Breaking Managed Dissatisfaction: The Culture Industry, Netflix, and the Rise of the Binge Experience

by
Brett Stults

University of California, Davis
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The advent of new entertainment technologies such as Netflix and Hulu mixed with the growing access to mobile devices and a seemingly ever-present connection to the Internet has created a new market for telling stories. Where the 19th century saw the rise of the serialized novel, the 21st century saw the arrival of the binge experience: the consumption of narratives, print or televised, within a compressed timeframe. As Netflix continues to provide wholly original content designed for viewing and consumption at once, the binge experience will continue to flourish resulting in a market flooded with ready-to-consume bite-sized narratives. However, there is something problematic with this new venture into storytelling – the binge experience is merely a marketing ploy, and not a novel attempt at storytelling. The binge experience is a manufactured product designed to increase audience reception and consumption in hopes of increasing the profits of companies such as Netflix as they attempt to flood the market with new narratives on an almost monthly basis. Furthermore, there is nothing specific about the binge experience, i.e. any series regardless of its seriality can be consumed at a rapid rate, and, conversely, a series can be consumed at a slower rate – binging is an action performed by the viewer and not a preset experience produced and distributed. In this paper, I hope to explore the creation of the binge experience as a means of capitalist profiteering, while also suggesting the possible benefits of the binge experience. AMC’s Mad Men functions as a primary source not designed for the

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1 The use of the word ‘binge’ is a variation on the phrase ‘binge-watching’ with this variation on the original word giving room to consuming media, regardless of it needing to be watched, at a rapid rate. According to Oxford English Dictionary, ‘binge-watching’ as a noun first entered the modern lexicon in 1996 in an X-Files forum “Binge-Watching, n.” ‘Binge-watching’ as a verb appeared in yet another X-Files forum “Binge-Watching, v.”
binge experience, but still lends itself to the binge experience with ease; furthermore, I will explore how Mark Z. Danielewski’s contemporary serialized novel, *The Familiar*, acts as the novel’s reaction to the era of binge watching.

I use the term binge experience as a general definition for the compressed consumption of a narrative regardless of the form it exists in. The binge experience can be applied to novels, movies, albums, or even a television show. The degree to which a narrative is binged is ultimately up to the audience. While binging is not limited to whether or not a series has completed its thematic run, i.e. a person can binge *Game of Thrones* even though the final season has yet to be produced, or a person can binge *Mad Men* which has been off the air for several years, the rate at which each episode is consumed by the viewer is ultimately at the viewer’s discretion. In as much as there is a debate over the introduction of the word ‘binge-watching’ into the English language, it should be considered that ‘binge-watching’ or simply ‘binging’ is a verb, which relies solely on the audience to act upon. Binging is not something that is produced, but rather it is something one does, which leaves binging as a form of unwitting engagement with larger industries that produce and profit off the narratives made available for rapid consumption.

*AMC’s Mad Men* proves itself as a prized example of the serial narrative, and lends itself to the binging experience with relative ease -- the entire series is readily available on Netflix. Additionally, *Mad Men* was one of the first network series Netflix purchased as it launched its streaming service back in 2011 (Nocera). Also, given the grand scope of the series (the show starts in 1960 and ends around 1970) and its manipulation of time (weeks or months could pass in between episodes)
Mad Men’s examination as a stellar example of seriality is warranted (Dockterman). In order to understand why Mad Men is such a triumphant feat of seriality and why this is pertinent to the binge experience, it is important to know the key elements of seriality.

The Tenets of Seriality

In “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality,” Frank Kelleter lays out the argument for the five key tenets used to identify a serial narrative. However, for the sake of this argument I will only explore the first three tenets – “evolving narratives,” “recursive progression,” and “proliferation” – and how they inform our understanding of serial narratives (12, 16, 18). Kelleter’s list does not appear in any particular order, it becomes quite apparent that many of these defining characteristics of serial narratives easily blur the lines of their definitions and blend into one another. It is important to note that Kelleter is looking at serial narratives in a non-compressed timeframe, i.e., Kelleter does not take into consideration the binge experience. To understand how binge watching alter the production of serials, however, it is important to first understand how serials are produced and defined by the parameters established by Kelleter.

