

Repackaging Popular Culture: Commentary and Critique in *Community*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporaneous with the collision of Science Fiction/Fantasy with the mainstream evident in the success of nerd culture show *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-), Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012), the growth of Comic Con audiences and so on, Dan Harmon developed *Community* (2009-), a sitcom depicting a study group at a second-rate community college. The show exemplifies a recent gravitation away from the multi-camera, laugh-track driven sitcom formula, alternating between "straight" episodes dealing with traditional sitcom premises, though always inflected with self-aware acumen, and more ambitious, unconventional episodes featuring outlandish premises, often infused with the trappings of genre and geek fandom. The show presents apocalyptic action- and Western-style paintball wars, epidemics that evoke zombie cinema, a *Yahtzee* game that spirals into alternate timelines, and a high-stakes *Dungeons and Dragons* game that blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy. Both the straight and the unconventional episodes ultimately serve the same purpose, examining the intersection between nerd culture and everyday life.

This essay discusses a number of episodes which exemplify *Community*'s intersections between everyday life and popular culture, charting the show's evolving preoccupation with pop culture and intertwining of reality and fantasy. It discusses *Community*'s self-referentiality as a sitcom, its ambitious and elaborate recreations of and homages to pop culture artefacts, and its explicit gravitation towards Science Fiction and Telefantasy in its third season. Through its various homages to popular culture and ongoing depiction of fan culture, we posit that the show is both a work *of* fandom and a work *about* fandom, advocating for the pivotal role of fandom in everyday life and for popular culture as a tool for interpreting, comprehending and navigating life. In this respect, the show contributes to the long history of both the sitcom and Telefantasy as vehicles for cultural commentary.

KEYWORDS

Community, fandom, Fantasy, genre, popular culture, sitcom, Science Fiction, Telefantasy, television.

Introduction

The depiction of the fantastical and the real as intersecting states is at the heart of *Community* (2009-), a television sitcom created by Dan Harmon. The show, inspired by Harmon's real-life experiences studying at community college (Raftery, 2011), sees Jeff Winger (Joel McHale), a disgraced lawyer found to have fabricated his degree, returning to study at the second-rate Greendale Community College where he falls into a study group with an eclectic assortment of misfits – pop culture obsessive Abed (Danny Pudi), wealthy chauvinist bigot Pierce (Chevy Chase), devout mother Shirley (Yvette Nicole Brown), former high school football star Troy (Donald Glover), high achiever and perfectionist Annie (Alison Brie), and wannabe radical Britta (Gillian Jacobs). Harmon's encyclopaedic knowledge of popular culture and his affection for genre television permeate the show, with characters making pop culture allusions as a means of making sense of their lives and becoming immersed in scenarios lifted directly out of pop culture artefacts. This fundamental affection for a diversity of pop culture texts is intrinsic to the show's ongoing meditation on the overlap between audiences and the pop culture they consume, between reality and fantasy, which culminates in the fully-fledged incorporation of Science Fiction and Telefantasy tropes in the show's third season.

While *Community* shares lineage with other nerd culture successes like *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-) and *The IT Crowd* (2006-), it takes those nerd-culture tropes to new extremes. Moreover, where these shows conform closely to traditional conventions of sitcoms such as three-camera photography, three-quarter set and strong laugh-track, *Community* is more aligned with shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-) and *Arrested Development* (2003-2006) in departing from that convention, as well as animated shows like *The Simpsons* (1989-) and *Family Guy* (1999-) in its pop-culture obsession.¹ Moreover, the show deliberately alternates between what we might call "straight" episodes dealing with traditional sitcom premises (albeit in meta-fictional ways) and more ambitious, unconventional episodes featuring outlandish premises, often infused with recognisable tropes of Science Fiction, Fantasy genres and fan cultures. These latter episodes evoke a range of pop-culture genres by incorporating outlandish scenarios such as apocalyptic Western-infused paintball wars, a rabies epidemic that uses zombie tropes, a high stakes *Dungeons and Dragons* game that blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and a *Yahtzee* game that leads to alternate timelines, and later crossover between timelines, among other things. While disparate in their execution, both the traditional and unconventional episodes are ultimately united in their fixation with popular culture and their depiction of the intersection between the fantastical and everyday life.

This essay discusses thirteen episodes which exemplify, in various ways, *Community*'s ongoing meditation on the intertwining of reality and fantasy, of everyday life and popular culture. We chart the show's evolving preoccupation with popular culture, beginning with its self-referentiality as a sitcom before moving on to discuss its more ambitious and elaborate recreations of and homages to pop culture artefacts. Finally, we examine the show's explicit

gravitation towards Telefantasy in its third season: while *Community* does not become a Science Fiction series per se, it explicitly adopts recognisable Science Fiction tropes in a manner organic with earlier pop culture homages while articulating its meditation on the reality-fantasy divide in new ways. Through its various homages to popular culture and depictions of fan culture, we contend that the show is both a work *of* fandom and a work *about* fandom, advocating for the crucial role of fandom and its communities in everyday life. Here the importance of popular culture as a tool for interpreting, comprehending, communicating and navigating the world is apparent. In this respect, the show invests fandom and popular culture with thematic and dramatic weight, and contributes to the long history of both the sitcom and Telefantasy as vehicles for imparting cultural commentary.

Context

Sitcoms are built on and framed by boilerplates. Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck argue that the sitcom 'cannot function without stereotypes' (Medhurst and Tuck, 1996: 111), that its 'situations are usually just as stereotyped (predictable, ritualistic) as the characters' (*Ibid.*: 112), and that the sitcom formula hinges on 'the tendency to resolve conflicts, reduce problems, by resorting to folk wisdom and proverbialism' (*Ibid.*). *Community* conforms to these sitcom tropes in its stock character types, its scenarios, and Jeff's grand (but ultimately proverbial) summation orations, as well as the form's mandate for 'the presence of a quasi-familial structure' (Feuer, 2008: 83) in its core cast of study groupers. However, as Jane Feuer asserts, while the sitcom formula depends on the repetition of key ingredients, it 'shows no signs of being exhausted or of not being adaptable to all kinds of socially and comically complex circumstances' (Feuer, 2008: 83). Feuer contends that 'if we look at the sitcom in terms of what might be called its plot, we find little development or innovation;' however, 'the ideological flexibility of the sitcom... has accounted for its longevity' and made it a 'perfect format for illustrating current ideological conflicts while entertaining an audience' (*Ibid.*). In addition, it must be stressed that television itself, and by extension the sitcom, is an inherently hybridised medium (Turner, 2008: 8; Turner, 2008a: 9), and that the sitcom 'depends more than most kinds of television on the self-consciousness of performance', which is engendered by its traditional (and still common) theatrical staging, use of studio audience and three-camera photography (Bignell, 2004: 122). The sitcom format is thus more nuanced and complex than its detractors would suggest, and *Community* follows in the established tradition of repetition with variation, hybridity of genre, and awareness of its own artifice, though as intimated above it is liberated, like many other contemporary sitcoms (see Mills, 2005: 25; Mills, 2008: 89), from the more restrictive accoutrements of the format like the laugh track, theatrical staging et al. Thus while it bears similarities to a program like *The Big Bang Theory* in its celebration of Science Fiction and fandom within a quasi-familial group and stable, consistent environment, it is more nuanced and ambitious in its storytelling and self-referentiality.

