



**CANCELLED TOO SOON**



**JOURNEY PLANET**

# Journey Planet

November 2021 ~ Issue 58 ~ Cancelled Too Soon

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# Introduction

## Steven H Silver

I have an old friend, well, he's my age, but we've been friends since we were five years old, who often asks me for recommendations of television shows to watch. Over the years, I've recommended shows like [E/R](#)<sup>1</sup>, [The Building](#)<sup>2</sup>, [Superior Donuts](#)<sup>3</sup>, [Going to Extremes](#)<sup>4</sup>, [Doctor Doctor](#)<sup>5</sup>, and more. He has explained that one reason he likes to get recommendations from me is that he can watch the entire series without a lot of time expenditure because anything I recommend is invariably cancelled within a season or two (only one of the shows mentioned above made it to a third season and even then it only aired 40 half hour episodes, essentially two full seasons).

Sure, I've watched shows with long runs, like [M\\*A\\*S\\*H](#)<sup>6</sup>, but I seem to have a tendency to be drawn to shows that don't have longevity, like Mel Brooks' short lived (and, having recently re-watched it, deservedly so) [When Things Were Rotten](#)<sup>7</sup> or [Quark](#)<sup>8</sup>.

Last year, I posited the question on Facebook, asking people to recommend their favorite shows that were cancelled too early, in this case meaning two years or less. It proved to be a very popular thread, resulting in 125 different shows being named in more than 300 comments. I had clearly struck a nerve and was similar struck by the thought that there was a fanzine idea in that list.

When I discussed the idea with *Journey Planet* publishers Chris Garcia and James Bacon and my co-editor Evan Reeves, we agreed that we wanted to expand the scope beyond the shows that aired on American television and we reached out to authors and fans in Finland, Poland, China, Israel, Italy, Brazil, and Russia. We were a bit surprised by the nearly universal response that we received. The question we were asking, for shows cancelled before their time, had no real meaning in those countries. We were told that shows were conceived in terms of limited runs, what in the U.S. would be called a miniseries, although not necessarily shown on sequential nights. Shows would run their natural season and that was it. One intrepid author, Ekpeki Donald Oghenechovwe, did agree to provide us with a glimpse into Nigerian television.

The shows discussed range from *Jonny Quest*, which debuted in 1964 and was cancelled the following year after a 26 episodes) to *Daybreak*, which debuted and was cancelled in 2019, airing a mere 10 episodes. While none of the shows approached the record set by [You're in the Picture](#)<sup>9</sup>, *Wonderfalls* only aired four of its 13 episodes before being pulled from the air.

Other shows have reputations that belie their brief appearance on television, such as *Firefly*, which has garnered a massive fanbase, or *Battlestar Galactica*, which not only had the sequel [Battlestar 1980](#), but was eventually rebooted as the successful 2004 series that lasted five years and launched its own spin-off series (which would be eligible for an article in this issue, having lasted a single season), others have faded into obscurity, not necessarily deserved and authors like Zev Winicur explain why you should be saddened if you don't remember *Woops!*

In addition to fans writing about their favorite sort lived shows, we also offer glimpses into shows provided by writers (Margaret Dunlap's look at *The Middleman* and Michael Cassutt's thoughts in *StrangeLuck*), show-runners (Bryce Zabel on *Dark Skies*) and even the guy who wrote the book on which the series was based (Robert J. Sawyer on *Flashforward*). Of course, just because they worked on the shows doesn't mean they weren't fans. In fact, they were fans of the shows before you even had a chance to watch them before they were ignominiously cancelled.



So dive in and revisit or learn about those long lost shows that you have never seen. In many cases, thanks to the wonders of DVDs, BluRays, and streaming, you have a chance to catch up on many (but not all) of the shows described within these pages.

And finally, some of my shows that I didn't elect to write about, but have fond recollections of: [Q.E.D.](#), [The Adventures of Brisco County, Jr.](#), [Better Off Ted](#), and [Galavant](#). I want more of all of them.

- 1 - 1984, 1 season, 22 episodes, not to be confused with the later *ER*, also set in Chicago and also with George Clooney, that lasted 15 seasons and 331 episodes.
- 2 - 1993, 1 season, 5 episodes
- 3 - 2017, 2 seasons, 34 episodes
- 4 - 1992, 1 season, 17 episodes
- 5 - 1989, 3 seasons, 40 episodes
- 6 - 1972, 11 seasons, 251 episodes
- 7 - 1975, 1 season, 13 episodes, and all the good jokes were recycled in *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*
- 8 - 1977, 1 season, 8 episodes
- 9 - 1961, 1 season, 2 episodes, the second episode consisted of star Jackie Gleason apologizing for the first episode and discussing what went wrong.
- 10 - 1982, 1 season, 6 episodes
- 11 - 1993, 1 season, 29 episodes
- 12 - 2009, 2 seasons, 26 episodes
- 13 - 2015, 2 seasons, 18 episodes



# JONNY QUEST

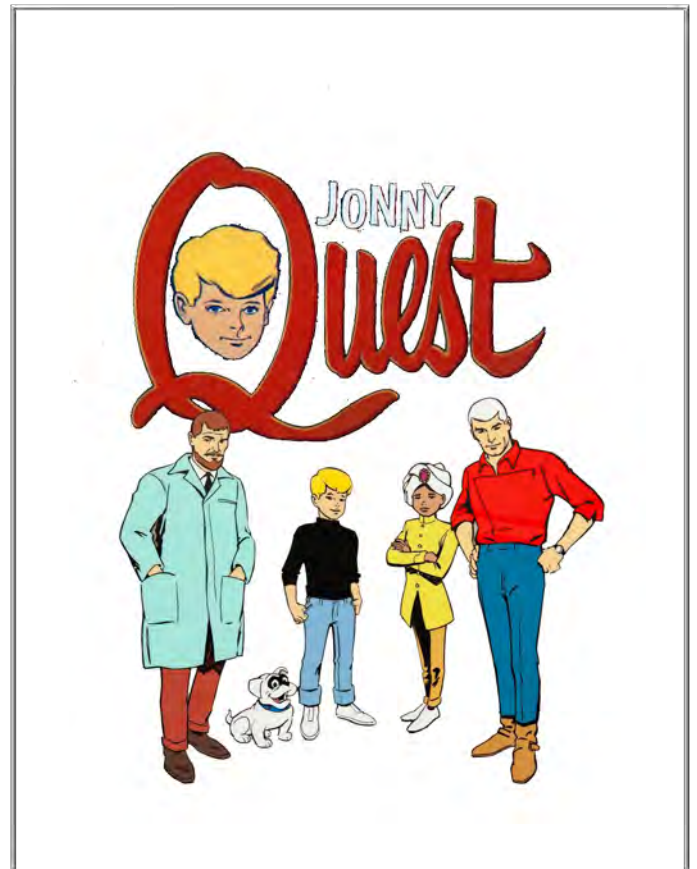
BY DAVID STEIN

*Jonny Quest debuted on September 18, 1964 and it ended on March 11, 1965 after one season and 25 episodes. An animated series using the voice talents of Tim Matheson as Jonny Quest, Mike Road as Race Bannon, and Danny Braco as Hadji, the show was a pulp serial with an 11 year old hero getting into all sorts of scrapes. The series originally aired on ABC in the US. It was rebooted in 1986 and again in 1996, with the first reboot lasting one season and the second making it to two. It is currently available on DVD, BluRay and streaming on HBO Max, Boomerang, Apple TV, Amazon Prime, Vudu, and Google Play.*

[Jonny Quest](#) was a prime-time animated half-hour long adventure series produced by Hanna-Barbera Production for distributor Screen Gems and premiered on ABC on Friday, September 18, 1964 in the 7:30pm time slot. It held this time slot for its entire run of 26 episodes, the last episode airing on March 11, 1965. Before the new television season dropped in the Fall of 1965, the show was cancelled, with high production costs given as the reason.

*Jonny Quest* was the brainchild of famed comic book artist Doug Wildey, already well known for his work at Atlas comics (later Marvel) on western adventure stories. His bold dark line style lent itself to the genre, and was best known for the book *Outlaw Kid*. He also drew the syndicated comic strip "The Saint." His last big job in comics was filling in for an ill Milton Caniff on the "Steve Cannon" strip.

Wildey then moved out to California and worked under the great Alex Toth, of "Flash Gordon" comic fame, on the short lived "animated" show *Space Angel* (and I say "animated" in quotes cause *Space Angel* was infamous for using mostly still images with live action human lips to deliver the dialogue via the same



system, Syncro-Vox, used on Cambria Production's previous show [Clutch Cargo](#)).

Looking for work, he walked into Hanna-Barbera, and hauled out his portfolio. Most of the artists had seen his comic works and by the end of the day he was talking about employment with Joe Barbera. Barbera loved Wildey's style and asked him if he could design up a show based on the radio show *Jack Armstrong, All American Boy* but updated it to be cool and space-agey.

Wildey went to work and in a few days returned lots of cool action pieces with modern and slightly futuristic gear in them set in exotic locations. The art went over like a house on fire, but the bad news was HB couldn't secure the rights to *Jack Armstrong*. Barbera asked him if he could work it into something new and original, and overnight he created the basis of *Jonny Quest*.

FYI: Not one to waste work, the clips of animation seen under the end credits of *Jonny Quest* were the pieces of test animation and art style Wildey created for the aborted *Jack Armstrong* project, which answers the fan questions of why none of these scenes appear in any episodes of *Jonny Quest*.

The premise of the show is the adventures of Jonny Quest and his extended family. Each week having to deal with foreign agents, dastardly criminals, strange exotic people and their strange exotic ways, and evil geniuses.

For a mid-60's show it did a good job showing people in foreign lands as real people with their own interesting lives and even a certain level of diversity in the cast. Not many female characters were shown, but the ones who were shown to be strong and competent. The first thing that made the show stand out was the bold, sharp, illustrative art style, which would have looked more at home on the front pages of the Sunday comics of recent memory, as seen in the comic work of Alex Toth.

The other notable thing about the show was the actual lack of much animation. Most scenes were more like animatics, cut outs moved across the background art. Many scenes are four or five frame walk cycles. Only the main characters would get scenes that approach "full" animation. Even most talking scenes were static body shots with just the lips, and perhaps the occasional eye movement animated. Obviously this made for an economy of studio work. If so much effort hadn't been put into the outstanding artwork, if the same production style had been used for the traditional four color animated shows of the time, it would have been quickly dismissed.

Jonny Quest is the 11 year old son of Dr. Benton Quest. Jonny is often too smart for his own good, quite headstrong, and very good at getting himself in the middle of things. But his intelligence serves him well, harkening back to the aforementioned Jack Armstrong, and back further to Tom Swift. Thanks to Race Bannon's tutoring, Jonny can handle himself in a fight, often surprising adult opponents, and thanks to his father's teaching, is mechanically and scientifically clever.

Dr. Benton Quest is "One of the top three scientists in the world" which is often mentioned. These were the days when a character could be a "scientist" with no mention of a discipline or specialty. Dr. Quest did secret scientific research and investigations of the U.S. Government, but who he worked for directly is never shown, though he never had any trouble getting whatever he needed with a quick message. He was extremely well funded and supplied. He had his own exotic ultra-cool jet aircraft, *Dragonfly*, which Dr. Quest had helped develop. Capable of international flights at speeds only achievable by exotic military aircraft. The Quests lived on Palm Key, a private island in the Florida Keys, which had a huge homestead, hangars for various craft and a large series of laboratories buried into the mountain side.

Roger "Race" Bannon. Race worked for the nebulous organization "Intelligence One" of which nothing else is known. Race was an expert in all forms of hand-to-hand combat and weapons use, and one of the first TV characters that not only was an expert in martial arts, but was a student of actual named martial arts. He was a recognized expert in judo and a third-degree black belt in karate. He was an experienced race-car driver and an expert pilot. He spoke several "exotic" languages. His primary mission was to protect and assist Dr. Quest, and also had the mission protecting Jonny from dangers and kidnapping. Along the way he taught Jonny to fight, trained him in both judo, and karate, taught him how to shoot, and to operate vehicles. Yes, at 11 Jonny could drive a car, and skipper a boat, and at least take the stick and hold an aircraft straight a level. All this looking after Jonny has earned Race the title as "The World's Most Dangerous Nanny."

Hadji. Hadji grew up as an orphan on the streets of Calcutta, India. There he learned "street smarts" and how to fend for himself. He also learned to pick locks and pockets as well as any thief. He learned the

abilities of the Fakirs, rope tricks, contortion, and sleight of hand. He has exhibited the abilities to “hypnotize” people into believing what he wants them to believe, but this often fails. He also has great affinity with animals and can often “charm” them. While the circumstances of him joining up with the Quest family are unclear, speculation is that he leapt in to help Dr. Quest, and in return Quest brought Hadji home with them. One can only assume with the help of the State Department Quest was able to assume legal guardianship of him, and secure U.S. credentials for him. Hadji is treated as the adopted son and is every bit Jonny’s brother.

Bandit. Bandit is Jonny’s loyal and brave dog, who appears to be a French bulldog. He has black and white markings, including his signature domino mask markings surrounding his eyes. Bandit is a “normal” dog, in the vein of “Lassie” or “Rin-Tin-Tin” seemingly able to understand many spoken commands and smart enough to relay ideas back in the “What’s that? Jonny fell down the well?” Sort of way. He will stand his ground against any threat to his family.

What made *Jonny Quest* so popular? It’s no secret that the success of the show was based on terrific writing telling great yarns. It appealed to the kids on the cusp of teenagerhood, who were graduating up from standard cartoon fare. The show treated its audience maturely, knowing that tweens and teens were mature enough to handle the themes and strong dialogue. It didn’t shy away from adultish themes: politics, greed, crime, even sexual tension and relationships. It never talked down to the audience. The stories themselves were chock full of adventure and action at a time when TV and movies were full of franchises like *Wild, Wild, West*, *The Avengers* (Steed and Peele that is), James Bond, *Mission: Impossible* and all the other high action and adventure stories.

The art of the show caused a visceral reaction from all who saw it, so unique even today.

The writers understood that the young male target audience liked shows where they could see themselves in the part, or offered characters they could dream about becoming. This one did both well. Boys would love to have been Jonny or Hadji, or could dream about growing up to be Race. Even a few would love to see themselves at Dr. Quest. The show also appealed to girls, which came as a surprise to the studio because they had a fairly black-and-white view of their audience. Girls could picture themselves as part of the team, adventuring alongside Jonny and Hadji, and several had early crushes on Race. Many women confess that they watched the show for Bandit because they really liked dogs as characters. While it wasn’t on people’s minds as much at the time as it is today, many didn’t notice that lack of female characters, mostly because there were so few women on adventure stories who weren’t damsels-in-distress.

It was a great surprise when *Jonny Quest* wasn’t renewed for the new season. They had decent ratings and stations liked the demographics for the difficult Friday 7:30-8:00pm time slot. *Jonny Quest* went on to be a huge hit in syndication. In 1967 the show moved over to CBS for a steady stream of reruns every Saturday morning until late 1970. It would then air as needed for filler on the weekends over on NBC, giving it the distinction of being one of the few series to air on each of the Big Three networks. The show also had a very popular and spirited run on Canadian TV for many years after.

The reasons for the cancellation were given that the show had “High Production Costs” which given the methods used to make the show, left the makers scratching their heads. More likely the reasons were twofold. One was that networks were giving the 7:00-8:00pm over to the stations for local programming, and two was that because of the local station getting more local slots to programming the demand for ready-made syndicated shows was high, and very profitable.

*Jonny Quest* has never been out of syndication and still airs on stations around the world.

But now you say, *Jonny Quest* made several comebacks over the years. Yeah, but did it really? Try and watch these newer shows you quickly realize while they have characters with the same names, they aren’t the same show. Not that they didn’t have an appeal, they just are only related to the original in passing. Like trying to say the Christopher Nolan “Batman” movies are a continuation of the 66 *Batman* series. A few elements in common, but certainly not the same.

Now begs the question, “Could the original *Jonny Quest* series have continued?” Certainly. The ratings showed the audience was there for it, and the rate at which the world was unfolding at the time period, the space race, international borders opening up, the technology boom, increasing in the ability to travel and explore could have led in all sorts of interesting directions.



I don't want to be a fanboy about fan casting the future of the show, but it doesn't take much to see where things could have gone.

— Make sure the storylines grow off of actual world events, but of course in context of the Quest world.

— Let the characters grow. You can do more storylines with 12 and 13 year olds, than you can with 11 year olds. Heck, let them age in line with the seasons of the show.

— Bring in more female characters. Bring in Jade for a couple of good arcs each season, bring back Denice Lor as a female foil/adventuring partner to the boys.

— Add a couple more recurring villains, with an eye to avoiding racial stereotypes that several of the adversaries presented, though not as badly as some contemporary shows.

— Don't shy away from dealing with racial, or colonial storylines. A few adventure shows of the times worked in anti-racism, and surprisingly modern anti-colonialism storylines. JQ already had a mature attitude dealing with indigenous people and expanding on that would fit the show bible, and mark an excellent platform for messages to the audience.

— Allow the characters to have adventures away from the family, solo stories that would also help flesh them out.

— A good, powerful, emotional story of what happened to Jonny's Mom, showing her to be a powerful character in her own right.

— Dr. Quest shown teaming up with scientists from behind the Iron Curtain or such to put aside national, and political difference to use the power of SCIENCE to aid humanity.

— An homage episode to the movie "Marooned" wherein we see Race tapped to pilot a secret mission to space to save another mission which threatens humanity.

— Flesh out Hadji's backstory.

— A light hearted episode where Jonny and Hadji have to deal with another group of "Kid Adventurers," but who are wannabe media darlings and end up getting into some terrible situation way over their heads where our guys have to save them.

So the show could easily gain a minimum of two more seasons, building an even larger following. Eventually in more modern times, a big screen movie franchise is developed with Dwayne Johnson playing "Race" which would go on to be a big summer smash and lead to at least two sequels.