Evolving Narratives
Mad Men established itself as a serial that relied upon complex character arcs and myriad plot points that spanned an entire decade. And while this makes for compelling and entertaining television, these intricate and delicate details of characters and narrative rise from the first of Kelleter’s serial components – evolving narratives. Rather than suffer through the obvious rises and falls of plot points and character arcs found in episodic series such as Seinfeld and Cheers, or the ho-hum nature of procedurals like Law & Order or NCIS, a serial narrative such as Mad Men benefits, and only exists as a serial, from its collection of cascading narratives. Kelleter stipulates that a serial “is being watched or read while it is developing, that is, while the narrative options are still open or have not yet materialized as options,” (12). While episodes or an entire season airs in original runs, the audience consumes the serial installments. Meanwhile, the production team sets out to finish the remaining episodes of a season or begins to plot the next season. Not only does the openness titillate the audience, but allows staff writers the opportunity to explore new arenas of narrative and characters.

Season one of Mad Men introduced several compelling plot points that were ultimately left unresolved. First, there was the looming potential reveal of Don Draper’s infidelities. Second, there was the shocking reveal, over several episodes that Don Draper – the main character of the series – is not who he claims to be but actually a man by the name of Dick Whitman. Third, the one major plot point not featuring Don/Dick, Peggy Olson’s promotion and almost immediately revealed (and unknown to her) pregnancy (Weiner). These major plot points were designed to entice viewers with high stakes drama, but ultimately introduced them to a series
where the resolution of major storylines was not the end result. The reveal to the audience (and eventually other characters) that Don Draper is in reality Dick Whitman promised to be the major arc for the debut season, if not the rest of the series; and the unknown identity of the father to Peggy’s baby acted as a traditional season finale cliffhanger. Each of these narrative thread were not only meant to engross, but they were meant to lead viewers further into the *Mad Men* series – a collection of dynamic plots used to further propel the overall serial narrative that does not unfold in a traditional dramatic style.

However, this plot propulsion develops a peculiar side effect. Kelleter continues to state, “serial aesthetics does not unfold in a clear-cut, chronological succession of finished composition and responsive actualization [...] both activities are intertwined in a feedback loop,” (13). Given the nature of serial narratives and their sense of openness created by a lack of “clear-cut, chronological succession” seemingly a dialogue between producer and consumer is created wherein the consumers gain insight and information from the serial consumed. Conversely, the producer gains insight from the consumer resulting in reactions to the serial feeding into the production of future installments of the serial. To take one example of this feedback loop: fans of the series debated whether its inevitable ending would be the death of Don Draper. In fact, *Esquire* published an article with statistical data noting the most common causes of death as documented by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in 1969 paired with the likelihood of each potential death being Don Draper’s undoing (Howard). *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner and his team did not give into these fan theories (spoiler: Don Draper lives at the end of *Mad Men*); but
this interest and speculation on the part of the audience may have encouraged *Mad Men* writers to sprinkle allusions to (Don’s) death throughout the series final season as a nod to the fans.

Evolving narratives of seriality should be viewed more like a tree’s root system rather than a simple line of trajectory – the tree itself represents the entirety of the series, but the vast collection of roots that keep the tree alive twist and turn, and sometimes abruptly end. The evolving narratives of serials are crucial for the survival of the overall story being told, but it is the attention created by the feedback loop that continues to make the serial develop and grow.