Community has not achieved the same ratings success as more populist shows like *The Big Bang Theory*.² However, it has developed a dedicated fan base which eagerly dotes on and dissects each episode, and which passionately advocated for the series when it appeared on the verge of cancellation.³ Those fans share and revel in *Community*'s fascination with popular culture. As Brian Raftery suggests,

Community is a series by, for, and about people for whom pop culture is both a near-divine presence and a lens through which to view the world. When a character compares an onscreen relationship to Sam and Diane, or Abed notes—at the start of a *Goodfellas* homage—that he's always wanted to be in a mob movie, it's not a gimmick. It's Harmon's way of reaching out to those who love this stuff as much as he does. (Raftery, 2011)

In *Community*'s diverse embrace of genres and pop culture touchstones, we can see Henry Jenkins' concept of 'media fandom,' where fandom 'embraces not a single text or even a single genre but many texts— American and British dramatic series, Hollywood genre films, comic books, Japanese animation, popular fiction (particularly science fiction, fantasy and mystery)' (Jenkins, 1992: 1). It is also consistent with Jenkins' assertion that 'fan practices blur the distinction between reading and writing. The fans' particular viewing stance – at once ironically distant, playfully close – sparks a recognition that the program is open to intervention and active appropriation' (*Ibid.*: 155). Popular culture fandom as depicted in *Community* is participatory and active, as presented both within the fabric of the onscreen storytelling – with characters appropriating their pop culture objects of adoration in ways ranging from direct citation to literal imitation – and in the broader production of the series, with its creative personnel engaging with their own pop culture objects of adoration via the show.⁴

Jonathan Bignell states that 'The way fans appropriate television culture can be regarded as an unusually extreme but revealing instance of how all television viewers take possession of the programmes they watch, and assimilate the meanings of programs into their own lives' (Bignell, 2004: 290). Moreover, he contends that 'being a fan is crucially tied up with constructing fantasies that provide the scenario for fans to re-imagine themselves differently and experiment with the possibilities and limits of their interests and desires' (*Ibid.*).

Community advances and dramatises the role of fandom and popular culture in contemporary life. It depicts popular culture as a valuable tool for navigating and deciphering everyday realities, fandom as a meaningful expression of identity, and both as dependable means by which individuals can reach to and connect with others. *Community* simultaneously adopts fan practices and approximates fandom by including these culture tropes and homages into its own textual fabric and identity: that is, in depicting fandom of and homaging texts as disparate as *Aliens* (1986) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), to name just two examples, it is both a work *about* fandom and a work *of* fandom. Its nuanced scenarios that recreate scenes from popular and cult movies, television shows and games are loving homages to the original texts

but they also incorporate, repurpose and ultimately use the original text in the pursuit of something new. Like the best of sitcoms (Feuer, 2008; Hartley, 2008), it is a show with something to say about identity and culture.⁵

This thread of cultural commentary also ties *Community* to the rich American Telefantasy tradition – to which it would gravitate even closer in its third season – of using programs as vehicles for cultural commentary. *Community* follows in the footsteps of Rod Serling's iconic *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* (1966-1969), and Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), to name just three examples of shows which used fantastical narratives to address 'moral, ethical, political and philosophical themes' (Hockey, 2008: 37). Serling used *The Twilight Zone* to wrestle with the major issues of his time, and to critique and lament 'man's [sic] seemingly palpable need to dislike someone other than himself' (qtd. in Greene, 1998: 27). Rodenberry used *Star Trek*'s space opera platform to argue that 'humanity will reach maturity and wisdom on the day that it begins not just to tolerate, but to take a special delight in differences in ideas and differences in life forms' (qtd. in Van Hise, 1992: 125). Whedon used the Horror Fantasy tropes of *Buffy* to grapple with bildungsroman themes of adolescent angst and growth to maturity, and to assert a feminist message about 'the joy of female power: having it, using it, sharing it' (qtd. in Jowett, 2005: 18). Like *Community*, none of these shows were major ratings successes, but developed devoted followings and have endured culturally where other more popular shows have faded. Their continued relevance hinges on their combination of dynamic storytelling, compelling archetypes, and use of fantastical premises to explore culture, relationships, and the all-important human condition.

This is not the only area in which *Community* unites sitcom and Telefantasy traditions. Both genres have a history of the sort of homage episodes for which *Community* is famed. Hence we have Western episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970); detective episodes of *Next Gen* and *Married... with Children* (1987-1997); and musical episodes of *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and *Here's Lucy* (1968-1974), to name just a handful of instances of genres homaged across both Telefantasy programs and sitcoms (and later utilised in *Community*). A core difference, however, is that where unconventional or outlandish episodes in other sitcoms often turn out to be isolated one-offs or it-was-only-a-dream-type stories with little impact on subsequent episodes, in *Community* these episodes are instrumental in advancing character arcs, thematic motifs and seasonal storylines. In this respect, *Community* is more consistent with Telefantasy than its sitcom precursors. Several sections of this essay will be devoted to these homage episodes, but we will first examine the pilot, which establishes the foundations for the series.

1.01, 'Pilot'

The pilot for *Community* (dir. Anthony & Joe Russo, 2009), which aired September 2009, provides a statement of the show's intent. The audience's proxy is Jeff Winger, who courts Britta by forming a fake study group which, to his dismay, becomes a real study group. Abed compares Jeff to both 'Bill Murray in any of his films' when he is at his most charismatic and 'Michael Douglas in any of his films' when he is at his most loathsome. Given the episode's emphasis on Jeff's flaws and prospective redemption, as well as its trite sitcom life lessons about doing hard work rather than cheating or charming your way through predicaments, the pilot suggests that *Community* will ultimately be a show about an egotist's reformation, ala Murray vehicles *Scrooged* (1988) and *Groundhog Day* (1993). While the series would digress from this template over time, the pilot points explicitly towards pop culture knowledge as a key tool through which to approach and understand the show: a celebration of media and pop culture is the context through which almost every relationship or plot point is progressed. Pop culture here is a vocabulary through which the show communicates with its audience.

The pilot, then, establishes a mode of expression and with it an expectation, and while modest in its scope and ambition, it hints at the agenda of dismantling and reconstituting pop culture artefacts that would blossom over the course of the series. The pilot's most immediate object of critique is the sitcom formula itself. Harmon was raised on sitcoms: *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972-1978), *Moonlighting* (1985-1989), *Cheers* (1982-1993), and *Taxi* (1978-1983) are some of the programs cited as formative influences on the series creator (Raftery, 2011). As a perceptive viewer, Harmon took note of the way these shows both delivered on and played with audience expectations, and he takes his own show one step further. Where sitcoms follow a recognisable formula in the use of stock characterisations and scenarios, with variations from program to program, *Community*, in the postmodern tradition (see Lyotard 1984), embraces, acknowledges and critiques the artifice inherent in the sitcom form and its own status as a sitcom. Harmon calls the sitcom form 'a fucking constant violation of all reality. That's the point of it. It's an opiate. You are experiencing life as life is not. In the most successful ones, you're literally hearing 150 people laughing when you're supposed to laugh' (VanDerWerff, 2011). Harmon's characters, especially Abed, communicate this to the audience throughout the show. *Community* is by no means the first show to look inward to its own artificiality, or to critique its counterparts – for example, *Married... with Children* routinely took pot shots at other sitcoms, and *Seinfeld* (1990-1998) playfully highlighted its own status as a show about nothing – but it extends and advances this tradition, and in doing so creates new objects out of old forms, fresh jokes out of stale gags, and implicates the audience in the production of meaning via the genre's communal tools and vocabulary.