# ANDERSON PLANET:

## THUNDERBIRDS, CAPTAIN SCARLET AND THE MYSTERONS, AND UFO BY ALAN SMALE

*Thunderbirds debuted on September 30, 1965 and it ended on December 25, 1966 after two seasons and 32 episodes. A supermarionation series using the voice talents of Peter Dyneley as Jeff Tracy, Shane Rimmer as Scott Tracy, Matt Zimmerman as Alan Tracy, David Graham as Gordon Tracy, and Sylvia Anderson as Lady Penelope, the show followed the adventures of International Rescue. The series originally aired on ITV in the UK. It was rebooted in 1982 without creator Gerry Anderson's input and lasting one season. Another reboot, Thunderbirds Are Go, debuted in 2016 on Amazon. Thunderbirds was available on DVD and BluRay, but seems to be out of print. It also streams on Amazon Prime.*

*Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons debuted on September 29, 1967 and it ended on May 4, 1968 after one season and 32 episodes. A supermarionation series using the voice talents of Francis Matthews as Captain Scarlet, Donald Gray as the Mysterons, Ed Bishop as Captain Blue, and Sylvia Anderson as Melody Angel, the show followed an interplanetary war between Earth and the Mysterons, a Martian race. The series originally aired on ITV in the UK. It was rebooted in 1986 and again in 1996, with the first reboot lasting one season and the second making it to two. It is currently available on DVD, BluRay and streaming on Tubi, Shout TV, VRV, IMDB TV, and Amazon Prime.*

*UFO debuted on September 16, 1970 and it ended on March 15, 1973 after one season and 26 episodes, although there was a break of nearly two years between the airing of the 24th and 25th episodes. A live-action series starring Ed Bishop as Ed Straker, Dolores Mantez as Nina Barry, Michael Billington as Paul Foster, and Gabrielle Drake as Gay Ellis, the show focuses on first contact and a potential alien invasion of Earth. The series originally aired on ITV in the UK. An attempt to continue the series resulted in the creation of Space:1999. It was released on DVD, but appears to be out of print. It can be streamed on Roku, Showtime, IMDB TV, and Amazon Prime.*



As a kid the original [Star Trek](#) was a formative influence on me, as it was on so many others. I also watched [Doctor Who](#) on and off, which gave me an interest in time travel stories that's continued to this day. But rising above those powerhouse TV shows of my youth were three linked science fiction series that captured my imagination, wormed themselves into my soul, and affected my worldview even into adulthood. Each was created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and AP Films/Century 21 Television Productions. And each, tragically, lasted just a single whole season. [Thunderbirds](#) (50 minutes per episode) got a full first season of 26 episodes plus six more in a truncated second season. [Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons](#) (25 minutes), got a single 32-episode season. [UFO](#) (50 minutes) ended after one season of 26 episodes.

Very different shows in many ways, but with some strong recurring themes. All futuristic, and ahead of their time. Each now a cult classic. I was already partway through a *Thunderbirds* rewatch when the opportunity to write for this issue of *Journey Planet* came along. Oh darn, I thought with a cheery smile: now I'll have to watch *Captain Scarlet* and *UFO* again too. Y'know, for research.

It's impossible to deny that the Andersons (Gerry: 1929-2012, Sylvia: 1927-2016) were creative geniuses: variously creators, directors, producers, designers, and writers of a stunning sequence of TV series beloved by Brits and discerning viewers worldwide. Here I'll skip their early and late work and list only their nine most popular shows: [Supercar](#) (1961-2), [Fireball XL5](#) (1962-3), [Stingray](#) (1964), *Thunderbirds* (1965-6), *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (1967-8), [Joe 90](#) (1968-9), [The Secret Service](#) (1969), *UFO* (1970), and [Space: 1999](#) (1975-7). And if none of these shows lasted more than two seasons, that speaks more to the difficulty of marketing innovative TV back then (and especially those critical sales to foreign markets) than to the quality of the shows themselves.

*Thunderbirds* was the first Anderson show to make it to prime time, and it was a huge success. I had some nodding acquaintance with *Stingray*, but I quickly became addicted to *Thunderbirds* and then *Captain Scarlet*.

I concede that the shows require a willing suspension of disbelief. I had no trouble with that as a child, and have no difficulty with it now if the ideas, stories, and characters are interesting enough. But all the Andersons' shows up until *UFO* required a very *particular* suspension of disbelief, despite their high production values, because the sets and vehicles were all miniatures, and the characters were...well, they were puppets.

Not just *any* puppets. "Supermarionation" is what you get when you take a set of very expensive and well-crafted puppets, around 22" tall, each with several heads to allow different emotions, yet still mostly controlled by strings (occasionally visible onscreen), and then stuff some pretty sophisticated-for-the-time electronics into their heads and bodies. These super-animated-marionettes had movable lower lips operated by a solenoid in each puppet's fiberglass head that keyed off the pre-recorded dialog from the voice actors. This mechanism meant that up through *Thunderbirds* the marionettes necessarily had oversized heads, because scaling up the bodies to the same proportion would have made the sets unmanageably large. By the time of *Captain Scarlet* the electronics and other mechanisms had been reduced in size and so the puppet bodies could be more human-proportional...and yet, the *Thunderbirds* marionettes somehow managed to portray a broader and more believable emotional range than those of *Captain Scarlet*. Many of Anderson's puppeteers agreed the newer models lacked charm and inhibited their creativeness.

Walking was their weak point. Their slightly jerky puppet walking never bothered me in *Thunderbirds*, though the Andersons went to great pains to make the *Captain Scarlet* puppets walk as little as possible, which led to a certain stiffness to some episodes.

The quality of the puppetry was further enhanced by the other sophisticated production values: detailed 1/5 scale sets and innovative use of front and back projection, augmented by the occasional use of location shooting and live-action shots, particularly for close-ups of hands and some small props, plus the frequent use of explosions and other special effects. By the time *Thunderbirds* rolled around the refinement of these processes had resulted in shows of high technical quality. (Special effects guru Derek Meddings later went on to work on the Bond and Superman movies.)

Anyway. Enough on the shows' mechanics. What were they *about*?



## Thunderbirds

“5. 4. 3. 2. 1. ...Thunderbirds Are Go!”

International Rescue exists to save lives, and execute daring rescues with bravery and initiative—plus some hardcore tech. The organization operates from Tracy Island in the South Pacific, a secret base built and run by U.S. ex-astronaut Jeff Tracy and his family. The Thunderbirds vehicles are crewed by Jeff’s sons: Scott (TB 1, a fast-response VTOL rocket plane), Virgil (TB 2, an awesome green flying transport craft that carries rescue equipment in pods in its midsection), Alan (TB 3, spacecraft), Gordon (TB 4, submarine), and John (TB 5, a space station and comms hub that monitors the world’s airwaves to learn of natural and human disasters, and people in peril). This ridiculously powerful cluster of rescue vehicles is supplemented by a broad range of other machinery that TB 2 can ferry in to disaster sites, including the Mole (for tunneling), the Firefly (a fire-fighting bulldozer), and various excavators, mobile cranes, laser cutters, demolition vehicles, transmitter trucks, personal jets, and other miscellaneous recovery tech. Providing additional human support are: Brains, the all-purpose scientist/engineer who designed all these craft; British secret agent Lady Penelope, in her armored pink Rolls capably navigated by former safecracker Parker (“Yess...milady”); Tin-Tin Kyrano, variously a part-time laboratory assistant, pilot, and spy; and many others.

The *Thunderbirds* launch sequences are iconic, and lovingly portrayed in almost every episode. TB 1 is launched rocket-style from a silo beneath a retractable swimming pool. TB 2 taxis out airplane-style from a hanger hidden within a mountain, with palm trees that obligingly flatten to right and left to let the craft through, and is then launched using a ramp. TB 3 launches vertically *through* the Tracy roundhouse, which would be a spectacular sight from the living space within but seems extremely dodgy on health and safety grounds. TB 4 is carried where it needs to go by TB 2, its pod dropped into the water so that it can slide out down a ramp.



The rescues are often thrilling and larger than life (ironically enough for a 1/5 scale show), with skyscrapers regularly collapsing, planes and monorails going batshit out of control, and various other buildings, vehicles, and industrial installations exploding in spectacular style. Standout episodes include “Trapped in the Sky,” where a hypersonic aircraft full of passengers is sabotaged and unable to land, “Path of Destruction,” featuring a runaway giant forest-clearing machine, “Terror in New York City,” where an attempt to relocate (!) the Empire State Building leads to inevitable disaster, “Sun Probe” and “Ricochet,” with death-defying outer space shenanigans, the tense “Atlantic Inferno,” where Scott takes over command of International Rescue while his father takes a vacation, and solid fan favorite “Attack of the Alligators,” filmed (rather controversially) using live baby crocodiles.

There are also copious espionage activities, as arch-criminal the Hood attempts to learn the Thunderbirds’ technical secrets (e.g. “Trapped in the Sky,” “Edge of Impact,” “Martian Invasion,” “Desperate Intruder,” “The Mighty Atom”), although it’s never really explained why the Tracys need to keep these secrets under wraps in the first place. Various other crooks and kidnappers show up from time to time (“30 Minutes after Noon,” “The Imposters,” “The Man from M.I.5”), and the Tracy brothers are quite capable of defending themselves with firearms and engaging in shootouts where necessary—most notably in the delightfully gonzo “The Uninvited,” featuring a lost race of high-tech Egyptian pyramid dwellers.

Despite the spies and secrecy, *Thunderbirds* largely focuses on rescuing people from disasters, and so is far and away the most hopeful and uplifting of the three shows. As other commentators have noted, *Thunderbirds* appropriates the Cold War missiles-in-silos concept for a much nobler purpose. Taken overall, there’s relatively little violence and death, despite the constant dollops of peril and crackling, drawn-out tension. And the action-adventure is moderated by dry humor in almost every episode, a quality sometimes lacking in the Anderson shows that followed.

*Thunderbirds* got six episodes into its second season, and was then abruptly canceled when parent company and distributor, ITC Entertainment, was unable to sell the show to a U.S. network. Production on the next show, *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons*, then began so promptly that it’s hard to believe that Gerry and Sylvia Anderson weren’t gearing up for it ahead of time.

## **Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons**

*“The Mysterons. Sworn enemies of Earth. Possessing the ability to recreate an exact likeness of an object or person. But first...they must destroy. Leading the fight, one man whose fate has made indestructible. His name: Captain Scarlet.”*

*“This is the voice of the Mysterons. We will continue to take our revenge. You started this shock wave with your unprovoked attack on our Martian complex. This act of aggression will be avenged. Our retaliation will be slow, but nonetheless effective. You will pay in full.”*

Darker. Much darker. We’re in a very different world now, one of alien destruction and malevolence. In this world even our heroes kill people regularly, and the bad guys commit mass murder and mayhem in most episodes. Perhaps not unusual in dramatic SF, but hey, this is a kids show from the 1960s. In addition, the dramatic emphasis in *Captain Scarlet* is very much on mitigating the effects of disaster and limiting further destruction rather than preventing it, because at the beginning of each show the Mysterons obliterate, murder, or otherwise annihilate people or vehicles so they can recreate them to serve their own malevolent ends.

Well, okay: at the *absolute* beginning of each show, in the opening credits, we see our hero get machine-gunned in a dark alley, but survive to kill his assailant with a single shot from his pistol.

Let me explain. It’s 2068, and the human Zero-X mission to Mars has unexpectedly come across an alien complex. Believing themselves to be under attack, the Zero-X crew fire missiles at the city and destroy it...only to see it recreated before their eyes. By *retrometabolism*, the core concept of the series, and the reason why every episode begins with death and devastation.





The Mysterons are (as far as anyone can tell) a collective of sentient computers left on Mars by an alien race. Having been attacked, they're now waging a war of nerves upon the Earth by selecting a high-value target in each episode to destroy and helpfully warning us ahead of time what it'll be. ("This is the voice of the Mysterons. We know that you can hear us, Earthmen," while creepy circles of light—the "Mysterion Rings"—scan across the initial scenes of destruction.)

Spectrum is a "World Security Organization" with color-coded officers (Colonel White, Lieutenant Green, Captains Scarlet, Blue, Magenta, and Ochre, Dr. Fawn...you get the idea), supported by the Angels, kickass female fighter pilots with musical codenames: Destiny, Harmony, Symphony, Rhapsody, and Melody Angels. Their control center, Cloudbase, resembles an aircraft carrier hovering high above the actual clouds. It looks cool. I'd live there.

Captain Scarlet is indestructible due to a botched early Mysteron operation, and can thus give his life to save humanity in a variety of ways through the series, knowing he'll recover. He was actually my least favorite character, because he had little to lose ("Anyone can be brave if they're indestructible," says a grumpy Lieutenant Green in "Attack on Cloudbase"). I was more interested in his trusty sidekick, Captain Blue, and the other characters who would constantly fling themselves into harm's way with no guarantee they'd be back next week. And Scarlet is also kind of bossy and glacial. There's an inhuman element to him (clearly intentional) and his blue-eyed ten-thousand-yard stare is quite off-putting.

Captain Scarlet had all the high-tech awesomeness of *Thunderbirds*, with less of the heart. I admired the show in many ways, even when I was a kid, and especially the grey morality. The Mysterons often completely succeed in their intentions (e.g. "Inferno"), or deal out so much death and destruction that they must surely be scoring on the positive side of the war-of-nerves ledger. The body count of innocent civilians is often in

the hundreds, sometimes even before the opening credits (“Model Spy,” “Shadow of Fear,” “Avalanche”). Plus, we often see Spectrum members disobeying direct orders and being insubordinate to the point where they barely escape court martial and/or a death sentence (e.g. “Renegade Rocket,” “White as Snow,” “Flight to Atlantica,” “Attack on Cloudbase”).

The show does (a little) better on the representation front than *Thunderbirds*. Lieutenant Green, Colonel White’s aide and computer expert, is the first male black character with a major presence in any of the Supermarionation shows, and gets off Cloudbase and out into the field in “Avalanche,” “Lunarville 7,” and “Crater 101”. Then again, the main baddie in the show, and the primary Mysteron agent on Earth, is called Captain Black, so...well.

Likewise, the Angel Flight plays a pivotal role in most episodes, and two of the five pilots are women of color. It’s notable, and odd, that there are no female Captains, but at least the Angels fly seriously awesome jets and are frequently central in the action (“Man Hunt,” “Point 783,” “Seek and Destroy,” “Special Assignment,” “Model Spy,” “Inferno,” “Attack on Cloudbase,” many others). The male characters listen to and respect them in an evenhanded way that is a little unusual for shows of that period, and they generally participate in meetings of top Spectrum personnel.

After his *Thunderbirds* experience Gerry Anderson apparently assumed that *Captain Scarlet* would only run to one season, because once that was done he was already preparing for the next thing. *Captain Scarlet* may have been essentially immortal, but alas, his show did not possess the power of retrometabolism.

*“Captain Scarlet is indestructible. You are not. Remember this. Do not try to imitate him.”*





## UFO

Although *UFO* didn't begin with a stirring voice-over, the opening credit sequence is still classic, well-remembered and adored by every fan of the show. It was accompanied by Barry Gray's theme music, the first bars of which I still hear at cons as a cellphone ringtone. Watch it on YouTube and feel yourself effortlessly plucked back into a thrilling 1970s view of the future. With human actors and live-action this time, although there's still the signature use of miniatures for some of the futuristic vehicles and action sequences, and the usual Century 21 Productions awesome explosions and special effects.

It's 1980 (in the show), and Earth is under attack by yet another set of sinister aliens, this time humanoid and from much further away than Mars. They arrive aboard the most frankly awesome flying saucers in TV history, which make an eerie sound as they fly (even in space), landing on Earth to capture humans and harvest their organs to extend their own lifespans. These green-skinned humanoids wear characteristic and still-spooky red spacesuits, filled with a green liquid that allows them to breathe. Once captured and that liquid drained, they quickly age and die.

Defending humanity from this deadly menace? A top secret organization known as SHADO (Supreme Headquarters Alien Defence Organisation) formed between the UK, U.S., the Soviet Union, France, and Germany under the astute leadership of Colonel (and undisputed hard-ass) Ed Straker (played by Ed Bishop, who also voiced Captain Blue in *Captain Scarlet*, which still gives me mild cognitive dissonance). SHADO has its main HQ under the Harlington-Straker film studios—a cunning disguise!—and a Moonbase located in what looks like the northeastern part of Mare Imbrium with women in all significant leadership positions (Commander: Lieutenant Gay Ellis, played by Gabrielle Drake) and Interceptors, single-pilot fighting craft that flit through space to fire their missiles at incoming UFOs. There's also Skydiver, a submarine with a jet plane mounted on the front which is Super Cool (no, *it really is*). Skydiver angles up to launch Sky One from underwater, and off goes the plane, surging up through the waves to break out into the air in just the latest of the awesome Anderson signature launch sequences. Also: SID, Space Intruder Detector, an automated satellite in Earth orbit that scans the heavens and warns of incoming UFOs. Then there are the SHADO Mobiles (tank-like ground units) and various other futuristic cars and planes. I repeat: no shortage of stunning miniature-work and special effects in this show.

The episodes ranged from the exceptional to the...just-okay. Due to the dramatic limits of antagonists confined to bright red space suits, in craft that deteriorate and explode after a few days exposed to Earth's atmosphere, the show quickly adopted other tropes. In at least six episodes the aliens use mind control to bend humans to their will and become their remote agents (standout episodes: "Psychobombs," "Kill Straker!," and the crazyboots "Mindbender"). Implicitly, these alien mental/ESP capabilities must be much more powerful and prevalent than are acknowledged in the show universe, because the aliens have a stunning intelligence network, able to locate and target key humans (e.g. "Identified") and sometimes gain access to top secret information that even Straker has to struggle to obtain ("Destruction"). Two episodes feature undersea UFOs, leading to even further special effects inventiveness ("Sub-Smash," "Reflections in the Water"). But for me, perhaps predictably given my other interests, my favorite episodes were those set on the Moon with strong and direct alien action such as "Survival" (powerful and poignant), "Flight Path," and "The Daltok Affair."