**Recursive Progression**

As mentioned earlier, season one of *Mad Men* introduced the plot centered on the Don Draper/Dick Whitman identity crisis, which seemed set to hook viewers and create scandal as the season inched closer to its finale; however, all the fervor and pending drama of identity theft and supposed military desertion was easily erased with one line of dialogue: “Mr. Campbell, who cares?” (Albert). With that one simple line uttered, one of the more potentially devastating narrative of *Mad Men* was tossed aside not only as a way to further diminish the zeal and gusto of the privileged Pete Campbell, but also as a way to tell the audience *Mad Men* is a show that will alter the course as needed. The Don Draper/Dick Whitman plot’s near immediate dismissal is practically perfect example of Kelleter’s recursive progression where rather than craft episodes and reshape seasons to deal with the fallout of Don Draper’s true identity, the writers use the characters to quickly gloss
over a plot point that was more like a red herring. Another example of recursive progression was the result of real world events impacting *Mad Men*’s production: actor Christopher Allport who played Andrew Campbell, Pete Campbell’s detached father, died in real life (“Christopher Allport”). Yet, in lieu of recasting the role, the character of Andrew Campbell was killed in an off-screen airplane crash in the second episode of season two (Albert).

Any established serial is bound to contradict itself and blatantly ignore the sprawling histories and backstories established in prior episodes and seasons resulting in a serial having “to do their work of coordination, pruning, and coherence-building within the ongoing narrative itself,” (“Five Ways” 16). These slight alterations, tailoring the narrative (like the dismissal of the Dick Whitman reveal) grant the serial freedom to cultivate an audience without having to worry about inconsistencies within the serial’s narrative history proving distracting or illogical. The aforementioned feedback loop plays a part of this pruning and coherence-building – unpopular characters may be rewritten or removed from the entirety of the narrative, while fan favorites receive more screen time. Regardless of the motivation behind recursive progression, there is an underlying element: “narrative success for television series means being able to continue, not coming to and end,” (17). Shuffling of plot and characters not only responds to the desire of the audience, but justifies the continuation of the serial narrative.

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2 Not only did the death of Christopher Allport result in his character’s death, but it also created a minor plot line where Sterling Cooper, the principle ad agency of *Mad Men*, was forced to reconsider its marketing campaign for the upstart airline Tomahawk, which would later result in Sterling Cooper dropping Tomahawk as a client in hopes of gaining the business of American Airlines – the very same airline that had the crash resulting in the death of Andrew Campbell (Albert).
In the end, recursive progression is a way for writers to revise plot as the story progresses, or to alter the established narrative in the event of external forces impacting the serial. Recursive progression is the means for a serial to slightly course correct while the narrative continues to move forward.

**Proliferation**

Evolving narratives and recursive progression function as the means for a serial to remain culturally relevant and commercially viable, but the true test of a serial comes in the form of its ability to create and encourage proliferation. “[S]erial audiences [...] possess more freedom than work\(^3\) audiences to impact the stories they consume. As commercial culture expands, audiences become increasingly inclined to make use of this freedom,” (18-9). Proliferation can take many forms such as: fan fiction, merchandise, spin-offs, or even more obscure acts of proliferation like influencing fashion trends. In short, proliferation is another form for an audience to continue to consumer a serial narrative. In the case of *Mad Men*, there are currently 183 works of fan fiction residing at www.FanFiction.Net -- a site dedicated to housing amateur attempts at established works (“Mad Men FanFiction Archive”). Meanwhile, the *Mad Men* subreddit hosts just under 47,000 active users who continue to re-watch the series and discuss new findings and interpretations of iconic and important scenes (“r/Madmen”). Proliferation can be viewed as a tangible element of the feedback loop where the audience begins to create or consume products that act as an extension of the very serial they enjoy. The

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\(^3\) Kelleter’s term for non-serial narratives wherein the story has been produced and told resulting in no room for a feedback loop beyond that of sheer fandom.
hallmark of proliferation not only proves a series has a grip on the cultural zeitgeist, but it also proves the series is a commercial success – there is a demand for more products, more shows, more outlets of consumption for the audience.

**Managed Dissatisfaction**

In 2007, how audiences consumed television serials was forever changed as Netflix, the company once known solely for its DVD-filled red envelopes, introduced the world to its revolutionary streaming service. This would alter not only how people watched their favorite movies and shows, but also what people watched on Netflix⁴.

