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# "It's like *Groundhog Day*": Remediation, Trauma, and Quantum Physics in Time Loop Narratives on Recent American Television

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In his widely cited article "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," Jason Mittell maintains that as a result of numerous contextual factors, including technological progress and the accompanying increased media savvy of recipients, "American television of the past twenty years will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the medium can do."[1] These narrative experiments frequently center on questions of temporality, for numerous contemporary "shows play with time, slowing it down to unfold the narrative at rarely before seen rates […] and disrupting the chronological flow itself."[2]

This focus on time may, however, come as a bit of a surprise in our present cultural moment. After all, analyses of (post-)postmodern culture tend to overemphasize the prioritization of spatiality over temporality while disregarding the fact that time and space are not so much conceptual opposites than intertwined categories, as scientists starting with Hermann Minkowski[3] and cultural critics such as Mikhail M. Bakhtin (in his concept of the "chronotope"[4]) and David Harvey (the "time-space compression" characteristic of postmodernity[5]) have repeatedly underlined. Despite the unquestioned interconnections between time and space, it should be stressed that even though "time is one of the most fundamental parameters through which narrative […] is organized and understood,"[6] it is

especially central for television storytelling, which is why Mary Anne Doane has even claimed that "[t]he major category of television is time."[7] Whereas Doane's claim is grounded in her argument that repetition is central to television, no matter whether fictional or factual, Jason Mittell has more recently stressed that contemporary fictional television programs are characterized by seriality—a feature primarily conceived in temporal ways. He thus defines serial television narrative as "a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time."[8]

This primacy of temporality in television has led to a proliferation of "alternative" ways of telling stories on recent American television, including frame narratives, extended flashbacks, and even flashforwards. In the following, I will, however, turn my attention to another kind of narrative organization repeatedly seen on American television in the more recent past, namely time loops, in three episodes taken from *The X-Files* ("Monday," S06E14, originally broadcast on February 28, 1999), *Supernatural* ("Mystery Spot," S03E11, originally broadcast on February 14, 2008), and *Fringe* ("White Tulip," S02E18, originally broadcast on April 15, 2010). By presenting three readings that employ three different approaches—which are, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive—I will be demonstrating various cultural, medial, but also psychological influences on conceptualizations and representations of time in contemporary television.

### *"Getting it right": Remediating Video Game Mechanics in* The X-Files

Following in the footsteps of its thematic and conceptual predecessors *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–1964) and *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–1991), *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2002) has repeatedly been referred to as one of American quality television's harbingers. Indeed, as M. Keith Booker remarks in his monograph *Strange TV*, the show "is stylistically self-conscious" and often engages in "unusual formal experiments."[9] On top of that, *The X-Files* is "[l]aced with stylistic and thematic references to film, television, and other works of popular culture," suggesting that "the show asks to be seen as a sort of culmination of twentieth-century American popular culture" and "is consistently self-conscious about its own status as a television program."[10] When, in a final step, one adds the show's intricate (not to say

convoluted) mythology narrated in serio-episodic fashion, there is no denying that *The X-Files* was one of the shows that began to "offer an alternative to conventional television narrative" in the 1990s.[11]

One of *The X-Files*' most playful episodes is "Monday," (S06E14) which opens in the middle of a police operation—obviously, a bank robbery is underway and the police are trying to secure the building. Camera angles, framing, and the score quickly highlight the importance of a woman, who, as viewers get to know in the course of the episode, is named Pam and who apparently knows Skinner, for she asks him to "stop it—don't let this happen!"[12] As the camera moves inside the bank, a desperate-looking Scully holds Mulder, who has been shot and seems to be taking his final breaths, in her arms. Pam's boyfriend Bernard, the bank robber, has got a bomb on his body, and just when Scully remarks, "This doesn't have to end like this,"[13] a SWAT team comes storming through the front door, and Bernard blows up the bank. Cue *The X-Files* title sequence.