The foundations for this are laid down in the pilot. Within the first few minutes of the show, Jeff tells a black woman in the school cafeteria 'I was raised on TV and I was conditioned to believe that every black woman over 50 is a cosmic mentor,' and she retorts by calling him Seinfeld. The pilot also initiates a will-they-won't-they relationship between Jeff and Britta in the tradition of *Cheers*, *Moonlighting*, *Friends* (1994-2004), and *Who's the Boss?* (1984-

1992), a show Abed will triumphantly decode in a subsequent episode. From here, *Community* proceeds to entertain, subvert, and explicitly acknowledge this sitcom gimmick: in the episode 'Modern Warfare' (1.23) for instance, Abed tells Jeff and Britta they are 'no Ross and Rachel [from *Friends*]. Your sexual tension and lack of chemistry is putting us all on edge.'⁶ Later episodes would play with other sitcom conventions, such as Halloween and Christmas-themed episodes, bottle episodes (episodes set entirely in one location) and clip shows (episodes comprised largely of clips from prior episodes, a conceit *Community* satirises to great effect).⁷ *Community*'s comic contemporaries are also targeted: season two's 'Intermediate Documentary Filmmaking' (2.16) homages mockumentary shows like *The Office* (2005-) and *Modern Family* (2009-), while *Glee* (2009-) is parodied in 'Regional Holiday Music' (3.10) and elsewhere.

In addition to laying the scaffolding for the series' subversion of the sitcom formula, the pilot also establishes the show's broader intertextual agenda, its use of popular culture as a reference point for everyday life, and its depiction of everyday life as a point of intersection between pop culture and reality: witness Abed's aforementioned equation of Jeff with Bill Murray and Michael Douglas, or his comparison of the study group to the cast of *The Breakfast Club* (1985).⁸ Such intersections between popular culture and the everyday have continued over the course of the series, and much of the show's subsequent engagement with different forms of popular culture has hinged on its use of standard sitcom premises – themed episodes, stories centred on sitcom tropes like gameplay, competitions, miscommunication, role reversals and faux pas – as entry points into wilder terrain.

Role play: 2.14, 'Advanced Dungeons & Dragons'

Sitcoms regularly use costume parties, fancy dress, role play, and stories hinging on competitions and board games for comic effect. *Community* comments on and furthers this tradition by placing the games its characters play the core of the show's meditation on the intertwining of reality and fantasy, and usually have real-world consequences. An episode which exemplifies this is season two's 'Advanced Dungeons and Dragons' (2.14).

Community is not the only television series to base an episode on *Dungeons and Dragons*: as Harmon notes, 'I knew that we had predecessors there. I knew that *The IT Crowd* did one. I knew that *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000) did one' (VanDerWerff, 2011). However, where the gameplay in those other shows existed in a vacuum isolated from the broader plot events unfolding around it, here the gameplay advances both pivotal character arcs for season two and the show's larger thematic fascination with the collapse between popular culture and everyday life. This is a clear example of *Community*'s investment of nerd culture with thematic and dramatic weight, as well as its use of unconventional premises to advance theme, character and narrative, where in other sitcoms such "special" episodes often exist in a vacuum outside the broader brushstrokes of the show's storyline. By way of example, the aforementioned detective episode of *Married... with Children* (6.11, 'Al Bundy, Shoe Dick')

has no bearing on subsequent episodes of the series in terms of narrative or characterisation, while an equivalent episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (2.03 'Elementary, Dear Data') *does* feed into the development of core characters like Geordi La Forge (LeVar Burton).⁹ In this respect, 'Advanced Dungeons and Dragons' and episodes of its ilk are more akin to special episodes of genre shows than their sitcom counterparts.

In the episode, Jeff arranges a *Dungeons and Dragons* game as an intervention to help suicidal *D&D* enthusiast Fat Neil (Charley Koontz). Pierce is not invited, but crashes the game and maliciously steals Neil's character's treasured sword and taunts him. The rest of the study group band together to defeat Pierce and help Neil get his prized possession, and dignity, back. The outset of the episode recaps Neil's backstory in voice-over evoking Cate Blanchett's opening narration to *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) informing us that 'outlets of fantasy afforded [Neil] some escape from the darkness throughout high school.' The show thus foregrounds *Dungeons and Dragons* and role-playing (and by extension fantasy) as a crucial means of coping with everyday life, a motif which extends to Abed and Troy's role-playing as Inspector Spacetime and Constable Reggie in their beloved "Dreamatorium" in season three, and other forms of role-playing throughout the series. Here role-playing is a means of bringing the fantasy world of genre media into the real world. On its micro level, 'Advanced Dungeons and Dragons' focuses on Neil's personal journey throughout the episode: he starts out on the brink of suicide, and while Pierce's cruel taunts and malicious behaviour further demean Neil, pushing him further into depression and hopelessness, over the course of the game he becomes more resilient. At episode's end, his victory in the game translates to a victory in his life, and he leaves the study room stronger and happier, telling Pierce that was the best game he has ever played and inviting Pierce to engage in future role-playing games. This intersection of the fantastic and the everyday is exemplified by the fact that at no point in the episode is fantastical or non-diegetic imagery presented to advance the storyline of the game they are playing (though non-diegetic sound effects are utilised): it unfolds both in their imagination and, on another level, in their collective reality. In addition, on its macro level the episode utilises *Dungeons and Dragons* as a platform for advancing various character trajectories: Señor Chang's (Ken Jeong) ongoing exclusion from the study group, Jeff's ongoing reformation, Annie's sexual awakening, and Pierce's regression into villainy. Indeed, the episode is a major turning point in that season's overriding story arc chronicling 'the balance between good and Pierce.' Throughout the course of season two Pierce becomes increasingly antagonistic towards the other members of the study group, and in framing him so explicitly as the villain of *Dungeons and Dragons* the episode foregrounds his newfound status as antagonist. Moreover, much as Neil's victory in the game equates to real-life victory, so too does Pierce's defeat equate to real-life defeat and contributes to his downward spiral.

Gameplay: 'Modern Warfare;' 2.23, 'A Fistful of Paintballs;' 2.24, 'For a Few Paintballs More'

Gameplay also features prominently in *Community*'s triptych of popular paintball episodes, albeit gameplay of an altogether different sort. As Annie tells Fat Neil in 'A Fistful of Paintballs', 'that [*Dungeons and Dragons*] was a game; this is paintball.' Moreover, popular culture continues to intersect with gameplay in these episodes. Henry Jenkins argues that fandom 'is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests, a way of transforming mass culture into popular culture' (Jenkins, 1991: 172). *Community* is at once both an object of mass cultural production – a sitcom aired on NBC – and a product of and about fandom, a work that engages with various media objects and appropriates them to its own comedic and reverential ends. This is exemplified in these three paintball-themed episodes, where both the show's creators and its characters recite actions, lines, gestures and tropes from pre-existing works of popular culture – action films, Westerns, *Star Wars* (1977) – thus experiencing the gameplay through the filter of precursor texts and remaking the game in popular culture's image.