However, before entering Netflix's foray into original content, a brief history of how the company that situated itself as the leading cause of death for Blockbuster (death by algorithm⁵) and became a leading contender in original content on par with the likes of HBO is worth examining. The platform that made Netflix popular, DVD rentals delivered to your mailbox, only provided minor fiscal comfort for Netflix CEO Reed Hastings who was convinced “the Internet would eventually compete” (Nocera). Thus, in 2007 Netflix started its streaming service with a bulk of its attention on movies. Unfortunately, the legal nature of movie distribution rights proved to be fickle and resulted in Netflix having very limited variety because

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⁴ Netflix is not the only streaming service available, but it is certainly the progenitor of all current streaming services such as: Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Hulu, and YouTube Red to name a few. Going forward, my argument will be focused on Netflix, as it is the popular source of streaming digital content, and the leader in its market.  
⁵ A 2010 issue of *U.S. News and World Report* suggests “Netflix’s secret sauce: Algorithms that allow users to rate movies and then receive recommendations for other films they might like, including some they may have never heard of,” as one of the key factors that led to Blockbuster’s demise and Netflix’s success (Newman).
Netflix could obtain “distribution rights for only 12 to 18 months,” and once those rights were up a film that was once in Netflix’s catalog could be found on TV, for free, for nearly a decade (Nocera). Meanwhile, network cable was undergoing its one revolution concerning its original content:

Cable networks like FX and AMC were developing expensive, talked about dramas, the kind HBO pioneered with The Sopranos and The Wire. But these series, with their complex, season-long story arcs and hour-long format, seemed to be poor candidates for syndication (Nocera).

Netflix found “an inefficiency” and exploited it: streaming proved to the most viable way for major cable networks to see a return on their investments. Netflix was offering to pay for “'streaming video on-demand' rights” which was a concept that:

hadn’t even existed before Netflix asked to pay for them. And because the networks didn’t understand how valuable those rights would become, Netflix got them for very little money (Nocera).

The new technology Netflix had designed to keep itself a leader in home entertainment was the saving grace cable networks never knew they needed. Suddenly, shows like Mad Men found new life on Netflix, and a new audience who may have missed the show during its inaugural run. Plus, Netflix had the date to support their bold move: “Knowing from its DVD experience that customers often rented a full season of The Sopranos in one go, Netflix put the entire first four seasons of Mad Men online at once. Bingeing took off,” (Nocera). Ultimately, this
venture into the world of streaming was a proven success; soon, a driving desire for instant gratification would focus the company's creative endeavors.

Shortly after it had proven itself as a master of the streaming service, Netflix took a bold new step: original content. For Hastings, this was a likely evolution considering his open dislike of “managed dissatisfaction” which is what “the traditional entertainment ecosystem is built on” (Hass). As he puts it:

The point of managed dissatisfaction is waiting. You’re supposed to wait for your show that comes on Wednesday at 8 p.m., wait for the new season, see all the ads everywhere for the new season, talk to your friends at the office about how excited you are (Hass).

Netflix original content was the silver bullet designed to slay managed dissatisfaction. Imagine waiting seconds for the next episode of Mad Men to load rather than waiting a week or months. Netflix delivers freedom to its users under the banner of managed satisfaction: “[Hastings] knew that people were going to watch what they wanted, when they wanted it, and that no amount of network or studio hand-wringing would prop up that wall,” (Hass). By way of Netflix, Reed Hastings liberated electronic masses by granting them the ultimate freedom: complete and utter control when and how they watched their streamed narratives. With managed dissatisfaction dismantled, Netflix created a new market of rapid consumption.
The Industry of Binging

Netflix’s will to break the routine of managed dissatisfaction lead to its expansion into original content, which as that the same time sees an increase in the phenomenon of binge watching. As I mentioned earlier, binge watching is the viewing of an entire season or series at an accelerated rate. And, as before, binge watching is merely one way to consume a series and not necessarily the sole or definitive way. The decision to watch an entire season of Mad Men, Game of Thrones, or Stranger Things in one day or over the course of a month is entirely up to the viewer. Yet the apparent “freedom” of Netflix’s new approach to production and distribution opens itself to the critique of mass media made in Adorno and Horkheimer’s “The Culture Industry” essay some 70 years ago.