After the title sequence, a paperboy is seen delivering the morning paper, waking up Mulder in the process. Confusion ensues among viewers, for Mulder died moments ago (but is resurrected by the televisual apparatus). Was the scene in the bank a dream? Someone's vision? Rather than being allowed to seriously ponder the question, the viewers are presented with Mulder experiencing—in his sarcastic words—"the best-damn day of [his] life": his "waterbed sprung a leak and shorted out [his] alarm clock, [his] cell phone got wet and crapped out on [him], and the check [he] wrote [his] landlord to cover the damages is gonna bounce if [he] do[es]n't deposit [his] pay."[14] Mulder ends up being, as Scully puts it, "extraordinarily late" for a meeting,[15] but he still needs to hop to the bank in order to deposit his paycheck. On his way to the bank, Mulder passes Pam sitting in a car, who notes that Mulder is "right on schedule."[16] As he looks at her and nearly stops, she remarks that he "never did that before."[17] If not in this moment, then seconds later, when Mulder enters the bank Bernard is about to rob, it becomes obvious that what is currently happening on the screen has already happened before in the diegetic world—the past is repeating itself in the present, which, of course, implies that, paradoxically, the past is the present is the future. Tellingly, only moments later, Skinner underscores how unpredictable the future is, before, some more

minutes later, Bernard blows up the bank (again), effectively turning Skinner's comment into a kind of meta-discourse on the entire episode.[18]

The whole script re-plays several times, with (more or less) minor changes, but always ends the same way—Bernard blows up the bank and the people in the bank, including Scully and Mulder, die, which prompts the story to re-start. Pam is the only one realizing that the events unfolding in front of her very eyes are seemingly endlessly repeating themselves. She seeks to change the outcome in various ways: She tries to call Mulder, attempts to keep Bernard from leaving their apartment, tells Scully to keep Mulder from entering the bank, and even informs Mulder of the loop that they are all caught in. Pam is confident that she has to "get it right."[19] With each play-through, she becomes increasingly convinced that Mulder is the variable—the chess piece she needs to deploy to a position that the metaphorical king (Bernard, that is) can't move any more.

Pam is thus figured as a kind of observer who is, on the one hand, external to the action, but is, on the other hand, an agent who's controlling the moves and actions of other characters—a manipulator of her environment. In certain ways, this constellation remediates the video gaming experience, for, like a player, she "inhabits a twilight zone where […] she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game."[20] Unlike the (ostensibly) passive viewers of movies and television shows, players are not mere observers, but can influence events unfolding in the gametext:

> Rather than merely watching the actions of the main character, as we would in a film, with every outcome of events predetermined when we enter the theater, we are given a surrogate character (the player-character) through which we can participate in and alter the events in the game's diegetic world.[21]

In addition to her simulated agency, Pam's role is rather different from traditional characters in old media in a distinctly temporal way: Whereas typical characters in old media are merely allowed to "live" once, their behaviors are irreversible, and fixed in time, Pam's actions are undone as soon as Bernard blows up the bank and kills Mulder. Indeed, Pam has to "play" the same day all over again, as if she were

returning to a safe point and trying to figure out a way to advance to the next section or level of a game.

Yet before even starting to think of finding ways to progress—to escape her dilemma—and "get things right," Pam, in a first step, has to comprehend her situation. This starting point is reminiscent of ergodic texts, which require "nontrivial effort" on the user's part and have "certain requirements built in that automatically distinguish [...] between successful and unsuccessful users."[22] Even though these features are built-in, success (or lack thereof) lies in the user's hands, for users are frequently asked to "figure out for [themselves] what is going on."[23] Since Espen Aarseth includes video games—especially adventure games—among the ergodic texts he discusses, there is little surprise that James Newman, similarly, notes that "games do not tell the player how to conquer the game space."[24]

Following this pattern often employed in video games, Pam at first appears to be utterly confused and then seems desperate in trying to understand her situation. While she slowly grasps that she is situated in a temporal loop, she cannot fathom why only she is able to recognize the repetitive pattern of the events surrounding her. What Pam does apprehend, though, is that the goal of the game that is her life is to stop Bernard from blowing up the bank. In order to keep him from doing so, Pam tests various strategies, learns from earlier mistakes, and, eventually, becomes frustrated, as there seems to be no way of succeeding in this game. Video game players most definitely know the emotions experienced by Pam, as controllers tend to be "thrown across the room in disgust a few times" before players can finally emerge victorious.[25]

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin note that old media are "trying to co-opt our culture's fascination with new media […] to refashion traditional, linear" narratives.[26] While "Monday" most definitely presents a case in point of how video game mechanics can inspire formal experiments in television, the episode's differences from video games are as significant as are its similarities to them. Leaving aside the blatantly obvious differences, such as that "Monday" is, after all, an episode of a television show and not a video game and that *The X-Files* is a live-action show, which clearly distances the episode from the animated world of video games, especially one aspect is worth pointing out.