However, intriguingly for the Gerry and Sylvia Anderson shows, many episodes focus on—and almost every episode alludes to—the human costs of being part of SHADO, and the crippling responsibilities on the shoulders of its leaders and agents. *UFO* never shied away from serious grown-up themes, including divorce and other shattered relationships, drug use, mental illness, and murder.

But hey! It was still all fun! And balancing the more serious elements were some nicely stylish/campy elements, such as the never-rationalized decision to clothe the professional women of Moonbase in purple wigs and silver uniforms, and the crew of the Skydiver submarines of both genders in characteristic thick-string vests over body stockings. Between the tech aspects and the people, the look of the show was pretty stunning. And character-wise it was a nice ensemble mix: Ed Straker is the only character who appears in every episode, and characters rotate responsibilities in an interesting way. Straker's first deputy, Alec Freeman, was a bit too sleazy for even my young and innocent self when I first watched the show, and I was happy to see him replaced by Colonel Virginia Lake (played by Wanda Ventham, now mostly famous for being Benedict Cumberbatch's mother but a very proficient and well-known actress in her own right).

*UFO* lasted just one awesome season. A second season was commissioned, and since the lunar episodes were deemed to have been the most popular and successful (see, it wasn't just me), *UFO* Season Two would have taken place entirely on the Moon. (Be still my Lunar-Love heart.) But it was not to be: while still popular in the UK, the U.S. ratings dropped toward the end of the first season and the decision was made to transition to a brand-new Moon-based show with a completely different premise, *Space: 1999*.

## **Themes and Progression**

Despite their clear differences, these three Anderson shows had a number of solid recurring themes. Bravery and self-sacrifice. Service and duty to others at the risk of oneself. Obvious empathy and caring rather than bravado, even from a mostly male cast of characters. A lack of machismo overall, and also a (... relative) lack of (...overtly-portrayed) sexism, and by the time *UFO* came around, increased use of diverse characters in key roles. All somewhat advanced for shows of their time, which was after all (checks watch) over fifty years ago.

All the shows featured paramilitary organizations with genuinely inventive and exciting high-tech vehicles and cunning gadgets in the service of Humanity rather than any particular country, the prevalence of British and American accents notwithstanding. All jealously guarded their secrets, and fought and sacrificed to preserve them. And the adventure never came at the expense of character. Those in peril and in need of rescue by *Thunderbirds* were always well-developed as real people, even at the cost of pacing. In *Captain Scarlet*, the members of Spectrum (including the title character) were frequently disobedient and willful, pushing back against their rather starchy commander, Colonel White. One step further on, in *UFO* it was Ed Straker, another white-haired commander, who was the most human and well-drawn character of the series, although many other characters within and outside SHADO were also given their own depths rather than being painted as obvious heroes or villains. Even the *UFO* aliens received their moments of pathos, unlike the machine-like and largely disincorporate aliens of *Captain Scarlet*.

And in terms of inclusiveness...I'm going to argue that these shows tended toward the positive when compared to other TV shows of their era. Each had strong female characters with agency: notably Lady Penelope and Tin-Tin Kyrano in *Thunderbirds*, the Angels in *Captain Scarlet*, and more SHADO operatives than I can easily list on the Earth and Moon in *UFO*. Male gaze? Yes: often present and incorrect. But also, the women in the shows were almost always taken seriously by their male colleagues, their authority and opinions generally unquestioned, their responsibilities not merely tokenized. And as the shows went on, the development was clear: away from the uncomfortable Asian stereotyping in *Thunderbirds* and toward a diverse cast and characters in *Captain Scarlet* and *UFO*. And it's well documented that Gerry Anderson tried to include more racially diverse characters in his shows but was talked out of it because he was so reliant on the American market, and black characters would have reduced his ability to sell the shows to stations in the southern U.S....so there's that.

## **Lost Futures**

For each of these groundbreaking shows, we got just one full season. Was that for the best? Might they have run out of ideas?

I think not. While I can't see into the brains of the Andersons, I'm super-confident that subsequent seasons of all of them would have been even stronger and provided some incredible TV.

If *Thunderbirds* had sold to the U.S., and continued for several more seasons? If *Captain Scarlet* had been planned for more than one season, and the groundwork laid for that? If *UFO* had gotten its second season as planned, set largely on the Moon, rather than being shelved in favor of *Space: 1999*?

My guesses: cool technology can only take you so far. Once the first seasons had established the fundamentals, further seasons would have introduced more plot complexity.

*Thunderbirds* would have transitioned into (even) more intricate storytelling. Multi-episode story arcs, more subplots. Truly tricky rescues involving several different payloads for TB 2, leading to logistical difficul-



ties that couldn't be quickly addressed. What if you need the Mole (for digging) and TB 4 (for underwater work) and two other machines at the same time, but only have one TB 2, with only one pod? What happens if you arrive to find the situation is different than you expected and you don't have everything you need? You have to do some quick and innovative thinking, that's what. I'd like to have seen that quick thinking and initiative move more to center stage, rather than meticulous preparation. (The *Mission: Impossible* TV series was always at its best when the IMF's intricate plans fell apart and their agents had to improvise to drag things back on course.)

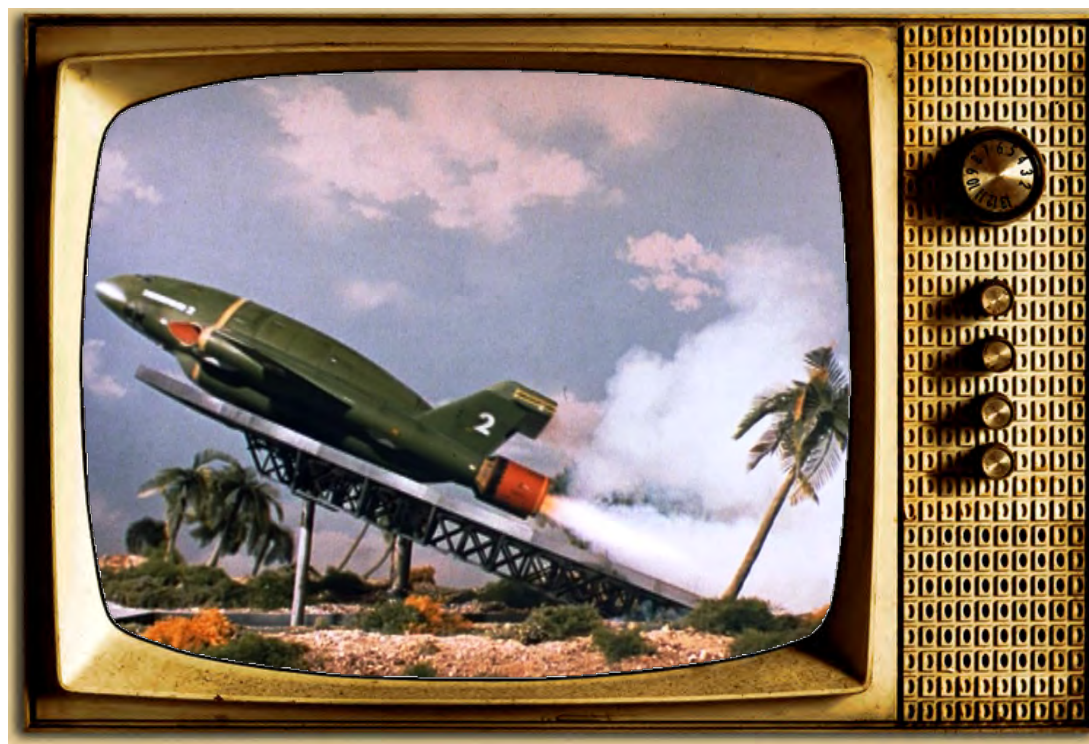
Also, the 50-minute rescue-of-the-week format generally only allowed a few of the characters to take central stage in any particular episode. I wanted episodes where everyone was in play, all at once, in different parts of the rescue arena, in situations so complex that they didn't have enough people and, once again, needed to improvise. There was a range of dramatic tension that the existing series didn't explore, that could have led to some really exciting episodes.

*Captain Scarlet*: the same, but easier. If it had been a bigger hit it would almost certainly have moved from its 25-minute format to 50 minutes, as *Thunderbirds* did, with the resulting increased depth of storytelling. And the *Mysterons*? Only one challenge at a time? Come on, Martians, I grok what "war of nerves" means, but maybe you could up the ante once in a while. Have five things going on at once. Spectrum has only the one indestructible guy. He can only kill himself in the line of duty in one place at a time. Have the very-mortal Harmony Angel risking her neck in the forefront someplace else. Along with Lieutenant Green, Captains Blue and Ochre, plus Destiny and Rhapsody. Even that sycophantic Captain Magenta dude. Also, see the above on multi-episode story arcs (*Captain Scarlet* already did a couple, but would likely have done more).

*UFO* is perhaps the richest vein of all. Already a cult show, if it had been given three seasons with the same dedicated team, it might have arrived in the same orbit as (dare I say?) *Star Trek*. And now people would be like "Well, the first season was a bit rough, but by the second season OH MY GOD." (And yes, this is the hill I will die on. Don't @ me.)

*Anderson Planet*: so many shows, such visions of high-tech and yet still-caring futures. Such hardware, such aspirations, such big dreams. I miss those shows, even while I'm still watching them.

We needed more.



# BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

BY JAMES BACON

*Battlestar Galactica debuted on September 17, 1978 and it ended on April 29, 1979 after one season and 21 episodes. The series starred Lorne Greene as Adama, Richard Hatch as Apollo, Dirk Benedict as Starbuck, and John Colicos as Baltar. The crew of the Galactica was the last remnants of the human race, trying to find earth and flee the cylon threat. The series originally aired on NBC in the U.S. It was followed by the short lived Galactica 1980 and then rebooted in 2004 and a run of four seasons plus its own short-lived spin-off. Battlestar Galactica was available on DVD and BluRay, but seems to be out of print. It also streams on Tubi, Apple TV, Amazon Prime, Google Play, Vudu, and Microsoft.*

Star Wars had eluded us somewhat, I know I had pals who were into it, but I had not yet gotten to see it, but we did enjoy SF stuff on TV and in the cinema.

I remember dad ensuring we saw the TV movie of [Battlestar Galactica](#) and this was just beyond amazing. I loved it, while many may have seen the ersatz Star Wars in this, I was overjoyed at it. The series, which we would have seen in 1980, two years after its screening in the U.S. There was some untidiness, if I recall correctly, to how the series worked, as we got a movie, and then TV episodes, but then the episode about the Pegasus was also a movie. Of course with the passing of time, I came to understand that these were meant to be films, and that it then became TV, and “Saga of a Star World” and “The Living Legend” could work as episodes or as a binge.

On the day of the first broadcast, we were all ready, did some household tasks with Dad, and I know we had beans and bread and eggs for Andrew and Dad for lunch that day. It was a Saturday and it was grand stuff, we just loved the militaristic feel to the science fiction. And you know, I can remember now the



ploy tricking of the Cylons with all the chatter about different squadrons, and then humans fleeing the Cylons, all built to create a really enjoyable bit of science fictional TV. We loved it.

The series was broadcast, and so I watched it avidly, there was sadness as well as jubilation, when Serina got killed, I was a bit surprised, I loved the western styled episode when Apollo was marooned, with “Red Eye.” The attacks that the Cylons made, especially when they flew into the hanger, the sounds of the Vipers, and Apollo, so smooth and cool and Boomer, like a dry foil to his extravagance, I just really enjoyed it. The story felt like it was progressing all the time, and things would just take an unfortunate turn, like Kobal getting attacked, or finding humans in suspended animation and then there were missed messages!

The action was fab, Starbuck was such a scoundrel and there was perhaps some overall messaging about good and bad, but the Cylons were bad and that was all that mattered.

It was an exciting time. And then there was no more...

Until there was *Galactica 1980*, which at this stage was a historical project. It felt utterly rubbish, the bloody do-gooding Galactica children, on Earth, and all the time, I wanted more Cylon space Viper action. It quickly felt boring, and the two leads—can you remember their names? Exactly, were in no way memorable, and were incomparable to Starbuck and Apollo. Suddenly it felt a bit too much [Little House on the Prairie](#) and then we had an episode with Starbuck and that felt good but ended oddly and then there was no more.

*Star Wars* had come on the radar and although I had massive fondness for the TV series, it felt like such a short changing. The BBC later aired the series, but they made a mess of this, showing episodes twice, and all types of malarkey, but then by then there was always a huge disparity between the UK, Ireland, and the USA. Films would come out months after their release, and videos of films would likewise take ages. It took 3 years for [Star Trek: The Next Generation](#) to get over to the BBC, and then sure, they censored “Conspiracy” from Season I and they arbitrarily banned the “The High Ground” episode. So we took what we could get.

*Battlestar* remained a favorite, and I rewatched it recently, before I then rewatched and finished the 2004 series, in full and I have to say, I liked that there was an ending. That was good.





# THE ANIME THAT WASN'T. BATTLE OF THE PLANETS, DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS, ROBOTECH

←—————→

## BY JAMES BACON

*Battle of the Planets debuted on September 18, 1978 and it ended on May 12, 1980 after one season and an astounding 85 episodes. An animated series using the voice talents of Alan Young as 7-Zark-7, Keye Luke as Zoltar, Ronnie Schell as Jason, Janet Waldo as Princess, Casey Kasem as Mark, and Alan Dinehart as Tiny Harper, the show was an adaptation of the Japanese anime series Science Ninja Team Gatchaman. The series originally aired in syndication in the U.S. It was released on DVD, but appears to be out of print. It can be streamed on Discover+.*

*Dungeons and Dragons debuted on September 17, 1983 and it ended on December 7, 1985 after three seasons and 28 episodes. An animated series using the voice talents of Katie Leigh as Sheila the Thief, Frank Welker as Uni, Willie Aames as Hank the Ranger, Don Most as Eric the Cavalier, Adam Rich as Presto the Magician, and Sidney Miller as the Dungeon Master, the show was based on the popular role-playing game and set children from our world into the magical world of the game. The series originally aired on CBS in the U.S. Some episodes were released on DVD but are currently out of print. The show is not currently streaming.*

*Robotech debuted on March 4, 1985 and it ended in July of 1985 after three season and 85 episodes. An animated using the voice talents of Ed Bishop as Ed Straker, Dolores Mantez as Nina Barry, Michael Billington as Paul Foster, and Gabrielle Drake as Gay Ellis, the show was an adaptation of three different Japanese anime series: Super Dimension Fortress Macross, Super Dimension Cavalry Southern Cross, and Genesis Climber MOSPEADA. Ther series led to a movie, several subsequent series, role-playing games, novels, and much more. The series originally aired in syndication in the U.S. It was released on BluRay. It can be streamed on Amazon Prime.*

As a youngster, I watched TV as much as I could and when there were cartoons on, which was limited. We had five channels, and the Irish terrestrial two were utterly dreadful, so I relied heavily on watching BBC and ITV from the UK.







The BBC bought [Battle of the Planets](#) and began airing the cartoon on the Saturday Morning Kids TV program [Swap Shop](#), hosted by Noel Edmonds in September 1979. At some stage the cartoon moved to BBC children's afternoon around 4.30pm. Now *Battle of the Planets* is the very changed and adjusted Americanized version of [Gatchaman](#) except instead of the 105 episodes, we get 85, and instead of wonderful Earth based drama, with a heavy influence on climate based issues, we see the violence and battles happen on other planets, and 7-Zark-7, a sorta dreadful animation robot filler, which bridges these changes and also informs watchers of what is going on. Now there were reruns, and generally I felt like the series never ended.

And in many ways it did not. The last episode of the series was only shown the 20th July 1985 and by then, six years had passed, or rather more than half my lifetime, and I never really got to see it. Yet as an adult, I found *Battle of the Planets* on video and well, it was disappointing: from such fond memories, the reality was just so unfortunate, but then it also did not feel like a proper ending, it felt shoved together, because it was. In essays that no doubt express the desire for the series to end, I wondered whether “ended properly” was valid, and it is, but even more tangential is the fact that *Gatchaman* in its 105 episodes did a wonderful job, and I got to enjoy those, on DVD, in their full beauty and brilliance.

The first I heard about [Dungeons and Dragons](#) was when it also came on BBC. “Is this anime?” you may ask. Well interesting that you might, as it was the Toei Animation, a Japanese animation company, who was commissioned to provide it, although they did provide other favorites, which are much more like cartoons, from [Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends](#) to [Transformers](#). Anyhow, it ran for 28 episodes, over 3 years, and I loved it, it was a couple of years before I would get to play *D&D* and that would be 2nd edition, and I liked the fantasy of it all, although occasionally felt that grabbing the pseudo Yoda little feck Dungeon Master and doing a bit of ultra-violence might be a quicker solution for the team. It just ended, but this sort of unfinished thing was nothing new, and I probably quickly forgot.

Some of this maybe came from long running comic stories that did not end, or ended in a totally unsatisfactory way, *Johnny Red* never ended, until 30 years later, when Garth Ennis did a 6 issue mini-series, and *Charley's War* was going well, I thought, when suddenly Charley started to reminisce and it went back to the beginning for god's sake. So stories without an end were not dreadfully uncommon, and of course the vagaries of TV and a life controlled by other people, meant that not only could a TV series just disappear, but it might be time for scouts, or swimming, or a visit to somewhere with only 2 channels.

Now at some stage in the early eighties, we went from TV that utilized an aerial, to TV that came from a cable. Now this was not the same as cable TV in the US, but it did mean that TV would be more reliable, until the cable failed, or the TV broke, and Jesus wept, we'd be horrendous, but we got some extra channels. I recall Sky, in 1990 as they played *Star Trek* every day at 5pm, and [Eurosport](#), but we also got the Children's Channel, and this aired [Robotech](#).