Although “The Culture Industry” emphasizes the distinction between high art and popular culture, I will not be addressing this issue here; instead, I will be addressing their critique of the industrialization of art and culture. As Adorno and Horkheimer write:

Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art.
The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce.
They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors’ incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products (Noerr 95).

An article from MarketWatch.Com, published in October 2017, included documentation Netflix supplied to its investors regarding Netflix’s “Content
Accounting Overview” and this document is a clear example of Adorno and Horkheimer’s claim (Cherney). Hastings’ concept of managed dissatisfaction is not directly mentioned, but the implications are present in the report:

**Original content is more working capital intensive.**

- For produced original content, we often cash flow the production costs during the content creation process prior to completion and release on the Netflix service. This could be years in advance of a release date.
- This also creates a content asset with a useful life well into the future.
- For licensed originals, cash payment terms also generally exceed expense in the early years.
- Payment for second window and catalog licensed content is generally upon delivery and over the window of availability.

(“Overview of Content Accounting”).

As we can see, Netflix not only admits it develops original content for future use long before it will see a return on its investment, but also understands the replay value of its original content, which justifies a prolonged capital gain. The production of future seasons of shows like *Orange is the New Black* and *Stranger Things* is not a matter of art, but a matter of return on investment.

Obviously enough, Netflix is a business. In fact, Netflix started as a business that distributed content to the masses, but soon saw the value in producing its own material for consumption. At the forefront of this eagerness to produce was the notion of supplying customers with a product they can consume whenever and wherever once the product was made available. What is so fascinating about this
business model is that it is a direct reaction to what Hastings has referred to as “a totally artificial concept” (Hass). However, this “solution” to managed dissatisfaction is problematic in that it is just another artificial concept that attempts to subvert the market and answer the demand for a new supply of art culture. Unfortunately, original content and the freedom to binge is not freedom. “The Culture Industry” addresses this very phenomenon of perceived demand, and reveals “the needs of consumers” is really “a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need” created by industries like Netflix (Noerr 95). In other words: Netflix created the demand, and then revealed the supply to the masses. Ultimately, Netflix, and other streaming services, have provided audiences with a unique marketing ploy: an illusory freedom to consume content in the same fashion as they always have.

Although Hastings and Netflix developed a platform that eliminate the need to wait for the next episode of a series, there remains the trouble of the next season. While managed dissatisfaction no longer exists in relation to each episode, there is still the matter of producing the next season of a beloved series. Furthermore, the accelerated rate with which episodes and seasons can be consumed does not change for the basics of the narrative experience. If there is no specific narrative reward for binge watching a serial, what is the merit of consuming a serial in such a short amount of time? No desire is satisfied from consuming House of Cards at an accelerated rate except the desire to consume yet another serial in a compressed fashion. Hastings’ desire to disrupt managed dissatisfaction does enable the viewer freedom to watch sans dictation of corporate executives and local affiliates pushing

6 The artificial concept being managed dissatisfaction.
for particular timeslots, but this freedom comes as a cost; namely, Netflix can “sell” more serials.

Currently, there are roughly 657 original titles\(^7\) contained in the Netflix catalog, including series, stand-up specials, documentaries, films, and children’s programs (“Netflix Originals”). Of those 657 original titles, 234 happen to be an original series, which translates into roughly 36% of all original content on Netflix being a serial (“Netflix Originals”). It should be noted that this percentage does not take into consideration the countless other serials finding a second-life on Netflix after their initial run ended on broadcast television. Managed dissatisfaction has given way to an overabundance of satisfaction—a near endless supply of narratives designed to engross audiences awaits eager viewers and customers of Netflix.