Whereas video games turn "users into characters,"[27] "Monday" transforms a character into a user. The episode thus highlights the lack of interactivity afforded by old media, for its intradiegetic user—like any other character—doesn't have any agency at all. However, maybe "lack of interactivity" is too extreme an expression, for not only does the episode simulate agency by giving Pam the power to change the eventual outcome of the bank heist, but also because already more than a decade ago Lev Manovich warned media scholars of the dangers of interpreting "'interaction' literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object […] at the expense of psychological interaction."[28] Manovich explains that

> [b]efore, we could read a sentence of a story or a line in a poem and think of other lines, images, memories. Now interactive media asks us to click on a highlighted sentence to go to another sentence. In short, we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations.[29]

Manovich thus points out that, compared with old media, new media, in fact, largely minimize psychological interaction.

In many ways, these differences in terms of agency between old and new media echo Mulder and Scully's recurring discussions concerning free will vs. predetermination in the episode. "Monday" combines highly philosophical and media-related questions and suggests an effective difference between life and art that might come as a surprise for a show that has repeatedly been referred to as "postmodernist": life provides the distinct advantages of choice and free will, whereas art—and I am including video games here—is limited by predetermination.

While Mulder and Scully repeatedly engage in exchanges on the nature of free will in "Monday," Mulder introduces another possible reading of the episode by stressing its Freudian subtext: "Some Freudians believe the déjà vu phenomenon to be repressed memories escaping the unconscious that represents a desire to have a second chance, to set things right."[30] Indeed, it could be argued that Pam confronts the repressed memories of her boyfriend's dying moments in the course of the episode. However, since "setting things right" does not so much mean overcoming or finally dealing with these memories, but rather changing the actual outcome of the events in the bank, I would argue that the intermedial reading should be

preferred over the psychoanalytical one.[31] Nearly a decade after the original broadcast of "Monday," a time loop episode of a show that overtly acknowledged its debt to *The X-Files* already in its pilot episode (and has done so repeatedly ever since) should more explicitly engage with the psychological subtext of its form.

### *"Killing Dean over and over again": Trauma and the Compulsion to Repeat in* Supernatural

*Supernatural* (WB 2005–2006; CW since 2006) has been described as "a testosterone-charged romp about two excessively good-looking brothers who, armed with phallic weaponry, roam the country in a '67 Chevy Impala hunting monsters from American folklore."[32] Typical of contemporary complex television shows, *Supernatural* mixes monster-of-the-week episodes with narrative arcs that are season-long (or even longer). Season One is structured around brothers Sam and Dean Winchester, the main characters, and their search for their lost father, and the second season zeroes in on how all three of them hunt down the demon that killed Mary, their mother and wife, respectively. In the penultimate Season Two episode, (S02E21), Sam is stabbed and dies in Dean's arms. Unable to cope with his brother's death, Dean decides to sell his soul in order to resurrect Sam. Once Sam realizes what Dean has done, he experiences a very specific kind of survivor's guilt and desperately begins to try to get his brother out of his Faustian pact. These attempts to save Dean are one of the main narrative strands in Season Three.

"Mystery Spot" (S03E11) opens in typical *Supernatural* fashion: The introductory recap displays images of Dean slaying various monsters and agreeing to his deal with the Crossroads Demon, the brothers' search for a supernatural colt they hope can kill the demon and thus save Dean, and Dean's visions of his future in Hell, before closing with Sam's demon friend Ruby telling Dean that he needs to help her prepare Sam to fight on his own. Jason Mittell has explained that recaps are useful narrative tools in television, since "[t]he entire process of narration in a television series needs to constantly reinforce story information and remind viewers of what they need to know to comprehend the next event."[33] As he continues, recaps feature "key moments" that are "vital to refresh viewers' memories for upcoming storylines,"[34] for "[e]ven the most attentive and intent viewer could not possibly

have all of that narrative information active in her operative working memory—most of the story information she has retained would be archived in long-term memory."[35] Indeed, the episode's recap stresses the most important information in the ongoing storyline while already foreshadowing the themes and issues the episode will touch upon. The special attention given to the trickster the Winchesters thought they had destroyed about nine months earlier anticipates the monster's return in the episode, all the while reminding viewers that, unbeknownst to Sam and Dean, the trickster was alive and kicking at the conclusion of the season two episode "Tall Tales" (S02E15).