During the 80's when we watched anything that looked interesting, we watched a lot of anime. It wasn't called anime, it was called Japanese cartoons and it would look amazing. Sometimes things would pop up on TV, other times, I just liked the look of them. Now we had [Star Fleet](#), which was [X-Bomber](#), a Japanese marionette story, in 29 episodes, on ITV on Saturday mornings, first airing on October 1982 and it was accompanied by Brian May music which was stunning, and very cool, as our household were big fans of *Flash Gordon* and Queen.

*Robotech* turned up, after many videos hired from the shop down in Phibsboro: [Armored Trooper Votoms](#), [Mobile Suit Gundam](#), [Tank Police](#), and I got [Codename: Robotech](#), which was a film, but then the *Robotech* series began on TV, and this was fabulous, although soon it became oddly disjointed. No one showed up and said, "Oh yeah, it's a fix up, adaptation and one might even consider a butchering of three distinct Japanese series, [Super Dimension Fortress Macross](#), [Super Dimension Cavalry Southern Cross](#), and [Genesis Climber MOSPEADA](#)," all of which are superb in their own right. And while *Robotech*, well the first series felt like it had an end, one also felt like a bit of a short sell.

Fortunately at about this time, Ireland really started to tune into manga, [Akira](#) was being released under the Epic banner, and although they looked lovely and they were expensive, they were about by 1990 and then I got to see *Akira* and then I got to see it in the big screen, but I have never really appreciated the short sell.



# HELPING HISTORY ALONG: VOYAGERS!

← BY MICHAEL A. BURSTEIN →

*Back in 2006, I wrote an article for my fanzine, Argentus, in which I discussed shows that I was looking forward to re-watching when they would finally be released on DVD. One of those shows was Voyagers!, which I have found Michael A. Burstein has a similar affection for. Voyagers! debuted on October 3, 1982 and it ended on July 10, 1983 after one season and 20 episodes. The series starred Jon-Erik Hexum as Phineas Bogg and Meeno Peluce as Jeffrey Jones. The two traveled through time together making right what once went wrong, but unlike Quantum Leap, they not only focused on more historical events, but often visited multiple times in an episode to show how earlier changes impacted later history. Voyagers! was available on DVD, but recently went out of print. It does, however stream on Peacock, Apple TV, Amazon Prime, and Google Play.*



Set your Omni for Sunday, October 3, 1982, at seven o'clock in the evening, in New York City. If you get your coordinates right, you'll land just outside a row house in Forest Hills, Queens. Peek in the window of the house and you'll see a twelve-year-old boy sitting in front of a television set, about to watch the premiere episode of a brand new show. He doesn't know it yet, but the show will last only one season, a mere 20 episodes. And yet, unlike most one-season shows that are broadcast, canceled, and forgotten, this one will live on in people's memories for years to come.

Chances are that some of you already know the TV show [Voyagers!](#) and, like me, have fond memories of it. For those of you who don't, a brief explanation can be taken verbatim from the show's opening theme:

"We travel through time to help history along...give it a push where it's needed. When the Omni's red, it means history's wrong. Our job is to get everything back on track."

*Voyagers!* (including that exclamation point in the title) was a television show created mainly for one



reason: to be broadcast during the educational programming block the networks were required to provide on Sunday evening. Viewers like me soon discovered that Sunday night educational programming could also be a lot of fun, especially if it was presented as a TV show about time travel. In the first few minutes of the program, we got to meet Phineas Bogg, a Voyager who dressed like a pirate and whose time machine, the pocket-watch-like Omni, malfunctioned. The Omni brought him to the year 1982 when it shouldn't have been able to take him past 1970. Bogg lands in a high-rise apartment in New York City and through a brief mishap causes young Jeffrey Jones to plummet out the window to certain death on the sidewalk below. Bogg dives after him and rescues him the only way he can: by activating the Omni and taking Jeffrey along with him on his adventures.

What the viewer knows, but Bogg doesn't know until it's too late, is that Jeffrey's dog took Bogg's Guidebook, and without it Bogg is rather lost, since he paid very little attention in Voyagers school. Fortunately for Bogg, Jeffrey is a history ace because his late father had been a history professor, and since Bogg can't return Jeffrey to 1982...well, you get the idea. Jeffrey joins Bogg as they travel through time to fix history. The Omni tells them when something's wrong, but it's Jeffrey who knows what's wrong and can guide Bogg as they work to "get everything back on track."

Despite only lasting one season, "*Voyagers!*" managed to not only maintain a base of fans who remembered the show from 1982 but has even acquired new fans over the past thirty or so years. There are a few reasons why this is the case.

First of all, many of the original fans of the show were young kids who loved both science fiction and the concept of time travel. Time travel is an appealing concept for a lot of people and has been explored in short stories, novels, television, video games, and movies. Whenever a time travel fan who knows this show discovers a new time travel story, we almost always think back to *Voyagers!* nostalgically. Shows like [Quantum Leap](#) and [Timeless](#) make us want to revisit the first time travel stories we experienced, and for many of us that was *Voyagers!*

The Omni time-travel device itself was a particular part of the appeal. Throughout the history of science fiction there have been many different types of fictional time machines, usually created to suit the needs of the particular story. The time machine created by H.G. Wells was a vehicle, and not much else. The DeLorean from the *Back to the Future* films required power to operate. The TARDIS from *Doctor Who* is probably the most comfortable way to travel through time, given that the many rooms presumably include a kitchen and a place to sleep.

Compared to those, the Omni is less practical but more elegant. The Omni was a heavy brass device that hung on Bogg's belt. The front of it bore a stylized V and the phrase "Time waits for no man." When flipped open, the Omni showed a carved bas relief of the Earth's surface, which in theory rotated to show a voyager their location. Around the rim were dials that indicated the date and time. Finally, on the top were two lights. The left light, a red one, would blink and make a repeated dinging sound anytime they had arrived somewhere with incorrect history. The right light, a green one, would light up with one chime to tell them that they had managed to fix history. The Omni didn't include a wardrobe or any way to bring along a change of clothing or period currency—but it looked cool.

Apparently, an early concept of the Omni had Bogg wearing it on his wrist, but the showrunners soon realized that this would make it harder for the Omni to get lost or stolen, removing some possible tension. Indeed, because the Omni was loosely attached to his belt, Bogg could toss it to Jeffrey and order him to escape in "Worlds Apart," giving fans a chance to see the two characters operate separately to fix history.

Secondly, the actors who played Bogg and Jeffrey, Jon-Erik Hexum and Meeno Peluce, were quite frankly incredibly charming and had an amazing chemistry together. Young boys identified with Peluce's character and wanted to be Jeffrey; meanwhile, it has to be said that many women (and probably quite a few men) found Hexum to be, shall we say, easy on the eyes and a great romantic lead. Hexum's tragic death shortly after the series was canceled also contributes to the show's popularity in a sad way, as it was a significant news story at the time and reminded people that the show existed.

Finally, there's the show's own mythology that started to be developed and then was cut off when the series ended. Packed into that first year, we got to meet other Voyagers, learn about Voyager school and the society that educates Voyagers, and even meet a nemesis for our heroes. In 2018 I introduced the show to

one of my daughters; she delighted in every episode and then said exactly what I had said back in 1983 when the show ended: "I want to see the next episode!" Alas, it was not to be. But an unresolved mythology helps keep the show in the forefront of the fans' minds.

In particular, the idea that their new nemesis, a voyager named Drake, could have a different agenda than Bogg and Jeffrey intrigued me. How could the Voyager school end up with a graduate who is dedicated, along with a presumed like-minded group, to destroy history? In that final episode, "Jack's Back," Drake attempts to murder Arthur Conan Doyle and Nellie Bly and even states his goal outright: "My life is dedicated to ruining history, not people. You, Miss Bly, are just a piece of history to obliterate."

As an adult, I thought about this for many years and I have to admit that I now tend to look at the show with a slightly more skeptical eye, thanks to Voyager Drake. The idea that history might have gone "wrong" and needs to be put back on track makes sense in the context of a show that is trying to teach kids history. But who decides what is "right" in history? In the episode "Created Equal," for example, the Voyagers meet and rescue Harriet Tubman (a storyline that we see today has other issues), but they never think that they need to wipe out slavery from the start even as they acknowledge that slavery is bad. Given the premise of the show, in theory, if Bogg and Jeffrey discovered that history had gone wrong and somehow slavery had never happened, their job would have been to restore it. Obviously this is not something you would have put in a show for kids, but the implication in the show's premise is undeniable. It's even noted in the episode "Voyagers of the Titanic," when Bogg tells Jeffrey that they have to let people die because that's what happened. That's probably why the episodes were mostly crafted in a way that played up the good more than the bad, such as helping Thomas Edison invent the light bulb or Babe Ruth become a power hitter.

Had the show continued after its first season, I doubt they would have dealt with these moral dilemmas. After all, as noted, the point of the show was to teach history and not to confuse the intended audience. The show even ended with Meeno Peluce advising the kids watching that if they wanted to learn more about the historical figures featured in that week's episode, to "take a voyage down to your public library. It's all in books." I suspect that many kids ended up having a greater love of history than might have otherwise, and even more would have, if only the show had lasted more than one season.

Speaking of which...I'm in 1983 and my Omni is blinking red. Apparently, *Voyagers!* was supposed to last for at least three seasons and end up in syndication and with sequel serieses. Pardon me while I head over to Los Angeles to talk with Brandon Tartikoff, the president of NBC, and James D. Parriott, the creator of the show. We need to get everything back on track.



# WIZARDS AND WARRIORS

## BY LEE GOLD

*Wizards and Warriors* debuted on February 26, 1983 and it ended on May 14, 1983 after one season and 8 episodes. The series starred Jeff Conaway as Prince Erik Greystone, Duncan Regehr as Prince Dirk Blackpool, Julia Duffy as Princess Ariel, Walter Olkewicz as Marko, and Clive Revill as Vector. As with many fantasy series, it has the forces of good, led by Prince Erik and Princess Ariel battle the forces of evil, led by Prince Dirk. The series originally aired on CBS in the U.S. *Wizards and Warriors* is available on DVD print-on-demand. It does not currently stream. Journey Planet reprints three articles by Lee Gold.

### Wizards & Warriors Background

Courtesy of Don Reo, the show's creator, co-producer, and majority scriptwriter—interviewed by telephone by Lee Gold in early July, 1983. (Reo promised to send xeroxes of his full background material, but never did so.)

[\*Wizards & Warriors\*](#) was originally titled *Greystone's Odyssey* but was renamed for fear of conflict with an upcoming show about Tarzan/Lord Greystoke. The name was derived as an imitation of *Mazes & Monsters*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, etc. but neither Reo nor anyone else he mentioned seems to play role-playing games themselves.

The show was set five million years in the future, after the rise and fall of many civilizations—some based on magic, some on technology, some (including the last one) on what may be termed “technomagic”. The wizards/witches began as keepers of the ultimate knowledge preserved from all those past civilizations—as recorded in “the Book” (their equivalent of the Bible.) They read the Book through a special glass, which allowed one of them at a time to access it.





There were originally four Keepers of the Book—two Evil, two Good. One of them trained/created a young helper. During the period of this Keeper’s rejuvenation (the Keepers rejuvenated themselves every 2000 years), the helper read the book and became crazed, smashed the glass and caused the Great One (God?) to become wrathful. At this point, the two Evil Powers stole two of the glass’s four shards (Monocles) and tore the Book in two, each taking half.

The two Good Powers (the male weakened because of partial rejuvenation) were Traquil and Kaltrinnia. There were millennia of war, in which the two Evil Powers (Indira and Indelph) used all their knowledge trying to destroy the Good Powers.

Finally the wars died down (and human civilization began to spring up again, with some knowledge still retained from previous civilizations—such as how to make glass windows, explosives, solar power crystals, etc.). Indira and Indelph took the names of Bethel and Vector and chose the northern area of Aperans as the likeliest base for Evil. Traquil chose the southern area. (Each of these areas then had a number of kingdoms/castles but was still regarded as a general regional culture. Thus the South has the name of Camarand; the North the name of Karteia. Apparently the Greystone line is that of the High King of the South, judging from the show’s references to Erik as “heir of all Camarand.”)

Kaltrinnia gave Traquil all her power and consigned her Monocle to the Great One. This affected the nature of magic in the world, stopping all direct attacks by immortals (i.e. the three remaining Keepers) on mortals. Thanks to Kaltrinnia, Traquil’s power equaled that of Vector and Bethel, but his rejuvenation had failed—and he was frozen as old and frail. Kaltrinnia married and had two sons: Michael (innkeeper/lawmaster of a small town) and Marko.

Richard Greystone (the king seen in “Caverns of Chaos”) vied with Saris Blackpool for the hand of a young lady who was Saris’s second cousin. She eventually married Greystone—and died giving birth to his son, Erik.

(Note: The concept that Erik is older than Justin seems to conflict with a number of things including the actors’ faces and a point in “The Kidnap” when Justin refers to Erik as “little brother”; then again Reo said repeatedly that this “history” was just his preliminary notes drawn up over two years before writing the shows themselves. In any case, it does make Erik and Dirk third cousins.)

Later on, King Greystone married again and had a second son, Justin. Blackpool, annoyed at the “insult” to his cousin’s memory by Greystone’s remarriage, got his wizard (Vector) to cast a spell to ensure that Greystone’s second wife would also die in childbirth. Word eventually got out and not surprisingly annoyed Greystone considerably (and his friend, Edwin Baaldorf, who had also been Blackpool’s friend up until then). This was the start of the wars between north and south, which had been going on for some twenty years by the time of the shows.

## Miscellaneous notes

THE COUNCIL had nine members, electing a new member on the rare occasions that a position fell open. These were people who had progressed to a level beyond that of mere mages, people who were millions of years old. They could not impose their will on lesser beings except for gross violations of their laws, since even the Evil had to be allowed free will.

THE BOOK was originally kept in the Caverns of Chaos but was transferred to “the Citadel of the Book” after the Wars of the Ashen Plateau. (This may be the same Citadel Erik and Marco went off to in order to get the key to the Unicorn bomb.)

APERANS is a continent shaped like a huge dragon (Karteia) sitting on a pile of treasure (Camarand). It got its name from the artist who drew it. (“I was trying to figure out what to name it,” said Reo, “and then noticed that this beautiful map had ‘Aperans’ at the bottom<sup>14</sup>. What a beautiful name, I thought. Then I found out it was the name of the studio artist who’d drawn it.”)

MONOCLES could be approached by the path of Knowledge or by the path of Charisma. A technomage like Vector, Bethel, or Traquil approached the Monocle in terms of Knowledge—knowing all possible effects and getting full amplification of innate Magic power out of the thing. Royal Blood, however, had its own unique, charismatic properties, and a member of a royal family could use the Monocle on a semi-

instinctive basis, though with a far narrower range of effects immediately available and considerably less power.

Two consenting people could merge their powers and have them amplified by a Monocle, as guided by one of them. Thus Vector told Dirk that together they could override Traquil's power and steal his Monocle. Having introduced the idea to Dirk's mind, he then had his own Monocle stolen by the combination of Dirk and Bethel. Similarly Bethel's personality fixation on Justin required Traquil to merge his power with that of Justin and Richard Greystone to override it.

THE FANTASY CREATURES seen on the show (unicorn, clacton, invisible dragon, lightning hawk, grox, etc.) are the remainder of millions of years of evolution, helped on by radiation, plus millions of years of mages conjuring up creatures.

The show was one of the few TV comedies without a laugh track. It was suggested once, but Reo said, "You can't have a laugh track when people are dying," and the idea was dropped. Note, however, that no deaths were ever shown on camera. This was done not to minimize violence but to be sure they could always bring back a character if they wished. (For instance, Colter, the explosives expert from "The Dungeons of Death," was slated to be brought back if the series had been renewed.)

Don Reo co-produced *MASH*<sup>15</sup> in 75-6 and picked up their method of taking a rough draft of a script and assigning each role to one person who was responsible for playing/reading it: describing the character's actions, improvising dialogue, etc. That way every role had someone with an emotional investment in it—and in keeping the character interesting and true to type. We agreed that this constituted "winging fantasy role-playing—without a set of rules." The actors were also interested in their characters' development and often showed up for these sessions, especially Regehr who played Dirk Blackpool.

The first show aired was not the one intended as the pilot; it was intended to be the third show, with the two-parter ("The Kidnap" and "The Rescue") intended as the pilot). The network insisted on showing "The Unicorn" first because it was the first one ready. (In Australia, they showed "The Rescue" first of the eight shows—and "The Kidnap" last!)



14 - There was an artist named Maija Aperans working in Hollywood at the time, so it may well have been named for her. —eds.  
15 - *M\*A\*S\*H* did use a laugh track, but emphatically not in scenes set during surgery, nor in a couple of more serious episodes, and its use was decreased as the series continued.



## Wizards and Warriors—And Your Campaign

Lee Gold, intended to sell to a roleplaying game magazine, back in August, 1983

Once upon a time, in the second season of the TV year 1982-3, there was a show called *Wizards and Warriors*. It began as a somewhat uncertain compromise between heroic sword and sorcery and situation comedy (though without a laugh track). By the fourth episode, it had found its footing and evolved into a fascinating and complex fantasy campaign, with plots (and humor) growing out of characterization. It died after the eighth episode (with no hope of being rerun, let alone of renewal), because so few people had stuck with it after watching its first and weakest episode. (Incidentally, the first *W&W* episode had not been intended to be the premiere but was aired first by the network despite the plans of the series' producers/writers.)

The most easily transplantable feature of *Wizards and Warriors* for the average gamer will be its unique monsters. These were intended as worthy opponents for heroes and, depending on the energy level of your campaign, may need to be slightly tempered to avoid unbalancing things.