After a misleadingly conventional pre-credits sequence, season one's 'Modern Warfare' plunges a dazed and confused Jeff into a nightmarish scenario as he awakens to find Greendale splattered with paint and eerily silent. These moments recall the openings to the zombie film *28 Days Later* (2002), the television series *Lost* (2004-2010), and John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). As Jeff soon discovers, a game of paintball has escalated to extreme levels, with students vying for the coveted prize of priority class registration. The episode routinely evokes beloved and iconic action movies. *Die Hard* (1988) is perhaps the most notable object of homage: Jeff dons a white singlet à la Bruce Willis's John McClane, empties Britta's gun unbeknownst to her, and shoots Dean Pelton using a paintgun taped to his back. In addition, Abed's invitation to Jeff after rescuing him – 'come with me if you don't want paint on your clothes' – evokes *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991); a battle against roller-skating antagonists evokes *The Warriors* (1979); Señor Chang's flamboyant entry into battle evokes John Woo's *The Killer* (1989); his subsequent hysterical laughter and demise after launching a paint grenade evokes *Predator* (1987); and Jeff's destruction of the Dean's office with paintballs evokes *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). The episode is effective on multiple levels as sitcom, homage, and genuinely visceral action television.¹⁰

The subsequent paintball episodes are even more explicit instances of characters repackaging gameplay – and, by extension, their school – in popular culture's image. 'A Fistful of Paintballs,' as its title suggests, goes West for inspiration, or West via Italy, repeatedly conjuring the spirit of Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966). The episode opens with *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*-style opening credits with mock-Ennio Morricone music, there is a Mexican standoff in the cafeteria, and flashbacks evoke *For a Few Dollars More*. Its sequel, 'For a Few Paintballs More', turns from Spaghetti Western to Space Opera, paying homage to *Star Wars* and its sequels. The opening scene recreates the beginning of *Star Wars* with stormtrooper-esque paintball warriors charging the school followed by City

College's Dean Spreck (Jordan Black) encased Vader-like in an ice-cream cone costume; the surviving students band together into an 'alliance of rebels' to defeat City College's Empire-esque oppressor; and the opening credits evoke *Star Wars*' famous yellow scroll. As always, it is Abed who most passionately embraces these opportunities for homage, first imitating Clint Eastwood's Man with no Name persona, then shotgunning the Han Solo part of scruffy-looking scoundrel and casting Annie in the role of Princess Leia. Through impersonating Clint Eastwood and Han Solo, Abed, with his Autism-spectrum personality, is able to step outside his own way of being through the vehicle offered by pop culture. Susan Hayward describes fantasy as 'the conscious articulation of desire, through either images or stories' and film as 'a nexus of text relations which function as fantasy structures enunciating unconscious desire' (Hayward 2006: 129-130). That is to say, films and other forms of popular culture articulate fantasy, and in these episodes and elsewhere Abed both projects filmic fantasies onto real life scenarios and articulates real life via those fantasies.

Like 'Advanced Dungeons and Dragons,' the gameplay in these paintball episodes does not exist solely to be milked for comedic or reverential value: it also serves to advance characterisation and storytelling. In 'Modern Warfare,' the action scenario provides Jeff and Britta with a means of consummating their 'Ross & Rachel' flirtation, though not to the same romantic ends as that famous couple. Again, Harmon derails sitcom iconography while operating within it.¹¹ Meanwhile, 'A Fistful of Paintballs' and 'For a Few Paintballs More' see not just the future of Greendale but Pierce's future place in the study group at risk. As indicated earlier, the character becomes increasingly unpleasant and antagonistic over the course of the second season, and these final episodes show Pierce redeeming himself in the eyes of the study group through self-sacrifice.

Matt Hills characterises fandom as 'always performative; by which I mean that it is an identity which is (dis-)claimed, and which performs cultural work' (Hills, 2002: xi), and this performative dimension of fandom is exemplified in these paintball episodes as well as the next few episodes to be analysed. However, Hills also notes 'it is important to view fans as players in the sense that they become immersed in non-competitive and affective play' (*Ibid.*, 112). In its paintball episodes, though, *Community*'s cast of characters channel their fandom – for action films, Westerns, *Star Wars* – into play that is decidedly competitive with tangible stakes: they use and apply their fandom in practical and beneficial ways and repackage their games in pop culture's image, which is symptomatic of the collapse between real-life and more fantastical tides consistently dramatized on the show.

Dressing up: 1.07, 'Introduction to Statistics;' 2.06, 'Epidemiology'

Community repeatedly utilises the 'dressing up' trope found in countless sitcoms, and often to the same ends, finding laughs in the compatibility or incongruity between a character and their costume: take, for instance, having the homophobic and cantankerous Pierce dressed as the Gimp from *Pulp Fiction* (2.19, 'Critical Film Studies'). It also uses costume as a means

of revealing character – like the revelation that Jeff has a cowboy costume in ‘Introduction to Statistics’ – and, consistent with the show’s melding of comedy and nerd culture, embraces the culture of dressing up, role play and cosplay as a means of personal reinvention and empowerment.¹² Daisuke Okabe aligns cosplay and role-playing with Jenkins’ characterisation of fandom as active rather than passive, and calls cosplayers ‘not merely consumers of content but also creators... effectively consuming anime and manga characters while recreating them through unique acts of creation and performance’ (Okabe 2012). While Okabe focuses on Japanese otaku culture, these observations are equally applicable to cosplay and dress-up games across the Pacific.

In season one’s ‘Introduction to Statistics’, Annie hosts a Dance of the Dead-themed Halloween party. Pierce comes dressed as the Beastmaster, although this is only vaguely related to the film *The Beastmaster* (1982) which he has not actually seen. His costume, a padded muscle suit with accompanying mullet wig, operates thematically on several levels: as a poor attempt on Pierce’s part to seem ‘cool’ by homaging an anachronistic cult obscurity, a reflection of his inflated sense of his own virility and importance, and a misguided reaction to ageing. This is a key theme in this episode, and in his vain attempt to ward off ageing he takes drugs and trips, wandering around erect and meowing before constructing a precarious fort out of furniture. Meanwhile, Abed is dressed as Batman, speaking and growling in Christian Bale’s patented rasp from *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008). Jeff scolds Abed for taking his cosplay theatrics too far and tells him he isn’t Batman, but when the furniture fort threatens to collapse and crush Pierce and Jeff, cosplay transforms into genuine heroism as Abed saves the day, then vows to stand watch ‘out in the night, staying vigilant, watching, lurking, running, jumping, hurtling...’¹³ In this way, the episode reignites a discussion about the parameters of the fantastical in everyday life – a discussion that appears frequently throughout the show. Joe Russo, an executive producer and frequent director on *Community* along with brother Anthony, cites ‘Introduction to Statistics’ as a ‘watershed episode... because it was an experimental episode, it was very ambitious’ (Harmon et al., 2010). While the episode’s scope and ambition may seem modest in retrospect compared to later episodes, its daring and invention motivated the show’s creative team to be even bolder and, as Russo notes, ‘gave us permission to experiment with boundaries a little bit’ (*Ibid.*, 2010).

‘Epidemiology’, *Community*’s season two Halloween episode, sees a case of rabies infect an on-campus party, transforming all its guests into growling, biting zombies. The focal point of this episode is Troy and Abed’s relationship, with a particular focus on Troy grappling with his escalating geekiness. Troy and Abed are dressed in homage to *Aliens*, with Troy as Ellen Ripley in a home-made exosuit and Abed dressed in black spandex and helmet as the Alien Queen. At the beginning of the episode they briefly re-enact that film’s iconic confrontation between Ripley and the creature, and former prom king and star quarterback Troy is puzzled when nearby women are not impressed. As Jeff explains, he ‘reminds girls... of taking their little brothers to Comic Con.’ In light of this rejection, Troy feels dis-empowered by his

nerdy costume and dresses down to 'Sexy Dracula,' and following the rabies outbreak he rejects Abed's assertion that he 'need[s] to rise to the occasion like Ripley,' insisting he is not a nerd. However, before episode's end he embraces his destiny and resolves to 'be a nerd,' donning the exosuit and charging into action à la Ripley proclaiming 'prepare to meet the power of imagination.' Unfortunately he does not get very far: his suit falls apart within seconds and he becomes infected. While imagination is a powerful tool – a means of therapy for suicidal young men like Neil, a means of communication for the socially stunted like Abed, and, as this episode shows, a means of empowerment rather than dis-empowerment – it is perhaps inadequate defence in the face of marauding zombified hordes. The limitations of fantasy and popular culture in the face of harsh reality would also be the object of sustained scrutiny in the subsequent 'Critical Film Studies.'

