had already sent it to Peter in 2015. The similarly empty envelope in *September's Notebook*, therefore, performs narrative continuity with 'The Boy Must Live,' but it also presents an opportunity for viewers to fill the envelope by producing their own white tulips. Thus, *September's Notebook* confirms the cofactuality of *Fringe's* narrative system, and it reminds viewers that 'there is more than one of everything,' including endings and white tulips.

### **Biographical note:**

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### **Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, I'll refer to world-iterations and character-iterations with a number system.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Gray's 2010 book, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*,

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lays a foundation for understanding ‘paratexts as textual entities’ (16) in visual media. He argues that ‘a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text’ (6).

<sup>3</sup> In many narratives, viewer surrogates are secondary or minor characters who often occupy a position at the edge of the narrative action and share in the act of ‘watching.’ In *Fringe*, the onus of surrogacy shifts towards central characters due to the complex nature of the multiverse.

<sup>4</sup> While most of the Observers are undeveloped characters, we interact mostly with one named ‘September,’ who becomes especially attached to Walter, Peter, and Olivia.

<sup>5</sup> There are eight distinct title sequences in the series, distinguished by color schemes as well as the array of words that flash quickly onscreen. There are 3 versions of the initial Blue Sequence, used in seasons 1-3 to denote World 1 (the linguistic content changes each season). The Red Sequence denotes World 2, and contains words that relate specifically to the ontology of that world. The Amber Sequence occurs in season four to denote World 3. The Oppression Sequence denotes the dystopic future in season five. There is also a 1985 Sequence and a Shifting Sequence (which denotes that the episode takes place in Worlds 1 and 2). (Fringepedia.net)

<sup>6</sup> This term, derived from ‘relationship,’ is used in an array of fandoms to mean favoring or rooting for a particular character coupling.

<sup>7</sup> The first iteration of this scene was actually part of the promotional campaign before the season aired. Then, in various episodes in season five, Olivia, Peter, and Etta’s perspective of that day is conveyed via dreams.

<sup>8</sup> In order to effect the temporal reset in 2036, Walter travels to the future and is consequently erased from World 4, post-2015.

<sup>9</sup> Had the series continued for several more seasons, it could have further tested the emotional capacity of plural world narratology – how many world iterations does it take to breed viewer apathy? This question is especially interesting to consider in relation to fan-produced narrative elements: is there a point at which the viewer’s ability to recuperate or invent worlds diminishes the importance of canonical narrative worlds?