**THE GROX**—A tall humanoid with a fan-shaped head. It is unarmored and unarmed save for its knife-blade fingers—and the fatal poison they carry. Give it the same stats as one of the more powerful trolls in your campaign. Its fingers strike with the speed/strike rank of a knife *plus* fatal poison. It's too belligerent/stupid to attempt to parry or dodge. Oh yes, it has only one vulnerable spot—behind the left ear. (Warning: Don't withdraw the weapon you used to hit it there; the Grox will revive the moment you do so.)

The Grox is a Legendary Monster, virtually mythical, certainly not to be encountered at every crossroads. Characters should need Legend Lore in order to recall the more significant facts about it (i.e. its vulnerable spot and the importance of not withdrawing the weapon used to strike it).

Poison: If you don't fancy the idea of instantly fatal poison (no save) or just want to draw out the drama, you might want to treat the Grox as having *Lands of Adventure*-style Intense Poison. For each Grox hit, the victim will lose 3D6 HP per round for 5D6 rounds (with magical or clerical Cures possible, on a round to round basis). Damage will start with Energy Points (or Fatigue Points, if you're playing C&S), go on to Body Points, and end up with Life Points (or negative Hit Points in certain systems).

Hit Location Determination: Since no game gives "behind the left ear" as a standard hit location, the GM will have to modify the rules slightly. You can game a character's chance of *accidentally* hitting the correct area as a random HEAD HIT plus a D6 roll of 1 (or perhaps a D6 roll of 1-3 if hitting from behind). For an *aimed* hit, drop attacker's hit chance to 10% of normal and assume all hits land in the correct location. Remember, a critical hit is not necessary; any hit behind the left ear will put the thing out of action.

**THE BONE CRACK DEMON**—A tall humanoid with a glowing red left eye, summonable by a wizard to send against his foes. It gets its name from the fact that once it begins its attack, it will stop only when it has broken every bone in the victim's body. Give it the same stats as one of the more powerful trolls in your campaign.

The Bone Crack Demon has three major powers. Again, characters will need Legend Lore to recall what these are.

Magic crossbow with flaming quarrels: rate of fire should be about twice as fast as the standard short bow. Since the missiles are magic energy, hit chance/damage is not modified by armor.

Sword light: a magic beam which can affect up to five opponents at a time. Victims have their melee weapons struck from their grasp and bashed 3D6 feet away.

Flying ropes: a magic beam affecting up to five opponents at a time. Victims are hit by flying ropes of red light which bash them backwards up to 20' and tie them by the waist to the nearest available object: a tree, a lightpost, each other, whatever. These ropes are unbreakable and uncuttable—but vanish if the demon is killed.

The GM may wish to allow victims to dodge these various powers, but parrying should not be possible.

Breaking Bones: The Bone Crack Demon melee attacks by grappling a victim for an arm or leg lock (95% success chance; a victim not bound by a flying rope may attempt to dodge). The demon will then at-



tempt to break the bone grappled (20% success chance per attempt). Once both arms and legs have been broken, the demon will then first grapple and then break the spine—and finally the neck. Just in case the process is interrupted, here's how that sort of damage gets determined in *Lands of Adventure*:

Leg broken: Lose 10% of body points

Arm broken: Lose 5% of body points

Spine broken: Lose 60% of body points; legs paralyzed (10% permanent)

Neck broken: instant death

**INVISIBLE DRAGON** (well, perhaps it's only transparent): It's invisible to mages as well as to ordinary folk, and remains invisible even when attacking. It's also huge, about 20' high and 60' long. Hacking and slashing it won't do you much good, and you're unlikely to accidentally hit its vulnerable spot. Treat it as having about 2500 HP (plus being in the equivalent of cuir bouilli armor).

Its vulnerable spot is right between the eyes. (How do you aim right between the eyes, when you can't see the eyes because they're invisible? Easy! Just wait until it breathes fire and then aim slightly higher up. See the Grox discussion earlier for how to run hit location for something like this.)

This dragon breathes small puffs of golden fire, about as often as a short bow's rate of fire. Each fireball should leave the victim feeling badly singed (about 2D6 damage for games with fixed HP; about 2 HP per victim's HD in most games with level-HP). The dragon's breath range is twice its length: 120'.

Unlike standard fire, dragon breath can be reflected off a polished shield—to about 5' away. (Be careful not to hit a fellow party member with the ricochet.) The GM can make up his own mind as to whether the dragon will be hurt by having its own fire bounced back at it (assuming it's within 5'). Chance of using a shield to reflect dragon breath is Manipulation Rating (or 2% x Dexterity) + 10% for a small shield (heater or target), +20% for a large shield (kite).

The dragon isn't interested in charging victims but prefers to remain guarding its treasure (or perhaps the treasure of some wizard). If people insist on entering into melee combat with it, its claws should do about 250 HP damage each and its bite about 850 HP damage. It may also use its tail to bash away people attempting to sneak up on it from behind.

**DRAYGA:** Another demon summonable by a wizard against his foes. It attacks by possessing innocent bystanders (or if there aren't any of those around, the lowest level characters in the party). It can take over anyone with Charisma 10 or less; it will then be able to dominate the will of all people of Charisma 10 or less within 100' of its prime possession. Victims have their wills overridden by a Compulsion Spell of BEHAVIOR OBSESSION, giving them an idee fixe. The spell is strong enough to make a victim willing to murder a close family member.

The Drayga is a Legendary Monster, and a successful use of Legend Lore will allow a person to remember the only known way of dispelling a Drayga: splashing it with holy wine (wine that belongs to a priest).

Wine splashing is a Missile Skill. (In the *Lands of Adventure* system, it falls into the flung substance family.) The usual range would be about 8'. The Drayga may attempt to dodge the wine splash but cannot parry it. Any hit will dispel the Drayga permanently.

**LIGHTNING HAWKS:** Creatable by necromancy. ("I conjured those up from the remains of some of the foulest beasts in the Forest of Doom." "Delicious.") For gaming purposes, a wizard should be restricted to conjuring up one Lightning Hawk per point of Charisma, with dead Lightning Hawks not being replaceable.

Like a normal bird, the Lightning Hawk has only a few HP but is hard to hit while it's flying because of its agility and small size. (Treat as 1 HP, armor = skin, but only 10% normal chance to hit when flying with a Movement or Weapon attack.)

A Lightning Hawk breathes lightning bolts at about the same rate of fire as a longbow. It's not very

expert with its attack, but it usually hits its target eventually; treat it as a 20% Movement Skill. Each lightning bolt is capable of crisping a small tree, say 5D6 HP damage (affecting Body Points and Life Points). Unless the victim is taken by surprise, he should be allowed a last minute, partially effective dodge which - if successful—will reduce damage by half. (This is the equivalent of the *D&D* saving throw.)

The Lightning Hawk can be killed by normal attacks—or by reflecting one of its Lightning Bolts back up at it (say, from a polished shield). Chance of success at this is the same as for reflecting Dragon Breath: Manipulation Rating (or 2% x Dexterity) +10% for a small shield, +20% for a large shield.

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The background of *Wizards and Warriors* seemed tailor-made for a fantasy adventure campaign. It even had play-balanced magic. Like so many FRP worlds, the basic culture was semi-medieval, with a small group of elite to be found either at home in a castle or riding out on adventure—and a few small towns, each centered at the local inn.

(Actually, according to *W&W*'s creator, co-producer and major scriptwriter, Don Reo, the series was set some five million years in the future, after the fall of a number of highly advanced cultures, some based on magic, some on technology, some on a fusion of the two. This explains the presence of a number of

apparent anachronisms in the culture—like matches, glass windows, fireworks and explosives, etc. It also explains the Chaotic/Evil wizard's occasional use of a technomagic item such as the cannon that shot off magically-activated explosives, hurling them hundreds of times farther than normal gunpowder would be capable of doing.)

The series' setting was the continent of Aperans (shaped like a dragon frozen in mid-breath, sitting on a treasure chest) which was divided into two political areas: the southern lands of Camarand (Lawful/Good), dominated by the families of Castle Baaldorf and Castle Greystone—and the northern land of Karteia (Chaotic/Evil), dominated by the family of Castle Blackpool.

John Sapienza says that seeing *Wizards and Warriors* should give anyone a whole new depth of understanding of the term Chaotic/Evil. Certainly the power struggle at Castle Blackpool between prince, witch, and wizard had enough twists and turns to gladden the heart of any gamer oriented to the storytelling approach.

A few lessons for roleplaying from the Chaotic/Evil viewpoint glimpsed in the show.

The only alternatives when dealing with other people are dealing out pain or suffering it, depending on whether or not you have power. (Therefore lying, cheating, stealing, etc. are mere self-protection. There's no dishonor in doing them—and no moral shock when you find someone else is doing them to you.)

Never trust anyone—except possible for a naive Lawful/Good. (And therefore always be lonely—but try not to admit it to yourself.)

Threats and/or taunts are a normal part of conversation with current allies or captured enemies. ("Let me give you a warning, if you lie to me or if you try to deceive me, don't get caught.") So are ironic allusions to Lawful/Good morality. ("Don't you trust me?" "Words could not begin to express the depths of my trust in you.")

Good people are hateful because their very existence threatens the value structure of Evil as outlined above. Destroying them proves the faultiness of their beliefs—and reinforces one’s own self-confidence. (Therefore trying to break their self-confidence is even more important than killing their bodies. This explains why so many villains waste time gloating over their captured victims. Not just because it’s more convenient for the scriptwriters that way, but because breaking the hero’s morale is even more important than ending his life.)

*Wizards and Warriors* also provides an example of how to run a high energy campaign without letting the magic get totally out of hand. As in many FRP campaigns, the culture had a number of strange and powerful items left over from previous eras—a couple of magic swords, a vision scope that could show any place not protected by magic spells from prying wizards, etc. There were also three mages, each with a Monocle (what C&S gamers might term a Focus) that enabled them to practice the High Magic by virtue of having been a Reader of the Book. (What Book? Well, that gets more into the show’s background than this article has room for. It was certainly a thing of great power and greater potential danger. At one point, when it was kept in the Caverns of Chaos, every mage alive cast a spell to protect it.)

In any case, *Wizards and Warriors* was set in a very high energy campaign—and yet it was play-balanced. The mages and the warrior lords were fairly evenly balanced in power. How was it done?

First of all, mages were bound by the Council so they could not exercise their powers except in the service of some royal family. (The Council itself was never glimpsed onstage, though the evil wizard occasionally threatened the witch with appealing to it—after the mysterious theft of his Monocle. It was, says Don Reo, composed of nine Elder Powers, as much above mages as mages were in their turn above normal mortals.)

Second, mages could not use magic to kill mortals. They could, however, use magic to alter the odds of survival considerably (as for instance by summoning demons—or by bringing about an “earthquake”—or by merely freezing a victim in a time stasis—or see later in this article, under the discussion of the Monocle Powers). But the individual’s free will as expressed in his destiny could not be overridden by mere magic.

Thirdly, and interestingly, royal blood had a power of its own, passed on not through any coronation ceremony but directly through inheritance, conferring a special added mana/charisma on any royal family member. Some spells could only be cast or removed by a mage cooperating with someone of royal blood, with an invocation of the royal family’s bloodline. And someone of royal blood could use a Monocle, although highly inefficiently compared to a true mage.

Now at this point I’d like to suggest an idea (actually it’s my husband Barry’s idea) which certainly was not consciously present in the *Wizards and Warriors* series or background—or in any other fantasy world I know of—but which would account for many of the cultural features of *W&W* and similar fantasy shows.

Suppose it required a certain degree of magic ability to be able to use any sort of magic item. Not just to be able to use a wand or to read a scroll, but even to be able to use a magic sword as something more than an ordinary sword. Suppose this ability was inheritable.

I think in a while you’d end up with a medieval-type society, with royal families (magic users, if not true mages) reigning over the lower classes. And unlike the real-world medieval culture, such a society would have an immense degree of social stability even in the face of technological progress—because royalty would really be superior in one significant respect: they’d be able to use magical items and the lower classes wouldn’t.

You can get something of the same flavor as the *W&W* social background by having an extremely broad range of magical ability with most people concentrated toward the lower end of the scale—and two cut-off points. One cut-off point would be at the maximum end of the scale; below it you wouldn’t be able to cast spells unaided. The other would be toward the lower end of the scale; below it you couldn’t make any use of magic whatsoever, not even items like a magic sword or an amulet. Then roll for Magic ability for non-Royal NPCs using Wes Ives’ random die roll method. (Royal NPCs would roll D100 for Magic ability; others roll D6 on the table below.)

roll D6 for Magic ability

roll D8 for Magic ability

roll D10 for Magic ability



roll D12 for Magic ability  
roll D20 for Magic ability  
roll D100 for Magic ability

Magic ability of 100 is required to cast spells directly, unaided by any item. Magic ability of 80+ is required to be able to use a magic focus to cast spells. Magic ability of 10+ is required to be able to use a magic sword or similar item.

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## THE MONOCLE AND ITS POWERS

The most interesting magic item on *Wizards and Warriors* was the Monocle, a crystal dangling from a chain, glowing to life and power in the user's hand. (Don Reo's background accounts for the three Monocles seen on the show as remnants of a technomagic-based culture thousands of years dead.) Each Monocle was attuned to a certain mage, but that binding could be overridden and the Monocle stolen by black magic. (One way was an alliance between another Monocle-user and a person of royal blood, in defiance of the Council.) If the holder of a stolen Monocle died, the Monocle would immediately return to its true owner.

A wizard or witch approached a Monocle as an instrument of knowledge, used to achieve certain powerful effects made possible by understanding the basic nature of the universe (as revealed in the Book). This obviously involved a long course of study and practice.

That wasn't the only possible way to use a Monocle, however. It could also be approached as a focus of charisma by a person of royal blood. This gave a far more limited set of effects, with far less power (less range, duration, etc.).

Thus the world of *Wizards and Warriors* had three possible types of magic:

Charisma Magic: cast by a royal person with a Monocle.

Native Magic: cast by a mage without a Monocle

High Magic: cast by a mage with a Monocle (and given extra power if combined with Charisma Magic

(In the *Lands of Adventure* system, the first of these would be classed as a Technomagic Miracle skill, the second as a Magic skill, and the third as a Technomagic Knowledge skill).

The Monocle's range of effects potentially included the whole of reality. One attempt to systematize the Monocle Powers for gaming is outlined below.

## TABLE: MONOCLE POWERS

Spell Costs are specified in EP (*Lands of Adventure* Energy Points, 5-60 range, 33 average). For other games, use an appropriate number of Spell Points, Power Points, or some such. TAL = LoA Talent; for *RuneQuest*, use POW; for *D&D/Chivalry & Sorcery* use INT.

### MATTER

1) CREATE UNIMPORTANT OBJECT (or DISPEL such a magic-created object): e.g. chair, game-board; *not* weapon, money, jewelry, etc. Cannot be used to cause damage.

Native Magic: up to Load (5% of body weight) | EP

Charisma Magic: up to Load (5% of body weight) | EP

High Magic: up to Maximum Encumbrance (50% of body weight) | EP

2) ENERGIZE OBJECT—can be used to cause indirect damage: e.g. **create technomagic explosive** (requiring rare and costly ingredients, a minimum of 10 gold pieces and 1 hour preparation per damage point); **enhance weapon** (all hits are critical, no fumbles) or **curse weapon** (all failures are fumbles, no criticals).

Native Magic: up to 1 Body Point damage x mage's Talent | EP x TAL pt used

Charisma Magic: must be learnt; up to 1 BP damage x mage's CHA | EP x CHA pt used

High Magic: up to  $1 \text{ Body Point damage} \times \text{mage's INT squared} \mid \text{EP} \times \text{INT pt used}$

3) HEALING/DISEASE: Disease causes inability to regenerate HP plus gradual loss of  $1 \text{ HP per hour}$ . Non-Monocle cures probably won't work at full strength.

Native Magic: can affect person of up to  $\text{mage's TAL} \mid \text{EP} \times \text{TAL pt used}$

Charisma Magic: must be learnt; can affect person of up to  $\text{mage's CHA} \mid \text{EP} \times \text{CHA pt used}$

High Magic: can affect multiple persons of total INT up to  $\text{mage's own INT squared} \mid \text{EP} \times \text{INT pt used}$

## ENERGY

BASH OBJECT/PERSON—no direct damage, though a fall may result in HP loss/breakage

Native Magic: object/person throw aside  $D10 \text{ feet} \mid \text{EP}$

Charisma Magic: object/person thrown aside  $D6 \text{ feet} \mid \text{EP}$

High Magic: object/person throw aside up  $D6 \text{ feet} \times \text{mage's INT} = \text{"earthquake"} \mid \text{EP} \times \text{INT pt used}$

Falling: Victim must roll within  $50\% + (1\% \times \text{Agility})$  [or Dexterity in some game systems] or lose his footing and fall.

## SPACE

### TELEPORT

Native Magic: line of sight—or through one wall  $\mid \text{EP}$

Charisma Magic: must be learnt; line of sight or through one wall  $\mid \text{EP}$

High Magic: up to  $1 \text{ mile} \times \text{mage's INT squared}$ ; may take up to two other people  $\mid \text{EP per person}$

## TIME

FREEZE (in Time Stasis); victim does not age

Native Magic:  $D6 \times D6 \text{ minutes} (1-36, \text{average } 12) \mid \text{EP}$

Charisma Magic:  $D6 \times D6 \text{ minutes} (1-36, \text{average } 12) \mid \text{EP}$

High Magic: up to  $5 \text{ years} \times \text{Mage's INT} \mid \text{EP} \times \text{INT pt used}$

## PSYCHE

1) FAR-HEAR (and BLOCK FAR-HEARING)

Native Magic: up to  $\text{mage's TAL miles block at } 1 \text{ EP per tal pt of person blocked} \mid \text{EP}$

Charisma Magic: must be learnt; up to  $\text{mage's CHA miles block at } 1 \text{ EP per CHA pt of person blocked} \mid \text{EP}$

High Magic: up to  $\text{mage's INT squared miles block at } 1 \text{ EP per INT pt of person blocked} \mid \text{EP}$

2) COMPULSION: EMOTION OBSESSION: Sleep, Love, Hate, etc.