'Critical Film Studies': The Power and Limitations of Fantasy

At the end of season two's 'Critical Film Studies,' Abed characterises himself as a 'fast-blinking, stoic, removed, uncomfortably self-aware type. Like Data or Johnny Five or Mork or HAL or Kit or K9 or Woodstock and/or Snoopy.' This Aspergian, rabid digester of popular culture is the show's foremost consumer, chronicler, and commentator of the popular, and uses pop culture references as a strategy for communicating with the rest of the group, deciphering both the everyday and more outlandish scenarios he and his fellow characters find themselves in, and negotiating the trials and tribulations inherent in functioning in the real world. While Abed makes conscious efforts to normalize himself in several episodes,¹⁴ the episode which provides the most fascinating commentary on his attempts to be normal is 'Critical Film Studies,' with the twist being that this attempt at normalcy is just another eccentric exercise in movie homage and make-believe.

In 'Critical Film Studies,' Jeff has planned a *Pulp Fiction*-themed surprise birthday party for Abed, with Pierce dressed as the Gimp, Shirley as Jules Winnfield, Britta as Mia Wallace, Troy and Annie as Pumpkin and Honey Bunny, and Chang as Butch Coolidge. However, Abed interrupts these plans by asking Jeff to meet him at a restaurant, where Jeff finds Abed completely changed, 'dressed like Mr Rogers and talking like Frasier.' As he muses in voiceover narration, 'Abed was being weird, and by that I mean he wasn't being weird... in 30 seconds he hadn't made a reference to anything.' Abed explains his change in demeanour: after making a cameo appearance on his favourite television show *Cougar Town* (2009–), the experience left him profoundly changed. 'Playing' someone else – a character he invented, Chad, who had lived life while he himself had only lived it through popular culture – was such a revelation that he resolved to abandon his pop culture obsession. Abed compares his prior life to his new Bad Mother Fucker wallet (an homage to *Pulp Fiction* and a present from Jeff) – 'on the surface a reference to some cinematic drivel, but on the inside empty' – and asks Jeff to share his 'first real conversation' devoid of pop culture. The meta-fictional dimensions of *Community* go into overdrive here: Abed, a character obsessed with popular

culture on a television show obsessed with popular culture, recounts the experience of appearing on a “real,” or “fictitious,” television show (itself a piece of popular culture) and pretending to be a “real,” or “fictitious,” person, leading to his questioning of his own identity as little more just a tissue of fictitious pop culture citations.¹⁵ However, this is all just a ruse, as Abed actually orchestrated this dinner with Jeff as a homage to *My Dinner with Andre* (1981), Louis Malle’s film in which Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn, playing themselves, engage in a deep conversation over dinner. Abed is thus mourning the meaninglessness of popular culture while in fact recycling and re-enacting a piece of popular culture, extending the meta-fictional threads even further. Henry Jenkins observes that ‘undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions’ (Jenkins, 1992: 18); moreover, he points out that ‘fans enthusiastically embrace favoured texts and attempt to integrate media representations into their own social experience’ (*Ibid.*). Here (and elsewhere) Abed engages in this very activity, using pop culture as the basis for social interaction while supposedly asking for social interaction devoid of pop culture content.

Jeff ultimately discovers this is all just a ‘stupid movie spoof,’ or ‘homage’ as Abed describes it, but not before inadvertently baring his soul to Abed. Initially he refuses Abed’s request for a real conversation, saying ‘I don’t believe there’s such a thing. Conversation was invented by humans to conceal reality. We use it to sweet talk our way around natural selection.’ However, after confessing to a conversation he had on a phone sex hotline, Jeff delves deeper into his own psyche, recounting an experience of childhood transvestism and revelling in the liberation of not having to conceal feelings behind trivialities and pop culture superficialities, much to Abed’s increasing discomfort. The message of the episode reinforces the thesis of the show: that popular culture is a valuable tool for navigating and deciphering everyday realities. In parodying the supposed meaninglessness of popular culture and exposing Jeff to personal incrimination and humiliation, ‘Critical Film Studies’ asserts popular culture’s place at the very core of human communication as both social asset and defence mechanism.

Science Fiction: 3.01, ‘Biology 101;’ 3.16, ‘Virtual Systems Analysis;’ 3.03, ‘Remedial Chaos Theory;’ 3.11, ‘Contemporary Impressionists;’ 3.22, ‘Introduction to Finality’

As Luke Hockey observes, ‘science fiction television has a track record of addressing moral, ethical, political and philosophical themes’ (Hockey, 2008: 37). In its third season, *Community* explicitly gravitated to and utilised codes and conventions derived from Science Fiction storytelling. It did this in two key ways: the creation of faux-Science Fiction series *Inspector Spacetime*, and the depiction of alternate timelines and villainous alternate selves. This was a logical gradation of the show’s earlier meditations on the intertwining of everyday life and fantasy and its predilection for homaging the core texts of popular culture, and its use

of these tropes was consistent with the Science Fiction genre's own relationship to the reality-fantasy divide as well as its use as a platform for exploring human identity and culture.

The first episode of season three, 'Biology 101', signalled this shift towards Science Fiction terrain with a dream sequence homaging seminal Science Fiction text *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), with the study group's cherished table standing in for that film's iconic monolith, and the first appearance of *Inspector Spacetime*. Britta introduces Abed, crestfallen that *Cougar Town* has been moved to mid-season, to *Inspector Spacetime*, a 'British Science Fiction series that's been on the air since 1962.' This show-within-a-show is clearly modelled on British Science Fiction institution *Doctor Who* (1963-1989, 2005-): the titular hero is an eccentric who travels through time and space with a companion; his most famous mode of transportation is a red telephone booth called the DARSIT (in place of the Doctor's blue TARDIS); and his greatest enemies are the gas-pump-shaped Blorgons (in place of the salt & pepper shaker-shaped Daleks). However, the appearance of *Inspector Spacetime* gravitates more towards the original run of *Doctor Who*, with its retro feel and budget-constrained monsters, than the show's more recent incarnation with its slick production values, primarily for comic effect. It is of interest that *Community*'s creators sought to create this alternate version of *Doctor Who* rather than directly use the show itself: while factors like copyright and parodic intent likely informed this decision, the creation of *Inspector Spacetime* is valuable in that it furnishes *Community* with an entirely new mythology to play with, albeit one closely modelled on an existing intellectual property. In this respect, it doubles as a work of *Doctor Who* fan fiction.