The episode proper opens with Sam waking up to the diegetic tune of Asia's "Heat of the Moment." Obviously not too convinced of his brother's taste in music, he ironically remarks that "if [he] had to hear it again, [he]'d kill [him]self."[36] During their breakfast in a local diner, Sam and Dean reveal that they are in a small town in Broward County, Florida, where a man has gone missing. "His daughter says he was on his way to the Broward County Mystery Spot," discloses Sam, before Dean takes a look at a brochure that advertises the place "[w]here the laws of physics have no meaning."[37] Dean is not convinced at all, but Sam stresses that "sometimes, these places are legit."[38] Explaining the myths surrounding these mysterious places, Sam notes that "they […] have a magnetic field so strong that they bend space-time, sending victims to no one-knows-where."[39] Dean friskily notes that all of these stories "sound[...] a little *X-Files* to [him],"[40] a remark that not only serves to pay tribute to *The X-Files*, but also to underscore the involvement of Kim Manners in both "Mystery Spot" and the abovementioned "Monday," as he directed both episodes.[41] When the boys scour the Mystery Spot after it has closed for the day, the owner surprises them and shoots Dean, who dies in Sam's arms.

Following the title screen, viewers are apparently taken back a few minutes in terms of discourse time and several hours in terms of story time, as Sam opens his eyes to "Heat of the Moment" while Dean is getting dressed. Things appear to be just like they were after the recap. Regular viewers wouldn't necessarily get confused by this situation, for not only had Sam shown the ability to see the future in previous episodes, but *Supernatural* had already repeatedly employed non-chronological structures by the time "Mystery Spot" was broadcast.[42] Sam, however,

is rather puzzled by the situation and looks like he had seen a ghost when watching Dean lip-syncing the song. After some minutes, Sam concludes that he "had a weird dream." [43] In the diner, Sam, however, starts to feel "as if [he] were living yesterday all over again," because "yesterday was Tuesday, but today is Tuesday, too."[44] When Dean suggests searching the Mystery Spot at night, Sam succeeds in persuading Dean to go right away, obviously wanting to keep Dean from dying, who, however, is run over by a car only seconds later and again dies in Sam's arms.

"Heat of the Moment" plays again and Sam's eyes open as the story returns to Tuesday 7.30 a.m. Sam is now certain that he is stuck in a time loop. Yet it is Dean who concludes that they must ensure that he doesn't die so Sam can escape the loop. Seconds later, a piano comes crashing down on Dean. This is the moment when Dean's death scenarios start to become increasingly cartoonish, as he chokes on the sausage he ordered instead of bacon for breakfast in an attempt to assert his agency in writing his life-story, slips in the shower and breaks his neck, is poisoned by the tacos the boys eat in their hotel room in an attempt to protect Dean from the dangers outside, gets electrocuted when plugging in his electric shaver, is furiously attacked by a golden retriever, and even gets accidentally killed by Sam. After going through the motions more than a hundred times (by Sam's estimate), Sam notices that one of the diner's customers has strawberry instead of maple syrup one day. When he tells Dean that "[n]othing changes in this place—ever, except me," this remark triggers a reset, and Sam knows who to go after the "next" day.

Sam confronts Ed Coleman—that is, the trickster in disguise—the next day and wants to know why he had to go through this emotional rollercoaster ride for so long, wondering whether "[t]his is fun for [Ed]—killing Dean over and over again."[45] However, the trickster informs Sam that "this is so not about Dean. […] Watching your brother die—every day, forever. How long would it take you to realize you can't save your brother, no matter what?"[46] Thus, the episode makes explicit the ways in which it anticipates the traumatic experience that Sam cannot avoid—Dean's death, that is—and its significance to the entire season. The episode's structure as a time loop narrative proves to be highly important in this context. After all, according to Sigmund Freud, dreams "repeatedly bring [...] the patient back to the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright."[47]

Consequently, the patient cannot escape this traumatic situation, for he constantly returns to it in a kind of loop.