Duration: as per Time Freeze above  
Persons Affected: as per HEALING/DISEASE above  
Native Magic: 1 EP + 1 EP per TAL pt used  
Charisma Magic: 1 EP + 1 EP per CHA pt used  
High Magic: 1 EP + 1 EP per INT pt used

### 3) DISPEL/SUMMON UNDEAD/DEMONS

Native Magic: can affect being of CHA up to mage's TAL 1 EP x TAL pt used

Charisma Magic: summon must be learnt; can affect being of CHA up to mage's CHA 1 EP x CHA pt used

High Magic: can affect beings of total CHA up to mage's INT squared 1 EP x INT pt used

### LINKING

Mages may link and combine their Magic Requisites, increasing the power of the spells cast by one of them. (If only one has a Monocle, he is the caster. Otherwise, it must be determined by mutual agreement, or no spellcasting by either may occur.) A High Mage may link to a person of royal blood, using that person temporarily as a Charisma Mage by virtue of the High Mage's own Monocle.

Such a linkage may be used to override spells (with a success chance of 5% times total Magic Requisite higher than that of the initial spellcaster). It may also be used to override the binding between a mage and his Monocle. (Again, success chance is 5% x total Magic Requisite higher than that of the Monocle user.)

Magic Requisite: Native Magic: TAL (for *RQ*, use *POW*, for *C&S/D&D*, use INT)

Charisma Magic: CHA

High Magic: INT

Skill Level: Native Magic: 100%

Charisma Magic: 100% except for skills noted as "must be learnt" (These skills require that the Charisma mage learn them by casting them once in link to a Native or High mage. They are then acquired at an initial skill of 2% x INT—and must be improved through Skill Experience at 1% per successful use in stress situations.)

High Magic: 100% up to Native Magic limits. Further use at Initial Skill of 2% x INT—improvable through Experience as above.

Duration: unless otherwise specified, until dispelled/overridden

Range: unless otherwise specified, line of sight

Area: unless otherwise specified, only one person/object—with beam effect

Intensity: no saving throw possible—but spell is overridable by another mage at chance of 5% per point other mage's Magic Requisite is higher.

Note: Energy Points used to spellcast may NOT be regenerated as long as the spell is still in effect.

Now you may not be able to use Monocles in your campaign, even for Specialty Mages, but there is still a lesson to be learned from this sort of thing. One can have a magic item with multiple effects (and vary degrees of power) depending on which character class its user belongs to—or what Skill Category its user is approaching it through.

For instance, consider a multi-use magic staff. Used by a fighter (or someone with quarterstaff skill), it would function as a +1 Quarterstaff. Used by a mage (or someone with a Detection Spell skill), it could have a Detection Spell cast into its tip (e.g. Detect Magic or Detect Hidden Door - 1 foot radius) and store it for 2D6 uses. Used by a cleric (or someone with Invocation skill), it could be consecrated (by a Bless) and give a pious wielder +10% resistance to the powers of undead and demons. Of course, it would give an individual wielder only *one* of those benefits, depending on his character class/skills (or for some multi-class/skills char-

acters, depending on the first use he thought to make of it).

Then again, there's the multi-use Crystal Ball, again approachable from a variety of different skill categories (or related character classes). Used as a magic skill, it might give Wizard Eye or Divination of Fate (sight only, no sound, 1 round duration). Used as an observation skill, it might give the ability to see and hear through one wall (for, say, five rounds duration). Used as a knowledge skill, it might show a map of the area traversed (with a moving blip showing the carrier's current position). Used as a communication skill, it might allow the carrier to project his voice to a friend (240' range, 1 round duration). Used as a persuasion skill, it might be used to hypnotize a person the carrier has lured to look into it. Again, the device would allow an individual only *one* of these uses, depending on what use he first tried to make of it.

This article has touched on some, if not all, of the ideas that *Wizards and Warriors* can contribute to a Fantasy Role-Playing campaign. I recommend watching the show—particularly episodes four through eight—if you can find a friend with videotapes.





## Wizards and Warriors Adventure Game Writeup

from *Alarums and Excursions* #98, October, 1983

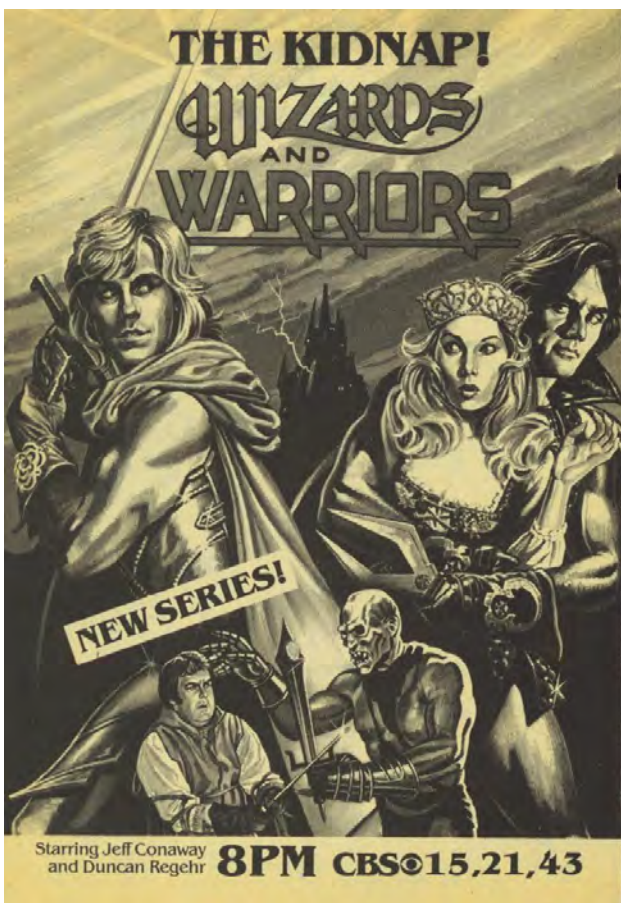
At Worldcon (Baltimore, 1983) I GMed a *Wizards and Warriors* storytelling run (using *Lands of Adventure*<sup>16</sup> plus a tentative systematization of Monocle Powers). What made it storytelling instead of roleplaying? Well, among other things:

- Standard script immunity applied to continuing characters; they could be dropped down bottomless abysses but *not* killed, as they had to be available for next “week’s” episode.
- Since everyone present had seen a few shows and was reasonably familiar with all the characters, everyone was partially responsible for all roles—and had the right to cry out if someone didn’t act fully within character; this meant that
- We sometimes reran an incident two or three or four times until action taken and dialogue spoken was up to the group’s high standards.

What resulted was (in large part thanks to Michael Kolb’s friend Andy who played Dirk Blackpool) a very nice run.

It was September and time for the Olympic Tri-Kingdom Games, held in a neutral area (a mountain plateau with a quasi-Stonehenge structure of seven tall black pylons called Giants Circle). [Note that for me this was an alternate world episode, as in my own future history the Games don’t take place until 13 months after the final episode televised, by which time a whole lot of things have happened to the major characters. Episodes 1-5 are now written and available.]

Justin and Geoffrey spent the first night choosing wine to be consumed at the drinking contest to be held the second night. But when morning came, Justin was missing. Erik and Marko suspiciously accused Dirk of having broken the Game Truce. Dirk denied this indignantly and—after asking Erik if he really wanted his playboy brother back—finally consented to postpone the sword bout between them and go along to retrieve Justin. He then privately asked Vector if he’d had a hand in all this. And was told “Nonsense. The Jenks planned it all, and executed it all without my help. I merely told them it looked as if their scheme would work.”



And the rescue mission headed off, following Justin’s tracks, into a Jenk cave—and turned around to see Geoffrey and Ariel tagging along behind them—and shooed them away. Erik and Dirk vied for who got to lead but finally agreed that the lead should be Vector, on the grounds that neither of them trusted him. (Given that the light from his rune-carved staff kept the fire-breathing vampire bats on the ceiling asleep, this was probably just as well, though it did make Marko’s work at waking up a bat to interrogate it slightly harder.)

And eventually they came to an area where there was a hole in the roof. Justin stood there (unconscious? dead? drunk?) leaning against a stone pillar. The light falling through the ceiling ran through a huge crystal and made a milky white pool on the floor, near Justin’s feet. And on either side of the pool lay the bodies of Jenks—cut in half.

(This was slightly beyond a large spider web that burst into flame when cut. The spider itself merely drank souls. It hadn’t eaten the Jenks though: just watched them split in half and fall down.)

Erik found his brother more comatose than seemed accounted for by the liquor on his breath and the lump on his head. Marko threatened the spider with water (it being a fire-based demonic creature) until it consented

to give up the vitality it had absorbed. Afterwards Dirk amused himself by dripping water on the spider—drop by drop. As they left, Erik and Justin brought each other up to date on the events of the previous night.

The Jenks had forced Justin to remove a crystal from the top of the central pylon of Giants Circle. He had then followed them to get it back. At this news, the group (except for Vector) returned to get the crystal, wrapping it up with cloaks till the pool of light disappeared. They took it back to Giants Circle where they found Traquil waiting for them. He directed them how to put it back up on the pylon again. They'd apparently gotten it back just in time: the pylons had already gone from black to a very light grey and were starting to hum. (It's not nice to deprive a major technomagic terraforming installation of the energy needed to keep its damping rods in place.)

16 - *Lands of Adventure* is a role playing game written by Lee Gold and published by Fantasy Games Unlimited in 1983.



# MAX HEADROOM

BY CHRIS GARCIA

*Max Headroom debuted on September 18, 1987 and it ended on May 12, 1988 after one season and 14 episodes. The series starred Matt Frewer as Edison Carter, Amanda Pays as Theora Jones, Jeffrey Tambour as Murray, and Chris Young as Bryce Lynch. The series is set in a dystopic future in which an oligarchy of television networks controls the world. The series originally aired on ABC in the U.S. and was based on the British TV film Max Headroom: 20 Minutes into the Future, which aired on Channel 4. The main character hit the mainstream in a series of New Coke commercials and Garry Trudeau used it in Doonesbury. Max Headroom is available on DVD. It is not currently streaming.*

It is difficult to understand how [Max Headroom](#) completely changed the way I viewed art, and especially how it did it in 1996 or so. It did, though, and in a way that is suitable for sharing as an article.

Boston, the first day of the most significant snow of the year. It was the second of them, a storm that I remember going on for three days. I knew it was the second because we always played football on the day of the first snow, and I specifically remember being uninjured, so we must not have played. I was, in fact, on the couch in the common room of our suite, my socked feet up, covered in a bedspread with the faces of the New Kids on the Block on it. We had a TV and a VCR, though no cable or antenna, which meant we could only watch what we either rented from VideoSmith, or had brought with us from home.

And we all had VHS collections.

I had ordered Chinese for five, my suitemate, Omar, had ordered a large pizza, pepperoni and sausage (and New York Pizza knew that as our regular), and my buddy John had gone out to Star Market and stocked up our mini-kitchen with microwavable stuff.





We wouldn't have to go down to the dining hall if we didn't want to, and since it was somewhere around 11pm, we couldn't have anyhow. I wanted to get something to watch, having just watched [Twin Peaks](#) one storm prior, and [X-Files](#) still being on the air. My roommate Matt came into the common room, said nothing, but popped a tape into the VCR, plopped down at the end of the couch closest to the TV and three inches from my feet, and hit play on the remote.

It was a Max Headroom Coke commercial, and after a bit, the catchphrase—  
“Catch the wave, COKE!”

And the rest of the suite filed in. Omar grabbed one chair, wearing his bathrobe and slippers. John from his room, pulling up space on the floor. Trumble walking in, as if timed by some sitcom director, grabbing one of the stools from the bar on the opposite side of the mini-kitchen bar, and pulling it into the edge of the living room.

A harsh edit, as all home edits were, and then the first episode of *Max Headroom* began.

Now, I need to explain my college. Emerson College was basically a communications college where everyone wanted to be something they weren't able to study. A lot of musicians studying radio or creative writing. Actors studying speech pathology. An historian studying poetry and children's writing because he could get in to Emerson, but not to one of the colleges that had actually important history programs.

That last one might have been just me.

Anyhoo, there are few places, even to today I'm told, that really get the impact of television on the masses, and how new media plays a role in defining what will become banal within our own lifetimes. This idea was hammered into us in all our required MassComm classes. It was there that I was first introduced to post-modernism as a theory and realized that it had always been what I enjoyed in film and paintings.

I had watched *Max Headroom* on its original airing, and I loved it. Part of it was the way that it presented television, and how dark it was. Plus, it had a cast I loved—Matt Frewer, George Coe, Jeffrey Tambor, and perhaps most importantly, Charlie Rocket. These folks grabbed my attention, but honestly, at 13, I wasn't looking very deeply.

In the common room, with more food than we should have been eating between 11pm and 10am, we watched episode after episode after episode. It only took a few minutes to realize that though the show was nearly 10 years old, it was talking about 1996. The idea of Blipverts, ads that run high-speed and can overload people's nervous systems, was coming and coming fast. Edison Carter, an intrepid reporter looking into the case, gets in an accident, running into a cross-bar in a garage that reads “Max. Headroom” and a brain-scan leads him to form as a computer network construct calling himself Max Headroom.

That might have been a bit far afield for 1996, but we were seeing miracles every day in genetics and research, and networks. It all felt like it was now. In the first run, it all felt like it was the inevitable later. We were right...sort of.

We were in the very first years of the internet in 1996. We all knew a lot about what was happening commercially, and a couple of us knew what was going on with deeper research through the copies of *WIRED* that someone must have subscribed to and left around the suite. *Max Headroom* was talking about advertising in a way that wasn't frequent yet, but we could all tell was coming. The folks who wrote *Max Headroom* saw it coming, too. Moreover, they understood the implications. There was an episode that talked about reality TV, not yet called that, but we also knew these, too. [Real People](#), [American Gladiators](#), [That's Incredible](#), and on and on. We saw what these were, and seeing it put on the screen like it was hit me hard. *Max Headroom* wasn't doing a predictive story, but was taking what was already out there and showing it to us with a nice polish. On that was hung, like so many Christmas bulbs, things like the banning of off-buttons, and that made it science fiction.

But this was commentary on where we were, and I never noticed it when I was a kid. I noticed it in 1996, under my New Kids bedspread, the snow out the window behind the TV falling in flakes the size of small children. Ideas of dream recording, something scientists are actively working on now but was a feature in an early *WIRED*, were bouncing around with the idea of the Vu Age Church, which is 100% like the cults that have popped up in Marin, Napa, and Santa Cruz counties over the last couple of decades. It would be an interesting thought to look at how that cult and Heaven's Gate used similar messaging, though they would have been active at the time of writing the episode.



But what hit me, beneath that blanket, tummy full of General Tso's and pizza and microwave popcorn and ramen noodles and Doritos, was that it was telling us what we already knew—the media is dangerous, but you have to take it in; you honestly can't avoid it. If you boiled *Max Headroom* down, the idea seems to be *Welcome to the Valley of Death—Enjoy Your Walk*.

And as we finished the last episode, followed by a few segments from the UK *Max Headroom 20 Minutes into the Future*, we headed down to the dining hall, to breakfast, for me always toast with bacon and Coke. We talked, going back and forth over what we had spent the entire evening “watching” as truth be told, most of us fell asleep for at least an hour in the common room.

“You know what gets me?” I asked.

“What?” Omar responded.

“I think this is what all those paintings in the abstract room at the MFA are about.”

Everyone looked at me like I was crazy.

“Whaddya mean?”

“It's about how what we create art, and tell ourselves it's art, but really, we're just putting together distractions, and we hope that those distractions catch people up enough that they fall in deep, and the deeper they fall, the more they give over, and the more they give over, the less likely they are to notice that they're being manipulated and drained.”

Silence.

“So...we're creating the instruments of our own downfall every time we try to make any sort of art?” John said, his face showing the maybe 45 minutes of sleep the night before.

“No,” I said, “I think it's saying we can't help but try to make our mark, even if we're gonna take folks down with us.”

“Bleak,” said Matt.

Silence again.

“OK,” Omar said “I'm getting more bacon.”

“Grab me some orange juice?” I called after him.

And we never spoke of it again.



# COP ROCK

←—————→  
OLAV ROKNE

*Cop Rock debuted on September 26, 1990 and it ended on December 26, 1990 after one season and 11 episodes. The series starred Anne Bobby as Vicki Quinn, Ronny Cox as Roger Kendrick, Vondie Curtis-Hall as Warren Osborne, and Barbara Bosson as Louise Plank. Coming off the success of several police shows and L.A. Law, Steven Bochco was given free rein and came up with the idea of a cop show that was also a musical. The series originally aired on ABC in the U.S. Cop Rock is available on DVD. It is not currently streaming.*



“Look, I’m basically going to do Hill Street again...there’s only one thing we’re going to do differently. They’re going to sing.”

– Composer Mike Post describing how Steven Bochco asked him to work on *Cop Rock*

To truly understand the wonder and the glory that is [Cop Rock](#), one must first appreciate the context in which the series was created.

For those who watched TV in the 1980s, the name Steven Bochco was synonymous with dramatic television success. From 1981 to 1989, he won nine Emmy awards for outstanding series or outstanding writing.

He even won Peabody Awards, which honor the most powerful, enlightening, and invigorating stories in television.

Bochco is renowned for [L.A. Law](#) and for [Doogie Howser M.D.](#), but what he is most famous for is cop shows like [Hill Street Blues](#), [Bay City Blues](#), and [NYPD Blue](#).

In the 1980s, Steven Bochco made serious, hard-hitting dramatic television involving police officers.

He was a serious artist to be taken seriously. So when ABC offered him complete creative control and a near unlimited budget to make a cop show, Bochco decided he wanted to make something audacious. He wanted to do a police procedural unlike anything that had ever been done: a hard-hitting crime drama that was also a musical.

Bochco gathered an all-star group of behind-the-camera talent to realize his dream.