It has been established that Netflix found success in gratifying its customers via the freedom of streaming digital content, but there is another tool Netflix uses to keep its users happy. The very tool that enabled Netflix to eliminate its major competitors prior to the arrival of streaming technology is the same tool that keeps countless customers around the world coming back for more episodes and new series: an algorithm (Newman). As much as marketing can influence a viewer’s choice to watch one title over another, Netflix’s user interface not only allows its customers to rate what they watched, but can also make recommendations based on rating aggregates and curated genres based on viewing habits (Newman).

\(^7\) This list does not include current and upcoming titles.
Netflix’s tracking of viewer’s habits assists their business model by constantly offering customers something else to watch.
The Tenets of Seriality: Revisited

In a previous section, I discussed Kelleter's tenets of seriality, and now I want to return to those three tenets to demonstrate how they function under the binge experience. Evolving narratives, Kelleter's first tenet, benefits greatly from the dismantling of managed dissatisfaction. Suddenly, season finales do not result in months of anticipation. The eagerness to know the outcome of an episode's cliffhanger has been calmed with the ability to immediately watch the next installment. In a traditional viewing of serials, evolving narratives act as a way to keep viewers interested for the next installment. Under the binge experience evolving narratives not only act as a way for viewers to remain interested, but also act as a former of encouragement to continue binging: without the delay of the next installment, viewers can see the aftermath of Will Byers’ being discovered in *Stranger Things*, or the fallout of Betty Draper asking Don Draper for a divorce in *Mad Men* is not interrupted by a week’s worth of waiting. Instead, under the binge experience, evolving narratives become an addictive gateway to continue consuming a narrative until either the entire serial has been viewed, or the most recent season has been exhausted.

In the case of Kelleter’s second tenet, recursive progression, it works in conjunction with evolving narratives, but also can create a series of plots that have no real resolution. Where evolving narratives work to keep the viewer entranced by the major arcs and plots, recursive progression can create tangential plots that create texture for the narrative. Recursive progression narratives may not see any real pay off on their own, but when used in conjunction with evolving narratives as a
serial under the binge experience it becomes a more engaging and detailed viewing experience.

Proliferation, Kelleter’s last tenet, can take many forms in relation to a serial, but it is what he writes about serials in relation to other serials that is important when considering the binge experience:

As a result, popular series exhibit a strong propensity to serialize themselves. In this manner, the first *Harry Potter* novel is followed not only by a second and third *Harry Potter* novel but by a multitude of competing series about young wizards and sorcerers, complete with engaged audiences and countless media transpositions in movie adaptations, games, and so on (20).

Not only is the licensed merchandise of a show like *Stranger Things* one form of proliferation, but so is the Netflix algorithm-generated genre of “Binge-worthy TV Sci-Fi & Fantasy.” The only difference between these forms of proliferation is one requires a trip to a local retailer (or a visit to an online retailer) and the other is just a matter of selecting an offered product appearing on the screen. The proliferation of serials via material or immaterial goods is an extension of the Culture Industry wherein:

The required qualities of attention have become so familiar from other films and other culture products already known to [the consumer] that they appear automatically […] The
products of the culture industry are such that they can be alertly consumed even in a state of distraction (Noerr 100).

In the case of Netflix, “the required qualities of attention [...] that appear automatically” is the technology used to tailor a customer’s viewing experience – similar themes and dramatic elements from one serial can be calculated in order to suggest three other serials that may cater to a viewer’s interests. Furthermore, serials can be “alertly consumed even in a state of distraction” is not unlike Netflix’s ability to immediately start the next episode after the previous episode ends. The viewing freedom created by Netflix that seemed to offer freedom from the “prime-time prison” is in face a lifetime of servitude to a seemingly endless proliferation of serial media and its related paraphernalia. The ability and freedom to binge, to consume mass quantities of art and culture is just an excuse to sell more art and culture to the consuming masses.