This show-within-the-show features prominently in subsequent episodes, with Abed and Troy playing various games inspired by it, and is threaded through several key story arcs, which testifies to *Community*'s promotion of popular culture and genre properties as core components of human life and identity. For example, when Abed and Troy's relationship begins to strain mid-season, it is Troy's resentment at always being cast as companion Reggie rather than the Inspector that temporarily breaks their friendship and leads to war (3.13, 'Digital Exploration of Interior Design' and 3.14, 'Pillows and Blankets'). *Inspector Spacetime* also figures prominently in and adds to the thematic weight of the episode 'Virtual Systems Analysis'. In this episode, Annie plays *Inspector Spacetime* with Abed, who is irritated that she set up a lunch date for Troy and Britta. They are playing in the Dreamatorium, a simulation space created by Abed and Troy clearly modelled on the Holodeck from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and subsequent *Trek* series. Not only does this space license Abed to play everything from *Inspector Spacetime* to 'dinosaurs vs. riverboat gamblers,' it allows him to perform simulations of his study group in over 7,000 scenarios. These simulations have supposedly granted him mastery and command of the group dynamics, and he believes Annie setting up Troy and Britta has 'tampered with the fabric of the group.' After Annie 'breaks' Abed's brain by altering the makeshift engine of the Dreamatorium, she must journey through uncharted simulations to find and retrieve him. This journey into Abed's psyche through various simulations has many genre precursors,

such as an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (5.21, 'The Weight of the World') in which Buffy's friend Willow enters her mind after she has retreated into a catatonic state. It also has psychoanalytic overtones which correspond to references to psychology elsewhere in the season, including Britta's growing interest in psychology, her evaluation of Jeff's narcissism in 'Contemporary Impressionists,' and her attempt to treat Abed in 'Introduction to Finality' (discussed below). In another episode, the study group are convinced they are inmates in an insane asylum and that their time at Greendale was not real; this too has a precedent in *Buffy* (6.17, 'Normal Again'), among other shows which have used this device. Annie eventually locates Abed and convinces him that the many scenarios for the group's future he has concocted within the confines of the Dreamatorium are simply 'great Science Fiction': not accurate reflections of reality, but speculative scenarios expressing human fears and anxieties - in this case, Abed's fear of being abandoned and alone. Abed's personal, popular culture-infused fantasy worlds and the worlds of Science Fiction thus share the same function: to articulate human concerns and help negotiate everyday realities.

Abed's mental state and negotiation of the reality-fantasy divide also figure into the other key Science Fiction thread of season three: the creation of alternate realities and Evil Abed. In 'Remedial Chaos Theory', the study group play *Yahtzee* at Troy and Abed's housewarming party. When Jeff throws the die to decide who has to go downstairs to get pizza, he creates six different timelines with different outcomes depending on who leaves the room and how the group dynamic changes in that person's absence. The outcomes in these different timelines vary from mild drama to disaster in the 'darkest, most terrible timeline.' In an epilogue at episode's end from that timeline, we discover Pierce has died, Annie has been institutionalised, Shirley has become a drunk, Jeff lost an arm et al. This marks the first appearance of Evil Abed, who reiterates his theory that six timelines were created, and proposes they don fake goatees and break through to the main timeline to reclaim their former lives. The fake goatee is another homage to *Star Trek* in which the Enterprise crew meet their villainous equivalents from a parallel universe and evil Spock has a goatee (2.04, 'Mirror, Mirror'),¹⁶ and this *Trek* reference along with the Science Fiction concept infuriates Jeff, who tells Abed to 'Shut up with your Sci-Fi crap!'

Evil Abed resurfaces in 'Contemporary Impressionists', in which the study group agrees to impersonate celebrities at a bar mitzvah to help pay off a debt Abed has accumulated hiring celebrity impersonators to re-enact scenes from films like *The Fugitive* (1993). This episode is pivotal in the story arc surrounding the straining of Abed and Troy's friendship. At the start of the episode Troy supports Abed's hobby, saying 'Abed doesn't need reality... All we had was dumb reality before we met that man.' However, on discovering that debt collectors will break Abed's legs if anything goes wrong, he is forced to take on a pastoral role to protect him, and reprimands his friend for his excesses. This reiterates the same message imparted in 'Critical Film Studies:' that fantasy and freedom from social constraints are good, but there are firm limitations imposed by everyday reality. At episode's end, a hurt Abed retreats to the Dreamatorium to play *Inspector Spacetime* by himself, where he is confronted by Evil Abed,

who alludes to the ‘many advantages of travelling by yourself’ to discourage him from having friends. Evil Abed reappears in the final episode of the season, ‘Introduction to Finality,’ where, once again, he tempts Abed – distraught after Troy was forced to join the air-conditioning repair school – to retreat from his friends into fantasy and the dark side. He temporarily submits, and Evil Abed takes over his body and crosses over into the prime timeline. Evil Abed is, of course, a composite of various signifiers of evil and dehumanisation derived from popular culture: he wears the evil Spock goatee; when Britta attempts to treat him, he turns the table on her in a homage to Hannibal Lecter and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991); and his eyesight resembles the technologized vision seen in *The Terminator* and *Robocop* (1987). However, Evil Abed fails in his quest to turn the timeline into ‘the darkest of all’ after hearing Jeff perform one of his (and the sitcom’s) signature proverbial orations on the importance of friendship and helping others, and the real Abed takes over and vanquishes his alternate self.

It is never made explicit whether alternate timelines were actually created in ‘Remedial Chaos Theory’ and an Evil Abed actually crossed over from the darkest of those timelines, or if these timelines were just six more simulations concocted by Abed’s Science Fiction loving, simulation-creating imagination, and Evil Abed just a manifestation of his impulse to retreat from reality. These events could be read literally, or they could be read metaphorically: it is a question of the individual viewer’s philosophical orientation as well as willingness to buy into more fantastical scenarios. Regardless of whether these events were real or merely occurred in Abed’s psyche, these storytelling beats mark a continuation of the show’s thematic preoccupation with the intersection of reality and fantasy, the intertwining of everyday life and popular culture, and pop culture as a means of deciphering and navigating the everyday. Through explicitly employing Science Fiction cues – using *Doctor Who* homage *Inspector Spacetime* as a recurring motif, re-conceiving the goatee and Holodeck as featured in *Star Trek*, incorporating storylines of parallel timelines and alternate selves – the show utilises tools and tropes recognisable and meaningful to both Abed and viewers to inform his character arc. This reinforces *Community*’s status as both a work *of* fandom – embedding popular culture tropes within the fabric of the screen story – and a work *about* fandom – dramatising how fan Abed draws on pop culture tools to communicate and decipher his predicaments. In doing this, the show also courts association with a genre renowned for dramatising the reality-fantasy divide and depicting culture and human experiences through the lens of fantasy, allegory and metaphor. *Community* thus highlights the function – and contributes to a distinguished tradition – of Telefantasy.