*“Everybody said you’re nuts, you’re crazy. I guess I had such a passion for the idea that I talked everyone into it, including Randy Newman, who said ‘you’re an idiot.’”*

– Steven Bochco

At the time, Randy Newman already had multiple academy awards, two Grammy Awards, a pair of platinum records, and his duet with Paul Simon on the Billboard Hot 100. In short, he was an icon of the music industry.

Joining Newman on writing songs was Mike Post: one of the few TV composers whose theme songs regularly got radio play. Among other hit songs, he was the composer of “Believe it or Not,” (theme song to [The Greatest American Hero](#)) which was a number 2 radio play hit. He wrote themes to [The A-Team](#), [Quantum Leap](#), and [Magnum P.I.](#)

Bochco was determined to capture the spontaneous energy and dynamic performances of a Broadway show, and insisted that all the songs would be performed by the actors live during the filming. This dedication to the craft caused significant issues, both in terms of finding actors who could sing, dance, and act, and also in terms of production schedules, not to mention the complexity of shoots.

*“It was a glorious failure, in that when we did it well, we did it really well. It was unbelievable that we could pull it off.”*

– Composer Mike Post

But these technical innovations led to *Cop Rock* becoming one of the most expensive series that had ever been made at that time. At a reported cost of \$1.8 million per episode, the studio funding this passion project began to get nervous.

The show premiered on September 26, 1990.

The nervousness began to grow as the first reactions came in from the press. David Letterman was obsessed with making fun of the show, without ever having seen an episode.

He did four separate comedy segments about *Cop Rock* the week before it aired.

You might say that *Cop Rock* was destined to fail. The premise was just too easy to mock. Even now, 30 years later John Oliver is making light of the show by playing the song “Baby Merchant” as a late-night punchline.

The night of *Cop Rock*’s premiere on ABC, rival NBC’s forgettable cop show *Hunter* aired in the same time slot and was watched by 17 million people.

CBS’ show *Davis Rules*—which is considered a flop—was watched by 14 million.

And *Cop Rock*? Just shy of 7 million people tuned in.

The numbers were disastrous.

In October, less than a month after the pilot aired, ABC president Bob Iger phoned Bochco and asked him to convert the show into a more standard cop drama by removing the musical numbers.

Iger suggested that if it were a little less weird, people might tune in.

Bochco refused.

The ratings continued to decline. *Cop Rock* was the 80th most-watched Television show on the air... out of 101 shows. It was also the most expensive.

The network pulled the plug on November 12, 1990 after only 11 episodes.

The series ends with a surreal musical number in which the characters sing about their own cancella-

tion.

But it's interesting to note that there had been previous detective shows that were musicals. In the UK, the [Singing Detective](#) was a major hit in 1986, successful enough that Robert Downey Jr. remade it as a movie.

Bohco himself invited the comparison to the UK series, telling reporters "I think *Singing Detective* is possibly the best seven hours of television I've ever seen. Period: without qualification."

The thing that makes *Cop Rock* endure in the public consciousness is the sheer audacity of it. The obvious and safe choice would have been to use the basic cop show template.

Bohco could have franchised *Hill Street Blues* like they did with [CSI](#) or [NCIS](#). There could have been *Hill Street Blues: Las Vegas* and *Hill Street Blues: Special Victims Unit*.

But how boring would that have been? If nobody has the gumption to try something crazy, all we'll see is safe and predictable television made for mass consumption.

The talent behind the series really shines through in the music. Some of these songs are actually pretty damned good, and they all drive the narrative forward. This isn't a cop show with songs added, it's a cop show in which the songs are integral to the story.

The massive dance numbers and productions are kind of unreal—hordes of extras and complex choreography.

When this show works, the energy is palpable. And the songs are bizarrely catchy. Tony winning actor Ben Vereen knocks in out of the park with the song "He's Guilty."

In the end, the series was best summed up by star Anne Bobby, who played Officer Vicki Quinn in the 11 episodes that aired.

*"My feeling is that the recent rediscovery of the show really is redemption for everyone involved. The show was very much ahead of its time. With [Empire](#) and [Glee](#), the medium has finally caught up to the vision we had."*





# THE O.I.L. FACTOR:

AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF WHY WOOPS! FAILED

← BY ZEV WINICUR →

*Woops!* debuted on September 27, 1992 and it ended on December 6, 1992 after one season and 11 episodes. The series starred Fred Applegate as Jack Connors, Cleavant Derricks as Frederick Ross, Meagen Fay as Alice McConnell, Marita Geraghty as Suzanne Stillman, Lane Davies as Curtis Thorpe, and Evan Handler as Mark Braddock. The show follows what Steve Goodman would have called the post-nuclear nuclear family, trying to survive and reestablish civilization in the wake of a nuclear apocalypse. The series originally aired on Fox in the U.S. If you want to watch *Woops!*, you're out of luck, it is neither streaming nor available on physical media.

In September of 1992, my wife and I discovered a bizarre, short-lived sitcom called [Woops!](#). The premise of the show was that during a military parade, some kids were fooling around with a remote-controlled car which accidentally caused a nuclear warhead to launch and sparked off a nuclear war, killing nearly all of humanity. Six survivors ended up in an abandoned farmhouse that was inexplicably well stocked. They all came from different backgrounds and ideologies, but they had to work together to survive and rebuild society.

The show featured an ensemble cast of four men and two women. Evan Handler, thin and sporting a mop of hair (I know...right?), led the cast as the clear-headed narrator, playing a former school teacher who survived the nuclear blast because he was in his Volvo at the time (and they clearly make them pretty safe and reliable). Lane Davies played Curtis, an aggressive, greedy venture capitalist who always wore a tie, even when working on the farm. Cleavant Derricks, years before his five-year stint on [Sliders](#), played a dour pathologist who also happened to be the only black survivor. Meagen Fay played an annoying stereotypical



progressive feminist bookstore owner. Fred Applegate played an eternally optimistic homeless man. And Marita Geraghty played a pretty, ditzy, hair salon employee.

My wife and I immediately loved the show. This was something truly new, something that really pushed the boundaries of narrative and good taste. This was a show for “our kind of people,” not for the typical Fox audience who laughed at Al Bundy’s latest antics, giggled at Homer choking Bart, guffawed at “Men on Film” giving an “around the world and back snap,” or repeatedly imitated Boomhauer’s Texas gibberish. This was a true original.

In retrospect, the show was doomed to fail from the start. The Fox Sunday lineup was already a slam dunk with two episodes of [Cops](#) starting at 7:00 pm, followed by [The Simpsons](#), [King of the Hill](#), [In Living Color](#), [Married...with Children](#), and the local news. Clearly, the Fox executive who approved the show wanted to fill a 10:30 pm slot with something new and different, but place it where it could do the least harm. It lasted all of 10 episodes. (An additional three episodes were filmed, but never aired.)

The show was silly and unsubtle, and that was the whole point. Everything was tongue in cheek. Since the Cold War was now over—the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991—it was finally safe to spoof the decades’ long dread of nuclear war that haunted our country. The conceit of the show, as I saw it, was to use a darkly humorous premise to explore the variation in human condition and stereotypical tropes inherent in society. It used sophomoric humor to appeal to a wider audience, but still commented on the sociopolitical issues of the time. Or at least, it tried to.

TV Guide had a different view. Not only did they refer to the show as a “post-apocalyptic [Gilligan’s Island](#),” which was probably true, but they also rated it the 42nd worst show on television, which was horribly unfair. How dare they group *Woops!* with the likes of [Jerry Springer](#), [My Mother the Car](#), and *Hee-Haw Honeys*?

For years, my wife and I blamed the Fox network and their habit of greenlighting creative shows but then killing them before they could get a footing. The Fox canceled shows were a rogues’ gallery of sci fi convention sweethearts: [Alien Nation](#), *Firefly*, [Tru Calling](#), *The Adventures of Brisco County Jr.*, [Terra Nova](#). The list goes on and on.

However, the more that I thought about it, the more I realized that the secret sauce of syndication success is not only based on external factors, such as promotion, favoritism, and luck. Often, success comes from a show’s visual appeal, the celebrity of its actors, and its O.I.L. (originality, intelligence, lens). In fact, this last factor is often overlooked by the studio elite until its writers go on strike.

O.I.L. puts a quantitative spin on the underlying qualitative nature of a script. It is particularly useful for analyzing sit-coms. If one imagines a three-dimensional graph, “originality” is on the x-axis, ranging from 1 (totally unoriginal, safe, and tested) to 10 (completely original, edgy, and new). “Intelligence” sits on the y-axis and ranges from 1 (low humor and obvious jokes) to 10 (intelligent writing, subtle humor, and esoteric references). “Lens” sits on the z-axis and ranges from 1 (incredibly broad appeal) to 10 (narrow, targeted appeal).

It is not easy to be a solid 5 on each factor. One wants content original enough to stand out from the competition, but not so original that the audience has no context to process it; intelligent enough that the audience is not insulted, but not so intelligent that the audience is alienated; broad enough in appeal that you build a viewership, but targeted enough to create a passionate fan base.

Fox’s flagship show, *The Simpsons*, is a perfect example of 5’s on all axes. A sitcom about a dysfunctional, working-class family is not very original until you animate it, stage it in a town with a nuclear reactor, and add in Matt Groening’s biting cynicism. The writing is truly intelligent, hitting its jokes without over-emphasizing them, incorporating in-jokes and literate commentary, but punctuating all of this with crowd-pleasing catch-phrases (“Don’t have a cow, man!”) and physical humor. The lens of its appeal is broad, creating a world everyone understands, but adding in enough biting satire to make people feel like one of the in-crowd. No wonder it has lasted 32 seasons.

*Woops!* didn’t do that. Long before Netflix and YouTube allowed for super-focused audience platforms, network shows lived and died by the Nielsen ratings. *Woops!*’s highly original premise was outside the realm of comprehension of many viewers. It wasn’t that they couldn’t follow the plot; they couldn’t understand why one would make fun of thermonuclear war. Its lens of appeal was similarly focused, landing on a select audience that loved its irreverence and satire. And its intelligence—well, its intelligence was uneven.

Take episode 6, “The Election.” Mark (Evan Handler) is the only person who knows how to fix the

generator, so the group decides that he should have the biggest bedroom as a reward for keeping the power on. Curtis (Lane Davies) wants the biggest bedroom, so—despite having no knowledge of how to repair a generator—he convinces the other residents that the job of generator maintenance should be put to a vote. He mounts a national-style election campaign (appropriating unnaturally folksy language, using “us” vs. “them” metaphors, etc.) writ small across only six people. In the end, what should have been a close election goes to Curtis when Suzanne, the ditzy one, forgets to vote. It was as subtle as a hernia.

My favorite story was episode 10, “Say it Ain’t So, Santa.” Santa, played by Stuart Pankin (who also played Earl on [Dinosaurs](#), another under-appreciated sitcom), visits the farm. In the course of the episode, it comes out that Santa has survivor’s guilt because he made it into his fallout shelter, but he couldn’t open the hatch to let in Mrs. Claus and the elves, leaving them to burn up outside. Eventually, we learn that this wasn’t really Santa’s fault. A lifetime of coming down chimneys meant that he never learned how to work a door-knob. Subtle? No. Tasteful? No. Intriguing? Possibly. Funny? Oh, yes.

Subjectively, *Woops!* scores an O.I.L. of 9-4-8. Its score is far from the coveted 5-5-5, but even worse, its score is unbalanced. Even *Married...with Children*, a Fox show with simple writing, over acting, unpleasant characters, and telegraphed jokes, scores a balanced 2-2-2, which is why it lasted 11 seasons. If O.I.L. scores are not all fives, it is critical that the scores are a balanced set of numbers if the show wants to find an audience.

Who knows if *Woops!* will find a new audience among Millennial or Gen Z viewers who come across it as they scour the forgotten reaches of social media. The show is no longer the most original, weird, wacky, wicked, or tasteless thing on TV. By now, I’m sure that even [Spongebob Squarepants](#) has done an episode on nuclear Armageddon. But *Woops!* will always have a special place in my heart. It’s the Brave Little Engine that Couldn’t.





# THE STRANGEHISTORY OF STRANGELUCK

←—————→  
BY MICHAEL CASSUTT

*StrangeLuck* debuted on September 15, 1995 and it ended on February 23, 1996 after one season and 17 episodes. The series starred D.B. Sweeney as Chance Harper, Pamela Gidley as Audrey Westin, Cynthia Martells as Anne Richter, and Frances Fisher as Angie. The show is about a photographer, Chance Harper, whose luck gets him enmeshed in other people's problems. One of the show's writers, Michael Cassutt, offers us a look at the show. The series originally aired on Fox in the U.S. *Strange Luck* is not available on DVD, nor is it currently streaming.

On Friday, September 15, 1995, a new fantasy drama titled [StrangeLuck](#) (yes, one word) premiered on Fox Broadcasting Corporation at 8 p.m. Eastern and Pacific.

Created by Karl Schaefer, whose previous series credits included [TV 101](#) (CBS, 1988-89) and [Eerie, Indiana](#) (NBC, 1991-92, with Jose Rivera), it told the tale—as presented in the main title voice-over—of one Chance Harper, survivor as an infant of a plane crash that wiped out his family. The accident left him—or revealed him—to be a lifelong recipient of *StrangeLuck*.

Not good luck. Not bad luck.

Both, or either, depending on circumstances.





Chance Harper was thus cursed and blessed.

Now in his late twenties, he works as a freelance photographer specializing in news, since he somehow always finds himself in the right place at the wrong time.

His personal life, like that of most TV action heroes, is non-existent—so open to new romances.

Like all great fantasy concepts, *StrangeLuck* had its roots in real life, in this case in Karl Schaefer's personal history. He had, for example, launched his screenwriting career with the miraculous sale of a spec script to a major studio—without an agent, literally by direct mail. Then he saw his first television concept sold as a pilot, picked up for production—and ordered to series, with himself as showrunner, at age 30.

He had also suffered through at least two major traumas that I knew, either of which would have been enough to make one feel cursed.

And to better inform Chance's work world, Karl had been a photographer and cinematographer prior to becoming a writer.

Actor D.B. Sweeney, 34, was Chance Harper. An engaging, wry actor, Sweeney's movie credits included Francis Ford Coppola's *Gardens of Stone*, John Sayles' *Eight Men Out*, as well as *Memphis Belle*, *Fire in the Sky*, and *The Cutting Edge* and who has also worked on the acclaimed TV mini-series *Lonesome Dove*.

Joining him were Francis Fisher as Angie, the wise and knowing waitress at the diner where Chance spent much of his free time. The English-born Fisher was a vastly accomplished stage actress with numerous additional credits in television and feature, notably Clint Eastwood's *The Unforgiven*.

Pamela Gidley was Audrey Westin, a news editor who bought Chance's photos even as she was baffled by his condition—and naturally a bit attracted to him.

Cynthia Martell was Dr. Ann Richter, a psychiatrist whom Chance had met and who was fascinated by his situation.

My route to a position on the staff was a bit circuitous. I knew Karl Schaefer quite well, of course, having worked on both *TV 101* and *Eerie*. But in the 1994-95 development season I was still reeling from a less than happy experience on [The Outer Limits](#), and had gone back to novel writing (*Missing Man*).

I wasn't even thinking about a television job in the spring of 1995.

But Karl and I were in touch. I was so taken with the *StrangeLuck* script and the pilot that when I learned that it had been picked up to series—while I was in Washington D.C. playing space sleuth—I called Karl directly and said I wanted to be part of it.

This is a terrible way to get a TV staff job, since the day a pickup order is announced, staffing has been taking place for months.

But I was confident that Karl liked me and my work, and surely saw that my sensibility would fit.

It did, and I was hired along with veteran TV writer-producers John J. Sakmar and Kerry Lenhart ([Remington Steele](#), [MacGyver](#), [SeaQuest DSV](#)), and my buddy Matt Dearborn—not only a colleague from *TV 101* and *Eerie* but a former collaborator on several failed comedy pilots, including one called *The Front Office*, about the wacky goings on of a major league baseball team, that still—thirty years later—finds an occasional reader.

In early June 1995 we started our story meetings in Karl's Fourth Floor incubator on the corner of Cahuenga and Hollywood Boulevard, but soon moved into a proper suite of offices in a tall building on Sunset on the edge of Beverly Hills.

And the four of us, aided and abetted by several talented freelancers (and hindered by one individual we were forced to hire, and who turned out to be toxic), started pitching, then breaking and developing episodes.

Such as "Over Exposure," in which Chance's car is stolen, along with his cameras. He tracks down the car and one of the cameras—which now has images of a young woman with a gun to her head, putting Chance in the middle of a kidnapping.

Or "Last Chance," which begins with Chance dropping into an automobile service place with his car, his *StrangeLuck* putting him there just in time to stop his mechanic from committing suicide. After a series of weird missteps with the mechanic, he learns of the man's connection to a convict about to be executed.

And "She Was"—Chance is shooting publicity photos on a movie set when he meets a woman who

claims she is married to the famous male star of the picture, but who denies her existence and has supposedly taken her children.

These capsule accounts don't give the full nature of the episodes, which were populated by storylines chronicling Chance's drive to learn more about his origins. We also had fun with guest characters in walk-on roles.

The A stories, however, made a virtue of coincidence. In fact, our method was to put Chance in some bizarre situation, ask what would he want to have happen next—do that, and then twist it into the worst possible solution.

When *StrangeLuck* premiered, it received positive, even rave reviews, of which this from *TV Guide* was typical:

“WE SAY: The pilot has a cool, seductive film-noir feel enhanced by three standout stars: sad-sack Sweeney (“*Eight Men Out*”), dishy Gidley as his editor, and tough cookie Fisher (Clint Eastwood's former flame) as a world-weary waitress.

BOTTOM LINE: *The X-Files* couldn't ask for a better lead-in. Fox may be launching a successful freaky Friday franchise here.”

As the episodes ran, the ratings were solid. By spring 1996 it was obvious that Fox had found a solid companion for *X-Files*.