**Binging the Book**

Netflix recently announced it is venturing into the world of books. Prequel novels and companion books of its popular original series, *Stranger Things*, are expected to arrive sometime in Fall 2018 (Johnson). While this does not mean Netflix is attempting to tackle the world of literature, it does echo back to Kelleter’s tenet of proliferation – Netflix is flooding the market with more stories, but stories that do not require an Internet connection or a screen. It is entertaining to consider Netflix entering the publishing world to gain another control of a narrative market; however, it is not what the streaming service is doing with books, but rather what books are doing as a reaction to Netflix and the binge experience.
Author Mark Z. Danielewski has introduced the novel’s reaction to television serials not unlike *Mad Men*. Danielewski's 27-volume series, *The Familiar*, directly mirrors the television series, but it just so happens to exist within the confines of the novel. The first volume of *The Familiar* introduces readers to not only the series’ protagonist, Xanther, and the myriad supporting characters that appear throughout the series, but the introductory volume also shows exactly how Danielewski’s series brings the television serial to the novel.

Volume one of *The Familiar* features “advertisements” replicating commercials that appear before the opening credits of a television show (Danielewski). Much like AMC or HBO running previews for other series on their respective channels, *The Familiar* features three “previews” for *Astral Omega: Our Common Horrors*, *Tom's Crossing: "Even in His Feet"*, and *Caged Hunt: Part One* (Danielewski). What makes these previews that much more like something a person would see before the start of a show is how each preview appears with its own text and style suggesting the theme and genre of that particular story.

*Astral Omega*, a story about cosmic nihilism and cataclysm, appears in four black boxes, with white text, on each page. Then *Tom’s Crossing*, seemingly a medical drama, utilizes the appearance of EKG graphs to depict its tone. Lastly, *Caged Hunt* appears in windows that look similar to viewing windows found on YouTube. Each preview performs exactly as it would on the screen: the reader experiences a sampling of a different story as they progress through the text until they ultimately arrive at the main narrative – *The Familiar*. 
Where each chapter of *The Familiar* lets the story unfold from a different character’s perspective, while Danielewski utilizes unique typography and writing styles to denote the different characters’ voices and perspectives. This transitioning from one character’s perspective to another is not unlike cutting from one character’s story to another in shows like *Mad Men* or *Game of Thrones*. Where television series may use camera angles and musical cues to denote a change in the narrative, Danielewski employs shifts in narration and page design to achieve a similar effect. Danielewski’s panache for stylistic flair is merely cosmetic in that he wants the reader to notice and feel the difference as they progress from previews to the actual story of *The Familiar*; furthermore, the aesthetics at work in the chapters of *The Familiar* continue this transition from traditional novel to experimental hybrid of book and television. All cosmetic alterations aside, Danielewski utilizes the same narrative tools used by writers of shows like *Mad Men*.

In the article “Serial Novel in an Age of Binging,” Inge van de Ven quotes an interview with Danielewski where he makes his intentions with *The Familiar* very clear: “*The Familiar* will show how the novel can stalk, take down and devour the television series” (de Ven 92). The formatting of *The Familiar* creates the atmosphere of watching a television show, but it is what Danielewski does with the actual story that demonstrates how his approach to the novel “can stalk, take down, and devour the television series.” de Ven notes Danielewski’s approach to *The Familiar* narrative elements more commonly found in serials like *Mad Men*:

This design of serial narrative is a product of its basic industrial conditions, from which follow structural and
aesthetic elements such as cliffhangers, drawn-out narratives, and deferred narrative closure (95). Elements like “drawn-out narratives, and deferred narrative closure” are synonymous with Kelleter’s notions of evolving narrative and recursive progression.

*The Familiar* is a novelization of a television serial.