And Sam wakes up each time Dean dies, as if Sam were working through the traumatic experience in dreams time and again. "These dreams," argues Freud, "are endeavoring to master" the situation,[48] but Sam has to realize that Dean's death is beyond his control; a traumatic experience he cannot avert and that will repeat itself time and again in the future. Thus, for Sam, "the future promises not unknown possibilities for fulfilling desire, but new occasions for the repetition of the fundamental loss that defines the subject."[49] This loss, psychoanalytic theory suggests, can, however, never be integrated in the Symbolic but always surfaces "in the form of that which is *unassimilable* in it—in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows."[50] In this way, an 'alternative' conceptualization of temporality emerges, since, as already Freud noted, the mental processes at work "are not ordered temporally" and "time does not change them in any way,"[51] for the past predetermines the future, a process Freud termed "*Nachträglichkeit*" (translated as "deferred action," "belatedness," or "afterwardsness"). Ned Luckacher explains that *Nachträglichkeit*

> demands that one recognize that while the earlier event is still to some extent the cause of the later event, the earlier event is nevertheless also the effect of the later event. One is forced to admit a double or "metaleptic" logic in which causes are both causes of effects and the effects of effects.[52]

This reverse temporal logic supports the abovementioned meaning of Dean's repeated deaths within the larger *Supernatural*verse. The narrative loop communicates the episode's message on the level of discourse and anticipates Dean's inevitable death at the end of Season Three (only to be resurrected in the Season Four premiere). In other words, Dean's eventual death, which is to occur about three months later, already haunts the present moment. Not only does the episode's structure thus underscore the theme of freedom (which would take center stage in Season Four and Season Five) but the repeated present moments of Dean's deaths in "Mystery Spot" also anticipate their own future pastness and imagine their experience as objects of future memory. As Mark Currie contends, in our culture of "accelerated recontextualization, the process which consigns the present to memory

is conducted at infinite speed, since the present […] is always already in the past."[53] These are symptoms of the "archive fever" Jacques Derrida (among others) has diagnosed in contemporary culture:

> [T]he archive […] is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the events.[54]

As has already been indicated above, the traditional cause-and-effect logic is thus reversed, for television "deals not with the weight of the dead past but with the potential trauma and explosiveness of the present."[55] A (media) event is not recorded because it happens, but it happens for the sole reason that it is recorded. Interestingly, Mary Anne Doane's observation was published in 1990, yet it should take the media buzz surrounding 9/11 to demonstrate just how insightful her statement was. In his book *The Rhetoric of Terror*, Marc Redfield goes so far as to suggest that 9/11 "would not even have occurred if it were not being recorded and transmitted."[56] Considering all of these contexts, "Mystery Spot" is arguably more than a simple episode in the serialized narrative of *Supernatural*, for its form reflects on the medium of television and its surrounding media culture. In that, the episode is very much in line with other *Supernatural* episodes such as 2006's "Hell House" (S01E17), 2008's "Ghostfacers" (S03E13), and 2009's "Changing Channels" (S05E08), as they all communicate metareflexive commentaries on (American) television.[57]

### *"There's more than one of everything": Time Loops, the Death Drive, and Many-Worlds Theory in* Fringe

If the televised images of September 11, 2001 effectively birthed the 'actual' event, the framing of which was "reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies,"[58] then there should be little surprise that the responses to the terrorist attacks were often cinematic and televisual in nature. In one of the most explicit references to the destroyed Twin Towers in fictional American television programming, *Fringe* (Fox, 2008–2013) concluded its first season with what

*MovieLine*'s Seth Abramovitch referred to as a "tasteless […] WTF moment,"[59] for the final moments revealed in "There's more than one of everything" (S01E20) the existence of an alternate universe in which the Hindenburg never crashed, JFK was not killed, and the September 11 attacks didn't take place, as the season closed with images of the Twin Towers dominating the New York skyline—some time in 2008 or 2009.

Although Jeff Pinkner, *Fringe*'s showrunner from season one to four, highlighted the images' allusion to the final shots of *Planet of the Apes* (1968),[60] the explicit references to 9/11 certainly also allowed *Fringe*, which can most easily be described as the twenty-first-century heir to *The X-Files*, to participate in America's working through what Marc Redfield has termed the 'virtual trauma' of 9/11.[61] Despite thus arguably being part of the trauma culture that mushroomed in the wake of 9/11, *Fringe* episodes repeatedly revolve around smaller-scale traumas, as well. One example is "White Tulip" (S02E18), which centers on a physics professor's attempts to return to the day his wife died.