Conclusion

As this essay has argued, *Community* is a series borne of popular culture and fandom, a work *of* popular culture and fandom, and a work *about* pop culture and fandom. The show employs traditional sitcom tropes and techniques while critiquing the nature of the sitcom and

reconstituting it for the meta-fictional and self-aware conditions of postmodern television, and homages texts as diverse as *Die Hard*, Spaghetti Westerns, *My Dinner with Andre*, *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*. By incorporating such a diverse set of genre references, it has also cultivated and hailed a fanbase frequently mistreated by network executives. Fans have dissected the show, advocated for its continuation, mourned its potential demise (creative or literal), and embraced its intertextual spirit.¹⁷ The irony, of course, is that like many shows with eclectic premises or dexterity of genre, it is a series perpetually at risk: the show was put on hiatus midway through season three, and while a fourth, final season has been secured, Harmon has been replaced by David Guarascio and Moses Port (O'Connell, 2012).¹⁸

While the series' future evolution and ultimate cultural legacy remain to be seen, we posit that *Community* is a valuable addition to the sitcom and Telefantasy canons not only because of the contribution it makes to the sitcom genre and postmodern storytelling on the small screen, but because of the changing relationship between a show and its audience that *Community* acknowledges. As this essay has demonstrated, at its outset the show established the fundamental role of genre, fandom and popular culture as a platform for communication, human connection and personal growth. It has expanded on and advanced this thesis over the course of three seasons, over which its pop culture evocations have ranged from conversational allusions to literal recreations and repurposings of scenes and moments from pop culture, drawn from a diverse and disparate assortment of texts and frequently elaborated from sitcom scenarios and fan activities (games, costumes et al.). Through its employment of fantastical premises (especially in its third season) and genre tropes, *Community* explores, interrogates, and provides commentary on the intertwining of reality and fantasy in our everyday lives and contemporary culture. Its broad intertextual agenda creates a community of viewers both on the screen and in the audience by using popular culture as a reference point and a decoding tool for real life experiences, demonstrating new extremes for the integration of popular and cult Telefantasy as the shared texts of contemporary culture.

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Glee. (2009-) U.S.A.: 20th Century Fox Television/Ryan Murphy Productions/Brad Falchuk Teley-Vision.

The Golden Girls. (1985-1992) U.S.A.: Touchstone Television/Witt/Thomas/Harris Productions.

Here's Lucy. (1968-1974) U.S.A.: Lucille Ball Productions/Paramount Television.

I Dream of Jeannie. (1965-1970) U.S.A.: Screen Gems Television/Sidney Sheldon Productions.

The IT Crowd. (2006-) U.K.: Channel 4 Television Corporation/Talkback Thames.

Just Shoot Me! (1997-2003) U.S.A.: Columbia TriStar Domestic Television/Universal TV/Brillstein-Grey Entertainment/Columbia TriStar Television/Universal Network Television/Sony Pictures Television/Stan Levitan Productions.

Less Than Perfect. (2002-2006) U.S.A.: Touchstone Television/Wass/Stein Productions.

Lost. (2004-2010) U.S.A.: Bad Robot/Touchstone Television/ABC Studios/Grass Skirt Productions.

Married... with Children. (1987-1997) U.S.A.: Columbia Pictures Television/ELP Communications/Embassy Television.

- 'Al Bundy, Shoe Dick,' *Married... with Children*. Episode 6.11. Dir. Gerry Cohen. FOX. 1991, November 24.

Modern Family. (2009-) U.S.A.: 20th Century Fox Television/Lloyd-Levitan Productions

Moonlighting. (1985-1989) U.S.A.: ABC Circle Films/Picturemaker Productions.

The Office. (2005-) U.S.A.: Universal TV/Reveille Productions/Deedle-Dee Productions/NBC Universal Television/Universal Media Studios.

Roseanne. (1988-1997) U.S.A.: Wind Dancer Productions/Carsey-Werner Company/Paramount Television.

Scrubs. (2001-2010) U.S.A.: Doozer/Towers Productions/Touchstone Television/ABC Studios.

Seinfeld. (1990-1998) U.S.A.: West-Shapiro/Castle Rock Entertainment.

The Simpsons. (1989-) U.S.A.: Gracie Films/20th Century Fox Television.

South Park. (1997) U.S.A.: Comedy Central/Comedy Partners/Braniff/South Park Studios.

Star Trek. (1966-1969) U.S.A.: Desilu Productions/Paramount Television.

- 'Mirror, Mirror,' *Star Trek*. Episode 2.04. Dir. Marc Daniels. NBC. 1967, October 6.

Star Trek: The Next Generation. (1987-1994) U.S.A.: Paramount Television.

- 'Elementary, Dear Data,' *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Episode 2.03. Dir. Rob Bowman. 1988, December 5.

Taxi. (1978-1983) U.S.A.: John-Charles-Walters Productions/Paramount Television.

The Twilight Zone. (1959-1964) U.S.A.: Cayuga Productions/Columbia Broadcasting System.

Who's the Boss? (1984-1992). U.S.A.: Columbia Pictures Television/ELP Communications/Hunter-Cohan Productions/Embassy Television.

Filmography

28 Days Later. (2002) Dir. Danny Boyle. U.K.: DNA Films/British Film Council.

2001: A Space Odyssey. (1968) Dir. Stanley Kubrick. U.K./U.S.A.: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)/Stanley Kubrick Productions.

Aliens. (1986) Dir. James Cameron. U.K./U.S.A.: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation/Brandywine Productions/SLM Production Group

The Beastmaster. (1982) Dir. Don Coscarelli. U.S.A./West Germany: Beastmaster NV/Leisure Investment Company/ECTA Filmproduktion.

The Breakfast Club. (1985) Dir. John Hughes. U.S.A.: Universal Pictures.

The Day of the Triffids. (1962). Dir. Steve Sekely. U.K.: Allied Artists Pictures/Security Pictures LTD.

Die Hard. (1988) Dir. John McTiernan. U.S.A.: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation/Silver Pictures/Lawrence Gordon Productions/Gordon Company.

A Fistful of Dollars. (1964) Dir. Sergio Leone. Italy/Spain/West Germany: Ocean Films/Constantin Film Production/Jolly Film.

For a Few Dollars More. (1965) Dir Sergio Leone. Italy/Spain/West Germany: Produzioni Europee Associati/Arturo González Producciones Cinematográficas/Constantin Film Production.

The Fugitive. (1993) Dir. Andrew Davis. U.S.A.: Warner Bros. Pictures.

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly. (1966) Dir. Sergio Leone. Italy/Spain/West Germany: Produzioni Europee Associati/Arturo González Producciones Cinematográficas/Constantin Film Production.

- Goodfellas*. (1990) Dir. Martin Scorsese. U.S.A.: Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Groundhog Day*. (1993) Dir. Harold Ramis. U.S.A.: Columbia Pictures Corporation.
- The Killer*. (1989) Dir. John Woo. Hong Kong: Film Workshop/Golden Princess Film Production Limited/Magnum Films/Long Shong Pictures/Media Asia Group.
- Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. (2001) Dir. Peter Jackson. New Zealand/U.S.A.: WingNut Films/New Line Cinema/The Saul Zaentz Company.
- My Dinner with Andre*. (1981) Dir. Louis Malle. U.S.A.: The Andre Company/Sage Productions, Inc.
- Predator*. (1987) Dir. John McTiernan. U.S.A.: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation/Silver Pictures/Amercent Films/Davis Entertainment/Lawrence Gordon Productions/American Entertainment Partners L.P.
- Pulp Fiction*. (1994) Dir. Quentin Tarantino. U.S.A.: Jersey Films/A Band Apart/Miramax Films.
- Rambo: First Blood Part II*. (1985) Dir. George P. Cosmastos. U.S.A.: Ababasis N.V.
- Robocop*. (1987) Dir. Paul Verhoeven. U.S.A.: Orion Pictures Corporation.
- Scrooged*. (1988) Dir. Richard Donner. U.S.A.: Paramount Pictures/Mirage Productions.
- Silence of the Lambs*. (1991) Dir. Jonathan Demme. U.S.A.: Orion Pictures Corporation/Strong Heart/Demme Production.
- Sixteen Candles*. (1984) Dir. John Hughes. U.S.A.: Universal Pictures/Channel Productions.
- Star Wars*. (1977) Dir. George Lucas. U.S.A.: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation/Lucasfilm.
- The Terminator*. (1984) Dir. James Cameron. U.K./U.S.A.: Hemdale Film/Pacific Western/Cinema 84/Euro Film Funding.
- Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. (1991) Dir. James Cameron. U.S.A./France: Canal+/Lightstorm Entertainment/Pacific Western/Carolco Pictures.
- The Warriors*. (1979) Dir. Walter Hill. U.S.A.: Paramount Pictures.