As much as Danielewski borrows narrative techniques usually found within the realm of television, there is still the matter of how the novel responds to and embraces binging. Netflix eliminated managed dissatisfaction, which gave rise to the possibility of binging – the rate of consumption ultimately left to the audience – but there is still the matter of how the novel can be a part of the binge experience. Fortunately, Danielewski has tampered with managed dissatisfaction as it relates to novels by releasing a volume of *The Familiar* every six months (de Ven 92). Unlike Netflix where an entire season is released at once, *The Familiar* alleviates the waiting process for readers by sticking to a regimented schedule. Where the world of novels can be chaotic with release dates, Danielewski brings some order, and dismantles a portion of managed dissatisfaction, by providing his readers an honored timeline of when to expect the next installment of *The Familiar*. For now, the novel has yet to embrace the binge experience in the same way Netflix has, but perhaps Danielewski’s attempt to bring elements of the television serial to the novel will result in a literary series that truly embraces the binge experience; until then, it is a matter of experimentation.

**Benefits of the Binge Experience**
Ultimately, the binge experience is a means for businesses to sell more products. The stories manufactured and distributed by Netflix do not undergo any transformation once the obstacle of managed dissatisfaction has been removed; instead, the consumer is free to devour serial narratives at an accelerated rate. There is no great change in how a story is told under the binge experience, but there is a great change in the amount of stories consumed under the binge experience.

If Kelleter’s notion of proliferation has taught us anything about serial narratives and the binge experience, it is the likelihood of similar serials appearing. After all, when one serial narrative is a proven success, the desire to replicate the effects is understandable. Consider the success of a serial narrative when placed under the pressure of the binge experience where there is no delay between installments, and it becomes clear that a successful serial narrative abiding by the binge experience is a finite resource. In fact, it is this idea of a successful serial narrative as a finite resource that brings a glimmer of optimism to the binge experience.

It is hard to imagine a benefit to the binge experience beyond the capital gains companies like Netflix receive from its customers constantly and consistently tuning in for another installment of *Orange is the New Black* or *Master of None*. However, I would argue there is a benefit to the binge experience that is finally gaining attention: diversity.

The demand that Netflix created with its original content has strained its supply of narratives; however, Netflix has found a way around this potentially crippling setback because, after all, “they're new at this and aren't afraid to make up
their own rules” (Boboltz). At the heart of Netflix’s business model is this refusal to engage in managed dissatisfaction, which not only manifests as waiting for a show to premiere, but also means companies like Netflix do not have to operate in the same fashion as Hollywood where “[p]art of the business—no small part—is making safe bets on movies [and shows] with people you know” (Boboltz). Netflix is free to create content that bucks the traditional norms of Hollywood, and instead they are “letting the creative run the show without so much interference” (Boboltz). Netflix not only granted freedom to its viewers, but it also freed creative teams to tell gripping and engaging stories.

Netflix manages to churn out successful serial after successful serial because of a tool that it has held onto for many years. This “production philosophy” of “creative driven” stories benefits from “predictive models” Netflix used prior to developing and streaming its own original content (Boboltz). The very algorithm that helped Netflix destroy Blockbuster, and secure its place as the forerunner of streaming services, is now used to help Netflix determine which new series will be a potential success.

A 2016 article from HuffingtonPost.com cites a study performed at USC where Netflix (and other streaming services) were measured regarding the level of diversity that appeared within their original shows. The data shows 38% of speaking roles in streaming original content belong to women versus the 28% of women’s speaking roles in film (Boboltz). Speaking roles for people of color were charted at 29% in streaming original content, and 26.7% in film (Boboltz). While it is difficult to determine if Netflix’s algorithm charts what is marketable or what
viewers wish to see in their streaming content, these results suggest streaming
service providers like Netflix are leading a change in representation on the screen.

In the end, the binge experience is a means to sell more stories; however, stories are like any other resource and they can become scarce. Perhaps, Netflix’s approach to allowing creators to develop serials that highlight underrepresented characters and voices is a step towards more diversity and representation on the screen. Or, perhaps Netflix is a company struggling to supply the demand they created resulting in producing content that just happens to feature the underserved and underrepresented. Either way, the binge experience is the result of a marketing ploy that may have evolved into something more than capital gains and market shares—perhaps, a 21st century narrative style that actually reflects the diversity of its audience.
Works Cited