Similar to "Mystery Spot," the episode's recap introduces the topic of trauma by referencing the experience that haunts one of the show's central characters, Dr. Walter Bishop—the death of his son Peter resulting from a terminal disease and Walter's ensuing decision to take his son's double from an alternate reality to his world. The episode begins with a man suddenly appearing in a commuter train. All other people in the train car are dead. The man gets off the train and passes a teen pickpocket, who gets on the train and is unsurprisingly shocked by what he discovers inside the train car. Following the title sequence, Walter is seen writing a letter to Peter in an attempt to tell "his" son the truth. Peter calls in order to inform Walter that they have been called to a crime scene—the train. Soon, the Fringe team discovers that the man is Dr. Alistair Peck, a former astrophysics professor at MIT, who, as Walter puts it, "has taken Einstein's Theory Relativity and turned it on its ear."[62] Peck self-confidently walks into his apartment while the FBI is scouring the place and explains that the twelve innocent people on the train "aren't dead. Not permanently."[63] Moments later, Peck disappears from his apartment and reappears in the train car, as the episode's opening moments repeat themselves. When he passes the pickpocket, Peck says, "I'm sorry you have to go through this again."[64]

The second version of the investigation shows slight variations, as Peck does not turn up at his apartment and the Fringe team meets a former colleague of Peck's at MIT, who tells them that Peck was obsessed with wormholes and time travel. Upon reading Peck's latest manuscript, Walter concludes that Peck "may well be able to travel through time," "that Peck's moving through time is what killed all of those people on the train," and that they "may have apprehended this man already—possibly several times."[65] When the team eventually determines Peck's location, Walter implores FBI Agent Olivia Dunham to allow him talk to Peck, for he believes he can stop Peck from traveling through time again. During his exchange with Peck, Walter reveals that the team has discovered the reason for Peck's desire to travel to the past and that he is certain that if Peck "pull[s]" his fiancée "from that car, the victims of this last, massive reset will remain dead."[66] Despite being aware of the dangers, Walter highlights a mathematical error in Peck's calculations and confides to Peck that he "attempted the unimaginable and […] succeeded" before unveiling that he has been looking for a divine sign of forgiveness ever since taking Peter II from the parallel universe.[67] Peck jumps back in time just when the FBI team enters the room.

In the final scenario, Peck's arrival in the train car is already past. He lands in his apartment's vicinity, quickly solves the mathematical problem, and draws the "divine" sign Walter had been asking for. Peck eventually returns to the day his fiancée died, yet decides not to save her, but rather sit right next to her when her car is hit by a pick-up. As the episode concludes, Walter receives his 'divine' message.

Peck is evidently obsessed with undoing his fiancée's death. Yet "White Tulip" demonstrates that these attempts to correct the world cannot help overcome the primordial wound that is his fiancée's death. In fact, Peck's desperate attempts to save Arlette inevitably intensify the wound's traumatic impact. However, as Slavoj Zizek explains, "the endless circulation around the object"—that is, the death of Peck's fiancée—"turns failure into triumph," for "the very failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure […] generates a satisfaction of its own."[68] This process is referred to as the "death drive," which situates "enjoyment in the movement of return itself—the repetition of loss, rather than in what might be recovered."[69] Walter's warning not to strive for doing the unimaginable can be read as a self-

conscious statement in which he underscores that what Peck is aiming for is "the irreducible kernel of jouissance that resists all symbolization."[70] And satisfying this drive would be an experience beyond representation (and according to Jacques Lacan, an impossibility[71]). Peck seems to understand the point at the heart of Walter's argument and decides to take the seat next to his fiancée and die with her rather than save her. By giving in to the nirvana principle[72], he thus breaks free from the death drive. And his letter to Walter which displays a white tulip presents a (somewhat futile) attempt to liberate Walter from "the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in [the] guilt and pain" not so much for having abducted his son's double from a parallel universe,[73] but rather for his inability to regret his actions, resulting in Walter's persistent search for a sign of God's forgiveness.