¹ Harmon was in fact one of the earliest practitioners of this alternate sitcom style: in 1999 he wrote and produced a pilot titled *Heat Vision and Jack*, starring Jack Black and Owen Wilson (both of whom would appear on *Community*) and directed by Ben Stiller, which failed to be greenlit as a series, but which continues to circulate online.

² Curiously, where in other programs highly publicised or unconventional episodes may result in notable spikes in ratings, this does not appear to be the case with *Community*: by way of example, its much-discussed Claymation Christmas episode, 'Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas' (2.11), attracted 4.293 million viewers on its initial transmission, while the relatively straightforward episodes which aired before and after, 'Mixology

Certification' (2.10) and 'Asian Population Studies' (2.12), rated higher with 4.596 and 4.740 million viewers respectively (Gorman, 2010; 2010a; 2011).

³ While not the only genre to produce fan campaigns to impact production schedules, this activity is particularly pronounced in the realm of Telefantasy. For example, fandom rallied behind *Star Trek* following its cancellation in 1969, advocating for further episodes; the campaign did not yield immediate results, but fans kept the torch alight, and *Star Trek* would eventually return with ten films and a reboot as well as four more television incarnations and countless novels and paraphernalia, solidifying its place as a cultural institution. More recently, fans of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* (2002), known as "Browncoats", orchestrated complex multimedia campaigns and, with money raised from the fan-base, ran an ad in *Variety* arguing for their show. Nikki Stafford writes 'The "Save Firefly" campaign was fast and furious. Fans took out a full-page ad in *Variety* on December 9, making a promise to the network: "You keep flying. We'll keep watching." But the campaign was too late, as it appeared that Fox had already made its decision' (Stafford, 2007: 22). Like *Trek*, the goodwill and passion of fans did not yield immediate results, but it did ensure Whedon's space Western would return again in other media. *Community*'s fanbase follows in this tradition. For discussion of other recent fan campaigns and the results they yielded, see Bellotto, 2009.

⁴ The show's depiction of pop culture consumption is also consistent with the contemporary democratization of media forms and dismantling of anachronistic high-low hierarchies. Anne Friedberg contends that in today's media climate 'The movie screen, the home television screen, and the computer screen retain their separate locations, yet the types of images you see on each of them are losing their medium-based specificity' (Friedberg, 2004: 914), and *Community*'s most rabid consumer of popular culture, Abed, digests media in different formats, including television and laptop, with little differentiation.

⁵ John Hartley (2008: 79) identifies sitcoms *Murphy Brown* (1988–1998), *M*A*S*H* (1972–1983), *Ellen* (1994–1998) and *Roseanne* (1988–1997) as important, albeit diverse and disparate, works of cultural commentary.

⁶ The sitcom *Scrubs* (2001–2010) derives similar mileage from parodying the ubiquitous Ross and Rachel romance.

⁷ Appearances from former sitcom stars like John Goodman (*Roseanne*, 1988–1997), Betty White (*The Golden Girls*, 1985–1992), Malcolm Jamal-Warner (*The Cosby Show*, 1984–1992) and Andy Dick (*Less than Perfect*, 2002–2006) further tie the show to sitcom history.

⁸ The pilot is dedicated to *Breakfast Club* director John Hughes, whose *Sixteen Candles* (1984) would also be homaged later that season in 'Contemporary American Poultry' (1.21).

⁹ Another famous recent example would be 'Once More with Feeling' (6.07), the musical episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which was pivotal to its season's narrative arc and eventual denouements. Interestingly, much like the unconventional episodes of *Community*, this episode yielded no noticeable increase in ratings: indeed, 'Once More With Feeling' received a Nielsen rating of 3.4, down from the previous week's rating of 3.7 (Anon, n.d.), yet it is revered as one of the best episodes of the series and has become an object of scholarly analysis.

¹⁰ 'Modern Warfare' effectively utilises director Justin Lin's action set-piece savvy honed over several entries in the *Fast and Furious* franchise (2006; 2009; 2011). By bringing in as director a known talent from the referenced genre, *Community* evidences its commitment to and valuing of these genres.

¹¹ In the commentary track for this episode, Joel McHale characterised Jeff and Britta's sexual union as the 'accidental collision of two egomaniacs' (Harmon et al., 2010a), and it is testament to the show's ongoing agenda to both entertain and subvert sitcom formula that it softened neither Jeff or Britta and, indeed, largely lost interest in their relationship shortly after paying lip service to it.

¹² A consistent example of this would be Dean Pelton (Jim Rash) and his wardrobe of wildly flamboyant costumes, which provides both an outlet for expressing his sexual identity and an excuse for conversing with the study group & object of desire Jeff.

¹³ Abed would resume the mantle of caped crusader in search of his missing *The Dark Knight* DVD in the episode 'Foosball and Nocturnal Vigilantism' (3.09).

¹⁴ In season one's 'Contemporary American Poultry' (1.21) what starts out as a sustained homage to *Goodfellas* (1990), in which the study group gains control of the supply & demand for Greendale's cafeteria's chicken fingers, becomes a means for Abed to communicate without the crutches of popular culture. Where at first he plays *Goodfellas*, he eventually becomes a genuine Goodfella, and tells Jeff 'I don't need to use movies or TV shows to talk to people anymore. Before I only needed them because the day to day world made no sense to me, but now everyone's speaking the same language: chicken.' Meanwhile, in season three's 'Urban Matrimony and the Sandwich Arts' (3.12), he and Troy spend an extended amount of time exhausting their imaginations in the

Dreamatorium so that they emerge drained of creative impulse and ready to attend Shirley's wedding as neutered, normal guests.

¹⁵ Actor Danny Pudi even makes a background appearance in an episode of *Cougar Town*, ostensibly playing Abed and recreating the experience recounted above (Faraci 2011).

¹⁶ Many shows including *South Park* (1997-) have preceded *Community* in making use of this device for comic effect.

¹⁷ As indicated in an earlier footnote, the show's fans advocated for the show's continuation when it looked likely to be cancelled. *Community*'s fanbase is also evolving in territorial and cliquey ways like other fan movements. For example, on a discussion forum on *Badass Digest* when a detractor criticised the show following news of its fourth season renewal, the site's *Community* fans promptly pounced on the naysayer, including regular site contributor Film Critic Hulk, who responded in his patented caps lock 'WE LIKE OUR COMMUNITY HERE NICK ROB. DON'T EVEN TEASE OR IT'S A SMASHIN' (Faraci, 2012).

¹⁸ Guarascio & Port's prior work as executive producers of *Just Shoot Me!* (1997–2003) bodes for a shift towards less experimental programming, though at the time of writing this is yet to be determined. Given the precarious nature of programming for experimental and/or genre television, it is little wonder that many viewers have largely abandoned broadcast television in favour of viewing episodic programming on DVD or via illegal download. For example, at the time of writing, season two of HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–) is the most illegally downloaded television series of 2012, with over 25 million downloads (Chanda, 2012).