Although psychoanalytic theory provides valuable insights into the episode, *Fringe*'s serialized narrative, in fact, somewhat short-circuits a psychoanalytic reading, for in 2009's "The Road Not Taken" (S01E19), Walter introduces a different explanation for déjà vu to Olivia:

> You're familiar with the pliability of space-time, yes? […] Most of us experience life as a linear progression […]. But this is an illusion, because every day, life presents us with an array of choices. […] And each choice leads to a new path. […] And each choice we make creates a new reality. […] Déjà vu is a momentary glimpse to the other side.[74]

In his explanation, Walter draws on what Max Tegmark in a pop-science overview of parallel worlds theory has termed "quantum many worlds," which suggests that that "random quantum processes cause the universe to branch into multiple copies, one for each possible outcome."[75] Marie-Laure Ryan has suggested that any "multiverse interpretation must be either explicitly suggested through […] exposition of […] quantum cosmology […] or implicitly motivated by a thematic awareness of cosmological issues that invites the reader to reflect on the nature of space, time, identity, or memory," since "the idea of parallel realities is not yet solidly established in our private encyclopedias."[76] Indeed, Walter's elaborations on parallel universes explicitly introduced the multiverse to *Fringe*'s storyworld prior to employing the concept full force in Season Three, in which the narrative constantly

switches between two universes. While, theoretically, an infinite number of alternate realities emerge from the primary universe according to the conceptualization introduced by Walter, there are, of course, limits to what can be done without overburdening audiences. This is why, as David Bordwell has rightfully observed in the context of movies, branching narratives never depict more than a couple of paths.[77]

Following the multiverse interpretation, Peck not only needs to go back in time in order to undo his fiancée's death, but, in fact, return to a point in time before two separate universes emerged—one in which Arlette is dead and one in which she is still alive. Similar to both the *X-Files* and *Supernatural* episodes discussed above, "White Tulip" (and *Fringe* at large) deals with questions of free will and predetermination. However, the multiverse adds an important dimension to the table: if, for any given decision, every single path is actualized in different realities, why would moral questions even be considered? Peck hints at this thought when, in the first version of these events, he indicates that the people he ostensibly killed will not always be dead.

***Time Loops and Recent American Television Storytelling***

With its insistence on alternative realities, "White Tulip" proves to be the episode among the three discussed above that demonstrates most explicitly that our "age is one of unprecedented flourishing for alternative ways of understanding and inhabiting time."[78] Whether it's messaging systems that allow for instantaneous communication, live-action role playing games that allow the present experience for (filtered versions of) the past, video games that "offer [...] a very different temporal experience than our other media"[79]—all of these and many more factors have led to the proliferation of different timespaces we inhabit today. Non-chronological television narratives enact the temporal distortion experienced by viewers in the 'real' world and allow them both to (re-)experience the alterations in the perception and conceptualization of time and to reflect on these changes from a safe distance. Todd McGowan has cunningly observed that "[t]he cultural importance" of atemporal cinema "lies […] in the revelation of the temporality of experience through an experience of temporality."[80] However, while McGowan posits that

cinema (and music) is best suited to communicate this type of experience for its foregrounding of temporality, he ignores the fact that television is capable of playing all the tricks of cinema, yet adds "the importance of temporality in grounding seriality" to the mix.[81]

Indeed, even though I have discussed some of the various influences on the construction (and perception) of time loop narratives above (the sheer omnipresence of video games on the cultural radar, the increasing awareness of our existence in parallel worlds—in various meanings of the term, and trauma), the structure of all three episodes underscores seriality not only by highlighting the significance of trauma to the larger narratives (the abduction of Samantha in *The X-Files*, the various traumas experienced by Sam and Dean in *Supernatural*, and Walter's loss of Peter in *Fringe*), but, moreover, by emphasizing how strongly seriality, in fact, depends on repetition. Repetition, as has already been mentioned earlier, is a feature characteristic of television as a medium. When one takes into account that TV 3.0 has been referred to as "the final moment in the age of television,"[82] the endless repetition enacted by time loop narratives perhaps points towards a fear of the future. Yet by both reflecting and reflecting on this fear, time loop narratives, somewhat paradoxically, may contribute to ensuring the future of television, as they are one of the means in which television presents its narratives in increasingly complex ways and thus reflects on the increasingly complex ways in which (new) media reshape human experience and vice versa.

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**Notes**

[1] Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *Velvet Light Trap* 58 (2006): 29.
[2] Melissa Ames, "Introduction: Television Studies in the Twenty-First Century," in *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First-Century Programming*, ed. Melissa Ames (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 9.
[3] Hermann Minkowski, *Physikalische Zeitschrift* 10 (1909): 75–88.
[4] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258.
[5] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989)., 284–307.
[6] Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 47.
[7] Mary Anne Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 222.
[8] Jason Mittell, "Introduction," in *Complex Television: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, 2012, <http://mcpress.media-commons.org/complextelevision/introduction>, par. 19; italics in original.

[9] M. Keith Booker, *Strange TV: Innovative Television Series from* The Twilight Zone *to* The X-Files (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 122.
[10] *Ibid*., 124-125.
[11] Mittell, "Narrative Complexity," 29.
[12] Kim Manners, "Monday," DVD, *The X-Files* (Los Angeles, CA: Fox, 1999).
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] *Ibid*.
[17] *Ibid*.
[18] "Monday" is filled with ironic—potentially metatextual—statements of this kind, which only highlight the episode's playful character. For example, Mulder at one point remarks that it's "one of those days you wish you could just rewind and start all over again, from the beginning." Scully responds, "[W]ho's to say that if you did rewind it and start over again, that it would end up exactly the same way?" Mulder retorts, "So, you think it's all fate? We have no free will?"
[19] Manners, "Monday."
[20] Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts>, par. 49.
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[23] *Ibid*., 113.
[24] James Newman, *Videogames*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 19.
[25] *Ibid*., 4.
[26] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 147.
[27] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Will New Media Produce New Narratives?," in *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 348.
[28] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 57.
[29] *Ibid*., 61.
[30] Manners, "Monday."
[31] Admittedly, Pam's self-sacrifice could be read as the ultimate gesture of repression or even as an indication of Pam finally mastering the situation.
[32] Catherine Tosenberger, "'The Epic Love Story of Sam and Dean': *Supernatural*, Queer Readings, and the Romance of Incestuous Fan Fiction," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 1 (2008), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2008.0030>, par. 1.1.
[33] Jason Mittell, "Previously On: Prime Time Serials and the Mechanics of Memory," in *Intermediality and Storytelling*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 82.
[34] *Ibid*., 90.
[35] *Ibid*., 84.
[36] Kim Manners, "Mystery Spot," Blu-Ray, *Supernatural* (Burbank, CA: Warner, 2008).
[37] *Ibid*.
[38] *Ibid*.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] *Ibid*.

[41] John Shiban, who went on to write nine episodes of *Supernatural*'s first two seasons and act as producer on the show, co-wrote "Monday" with Vince Gilligan, who went on to become *Breaking Bad*'s showrunner.
[42] For a piece on temporality in different *Supernatural* episodes, see Michael Fuchs, "Play It Again, Sam ... and Dean: Temporality and Meta-Textuality in *Supernatural*," in *Time in Television Narrative: Exploring Temporality in Twenty-First-Century Programming*, ed. Melissa Ames (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 82–94.
[43] Manners, "Mystery Spot."
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] *Ibid*.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 7.
[48] *Ibid*., 26.
[49] Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xi.
[50] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 55; italics in original.
[51] Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, 22.
[52] Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 35.
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[54] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1998), 16-17; italics in original.
[55] Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," 222.
[56] Marc Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 30.
[57] On "Ghostfacers" as a parody of ghost-hunting shows, see Stacey Abbott, "Innovative TV," in *The Cult TV Book*, ed. Stacey Abbott (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 95–96.
[58] Slavoj Zizek, "Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance," in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 11.
[59] Seth Abramovitch, "How Tasteless Was *Fringe*'s Twist-Ending?," *MovieLine*, May 13, 2009, <http://movieline.com/2009/05/13/fringe>, par. 1–4.
[60] Chuck, "FRINGE Executive Producer Jeff Pinkner Explains Mind Blowing Season Finale," *Entertainment Today and Beyond*, May 14, 2009, <http://blog.entertainmenttodayand-beyond.com/tag/fringe-executive-producer-jeff-pinkner-explains-mind-blowing-season-finale>.
[61] Redfield, *The Rhetoric of Terror*, 13–48.
[62] Thomas Yatsko, "White Tulip," Blu-Ray, *Fringe* (Los Angeles, CA: Fox, 2010).
[63] *Ibid*.
[64] *Ibid*.
[65] *Ibid*.
[66] *Ibid*.
[67] *Ibid*.
[68] Slavoj Zizek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 63–64.
[69] McGowan, *Out of Time*, 11.
[70] Slavoj Zizek, "The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture Can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan," in *The Zizek Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 14.
[71] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 161–173.

[72] Freud, *Pleasure Principle*, 49–50.
[73] Zizek, *Parallax*, 62.
[74] Frederick E. O. Toye, "The Road Not Taken," Blu-Ray, *Fringe* (Los Angeles, CA: Fox, 2009).
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[80] McGowan, *Out of Time*, 7.
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