Yet, that May, when Fox announced its fall schedule, *StrangeLuck* was not on it.

The road to this sad ending began when production commenced in Vancouver in July 1995.

The *StrangeLuck* pilot had been filmed in Los Angeles, largely in and around downtown L.A.

This was a very expensive proposition for any studio, and especially for a small entity like the *StrangeLuck* “studio,” New World TV. As executive producer and showrunner, Karl Schaefer had had to fight a series of insane battles with NWTV, where there was a typical rift between the creative side (acclaimed former NBC TV president Brandon Tartikoff was the head of the company) and the business side. The creative side wanted to sell series. The business side, it seemed, merely tolerated this radical notion, and only allowed series to be sold and produced if they didn't cost any money.

Karl had pitched *StrangeLuck* to Fox, sold it, written a fabulous script, gotten it picked up.

Then found himself in the middle of a pitched battle between the creative and business sides of NWTV—ultimately agreeing to a pilot budget that he knew was inadequate, that everyone knew to be inadequate.

As production on the pilot commenced, Tartikoff ordered more money to be spent so *StrangeLuck* could be completed properly.

The gambit had worked; FBC had picked up the pilot to series.

Meaning that Karl then had to sit through a meeting with the head of business at NWTV in which he was subjected to verbal abuse that few of us would tolerate. He later told me that the man was “red-faced, shouting, almost spitting.”

For financial reasons, then, production on the *StrangeLuck* series was moved to Vancouver, where different union rules and especially Canadian tax credits allowed for what the business side called “significant savings.”

Pioneered by Stephen J. Cannell in 1989, the Canadian production model was quite common by 1996.

But doing this resulted in several compromises. On *TV 101* and *Eerie*, our sets were either downstairs from our offices, or a few hundred steps away in a studio soundstage. This access allowed writer-producers to be on set for the blocking of each scene, or for whatever consultation or new lines that might be needed. Then we could walk back to the offices and continue story-breaking in the room, or writing, or casting, or editing.

In the Canadian model, the writer-producer flew to Vancouver for their particular episode, usually a day before production in order to be present for the vital production meeting—then to make the automatic rewrites due to changed requirements (there were always rewrites out of a production meeting) and to be on set for most of, if not the entire, seven days of production.

The writer was away from home for at least eight days, over a weekend. So the trip could be a fun

vacation, but it was also a giant waste of time. The writer was separated from whatever needed to be done on matters other than this particular episode.

And essentially the writer just lingered around the set—available for consultation with the director as needed, and that could be, gosh, several times a day for a total of perhaps an hour of vital work. (Unless there was a problem, in which case the writer's entire day might be consumed.)

There were other issues with the Canadian model, as I saw it. Casting was limited—a series would cast 3-4 guest stars at most, then fly them to Vancouver for production. Every other role, day players, would be cast from the locals. I don't wish to denigrate the talents of those in that pool, but it was quite limited in terms of appearance, experience, and diversity.

Locations were also an issue. *StrangeLuck* had been conceived for production in L.A., with the expected variety of locations, gritty urban, glitzy Beverly Hills, mountains, alleys, oh yes, sunshine.

Vancouver had a nice variety of urban, coastal, suburban settings, but what it really didn't have was sunshine, at least not during the months we were scheduled to film.

That overcast, often rainy sky actually helped set a mood for *StrangeLuck*, as it really did for our Fox and studio stablemate, *The X-Files*. So call that a draw at worst.

In any case, dealing with production was Karl Schaefer's job, and that of our Canadian-based producer, John Peter Kousakis. He had worked on *Hunter* and *The Commish*, and knew all the challenges we faced. He put together a skilled, friendly crew.

This move to Vancouver was apparently a surprise and shock to the cast, especially Sweeney. His experience in features had seen him away from home for perhaps a few weeks, if that.

With *StrangeLuck*, he was committed to ten months in Canada, and possibly ten months a year for the next three, four, five, or more years.

This may not have been an issue for Fisher, who had worked in features and television and on stage on both coasts, but I believe it was for Sweeney.

He was doing his first television work of any length.

At the time of the series premiere, he had been quoted as saying he had turned to television work "because one TV series had more promotion than any of his features".

Possibly. I'm sure he believed it when he said it. But I soon began to believe that Sweeney wasn't suited for, or interested in, life as the lead of an action TV series.

Because the moment we began production—hell, the moment we began prep—Sweeney began acting out. He objected to stories, he objected to scenes, he objected to lines.

We, the writing staff, tried to accommodate him...and the rest of the cast, though I have no memory, now, of any major problems they presented, or any revision requests.

The early burden of this fell on Karl, since as executive producer and showrunner, he was in Vancouver with the new production team for prep on Episode 102, and for the early phases of filming.

It was a shock to him.

There is a relationship, a sort of dance that develops between a showrunner and the action lead. First off, the lead starts out grateful to be cast, and is usually eager to do whatever it takes to get the series going, and to have it picked up for a back nine or even a second season. The power lies totally with the showrunner, which is rather necessary, since only he or she has the complete vision of what's going on, with casting, writing, production post—especially in the early going, when members of the crew are often unfamiliar with each other, when budgets are arbitrary and need to be re-examined (as you can imagine, this is often a huge fight in itself), as the show actually needs to be written...and quickly.

The showrunner is consumed by the number of decisions he or she must make, and the only thing that makes it easier is having your action series lead eager to do whatever you say, boss.

The showrunner pays a price, of course. The joke, or actual truth is, the first season the lead is working for you...the second season you're working for the lead.

Sweeney had leaped right past season one into season two, thinking or certainly acting as if Karl and the rest of us were working for him. He objected to stories, he objected to lines, he objected to blocking of scenes—for all I know, he objected to lunch.



He behaved like Robert Blake in his series, *Baretta*, or any number of male action adventure actors of the era. (I can't think of many female action adventure leads of that era. There were a number of female leads in comedy series, and some of them were very badly behaved, too.)

It was tempting to think that Sweeney was, in fact, doing television because he had made himself unwelcome in the feature field.

What was really the problem was that Sweeney was having trouble learning his lines. This, of course, is the actor's primary job, and some are better at it than others. There are well-known examples of actors who have notable talent but only glancing relationships to scripts—Marlon Brando is probably the most famous, but Dustin Hoffman is high on that list.

Hoffman's situation is understandable...he is dyslectic, a condition that seriously affected his academic career, and might explain his need to work with a coach—usually a writer like Murray Schisgal—who can help him learn lines and scenes verbally...often revising things to the extreme annoyance of the actual scriptwriter.

I don't know if Sweeney was dyslectic or had any reading disability. I do know that he had trouble learning his lines. This won't kill you in features, where schedules are more forgiving, where even a lead actor is dealing with one or two pages of script per day.

In television it's more like six or eight, sometimes more.

To be fair to Sweeney—though why I should try to be fair isn't obvious to me—no series is perfect, and we had our share of script and production problems, though I don't remember that we ever went into prep—as first season series often do—without a completed script.

But there was the episode titled "Blind Man's Bluff" that, once edited, turned out, in its intermediate assembly, to have a running time of 32 minutes.

In 1995, the ideal final running time for a broadcast drama was more like 42 minutes—meaning that the first assembly ought to be 45 or 46, to allow for fine-editing.

We had an episode that was at least a dozen minutes too short.

How this happened I still don't know. I was busy writing "The Box." The episode had been written by Melinda M. Snodgrass, the *Star Trek: Next Generation* veteran and a good friend of mine, but as a freelancer. She had done her two drafts and was away. But it's not like she gave us, or we sent to prep, a 45 page draft. It was our usual 55 pages.

The story, which still sounds like fun, saw Chance mistaken for a hit man by a criminal group with ties to white supremacists. During the episode, Chance has to keep a murder from taking place while also making sure he doesn't become the target.

It was prepped, guest stars were cast, locations found. The usual. Filming, under the direction of John MacPherson with Mark Ralston (*Shawshank Redemption*) as our big bad guy, commenced.

But somehow, as production proceeded day by day, no one on the crew noticed that coverage was lacking (that is, different shots of the same scene) or just that the pacing of scenes was unusually fast.

When the horrible truth became known, well, the script supervisor got fired.

And we had to come up with a solution.

We got this news on a Friday. Our editors were working in offices on the same floor as the writers. I recall arriving to find Karl and the editors huddled and speaking in worried tones. John and Kerry and Matt and I joined them and heard this astonishing story.

The solution was this: create a new character, a radio disc jockey

Since I was available—or, as Karl put it, "the guy who had to dive on the grenade"—I wrote 17 pages of shock jock commentary over the weekend. On Monday we had a casting session and selected the jock,



who flew to Canada the next morning and was on the set the day after.

In one of our soundstages, the set crew had created a cheap radio studio. Using one of our B cameras and with Kousakis directing, the actor magnificently recorded 17 pages of dialogue—well, mostly monologue—in just a few hours. (All this took place while we were in production on the next episode on the schedule.)

That footage traveled to L.A., where it was integrated into the 32-minute cut, bumping it into the mid-forties for proper editing—

The result? “Blind Man’s Bluff” was one of our strongest episodes.

More *StrangeLuck*.

One episode actually ran smoothly.

Karl had a notion about a mysterious box—small enough to be held in your hand—that Chance finds, and which leads him on a *StrangeLuck*-style adventure.

It was my turn in the rotation, and while I liked the idea, I thought it more like a *Twilight Zone* or some other fantasy series. It seemed to have nothing to do with Chance and his personal quest. (I couldn’t figure out who made the box, what its powers were, etc.)

So, in my fashion, I questioned the concept and tried to re-shape the story until Karl lost patience and said, “Look, either write it or give it to someone else, because we’re doing it.”

It won’t surprise anyone that I wrote “The Box.”

I think it turned out just fine—yes, off concept—but a charming episode.

But here’s the funny part. It was the only episode where D.B. had essentially no notes, no issues, and did his part in a manner.

The only one. We appreciated the respite from Sweeney-required revisions and other nonsense, and perhaps foolishly thought we had turned a corner with him.

Nope. Next episode brought the same madness.

In the last week of October 1995, Kerry and John began fielding some closed-door phone calls, and being the decent people they were, quickly took me aside and told me: New World had made up its mind that they weren’t going to get rid of D.B. Sweeney, so the only choice was to get rid of Karl.

I had had my own conversations with Karl about what action NWTN would take with our Sweeney problem. (New World had also been yelling at Sweeney’s agents to get their client in line. This had produced no positive results.)

Karl had talked to Tartikoff about simply re-casting Chance Harper, noting that in his mind, “Superman is whoever wears the suit”.

But everyone knew that re-casting a series lead in the first season, or any season, was dicey. The entertainment press would focus on the change and publicize its causes (which would take any reporter about five minutes to discover), which would ensure that no one would be paying attention to the story-telling—just the scandal behind the series.

Another option, however, was straight from the old television playbook...create a new character just like your troublesome lead, and over several episodes slide him into the role.

And so Chance’s “lost” half-brother was born. Well, Eric Harper had been baked into the series from the beginning—learning of his existence was a big moment for Chance in the pilot.

But Karl had no firm plans for Eric, other than possibly allowing Chance to track him down at the end of the first season.

As the issues with D.B. persisted, we hit on the idea of essentially replacing Chance Harper with his brother, who would naturally be another victim or beneficiary of *StrangeLuck*. At some point Chance would go missing, and the stories—and production—could focus on Eric.

But on Friday, October 31, 1995—Halloween of course—we heard that Brandon Tartikoff was going to come to the *StrangeLuck* office in person.

We all understood that this meant Karl was going to be fired.

Which he was—though forewarned, he was able to give as good as he got in the awkward conversation.

John and Kerry were left in charge. Story development and script-writing continued with no obvious change.

They had the challenge of communicating with D.B. Things were better, briefly, probably because Sweeney thought he now had the upper hand on the series.

But soon John and Kerry were having the same problems with him. If nothing else, being a team, they were able to share the agony.

And so the series staggered through to the end of its order, with decent if not outstanding ratings,

As production wrapped and New World and Fox began to think of a season two, John and Kerry were asked if they would continue as showrunners.

No thanks, they said.

They asked me. By this time I had already suffered through one miserable showrunning gig and saw no upside to taking on a new nightmare. I said no.

Others were queried, and they also turned down the, er, chance.

And so *StrangeLuck*, one of the most promising and original fantasy series ever to grace broadcast television, died a premature death.

Not due to ratings, but due to personnel problems.

In truth, though, it was doomed when Karl was forced to leave. It was his vision, his life.

There was no point in doing the show without him.

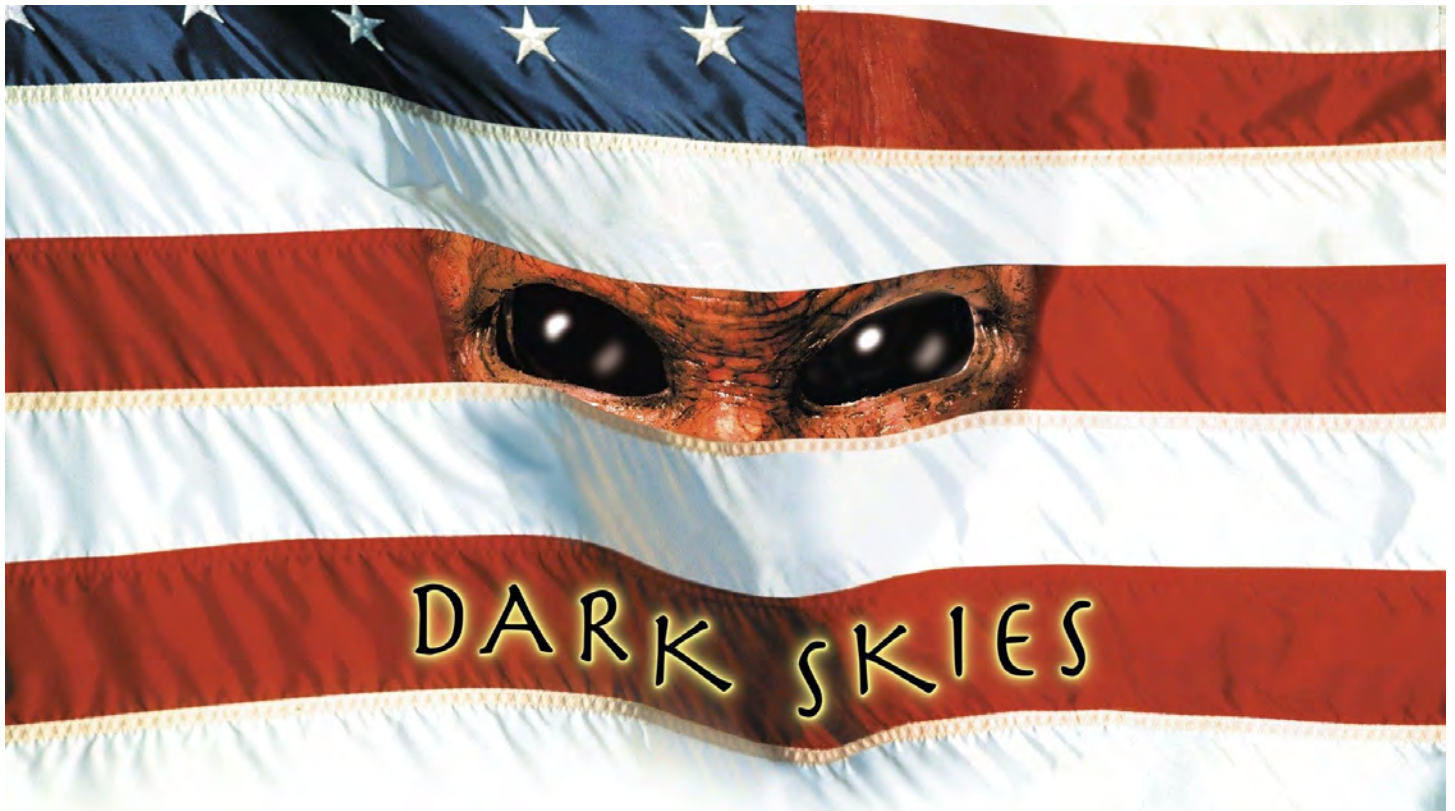


# DARK SKIES

## 25TH ANNIVERSARY

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*Dark Skies* debuted on September 21, 1996 and it ended on May 31, 1997 after one season and 19 episodes. The series starred Eric Close as John Loengard, J.T. Walsh as Frank Bach, and Megen Ward as Kimberly Sayers. The show is about the attempt to expose a secret alien invasion, which has been covered up. The show's co-creator Bryce Zabel offers us two looks at the show. The series originally aired on NBC in the U.S. *Dark Skies* is available on DVD, but it is not currently streaming.



Twenty-five years ago this fall, I was in Washington, D.C. producing the pilot of the NBC primetime television series *Dark Skies*. During some freezing November weather, my co-creator Brent Friedman and I watched director Tobe Hooper shoot key scenes from our pilot script, “The Awakening,” in front of the White House, Capitol Hill, and even the Reflecting Pool on the National Mall.

All of it was in service of a TV concept we'd cooked up the year before that said an extraterrestrial species known as the Hive planned to take the Earth away from humans by placing themselves into our populations before we could even recognize the danger.

The spin we put on that ball is that the series took place in the 1960s and every episode would twist actual history with legitimate UFO events, and we would use actual historical figures and name names.

Teasing our audience was not for us. We had zero interest in placing our characters on the outside looking in. Our opening scene was U-2 pilot Gary Powers encountering a massive UFO at 65,000 feet over the Soviet Union. We were going to take viewers directly inside the cover-up.

### Series Concept

Set in the 1960s, *Dark Skies* tells the story of idealistic congressional aide John Loengard who comes to D.C. to be part of JFK's "New Frontier" only to find himself recruited into Majestic-12 to fight against a growing alien threat. At the end of the pilot episode, President Kennedy is assassinated because of his plans to disclose UFO reality in his second term.

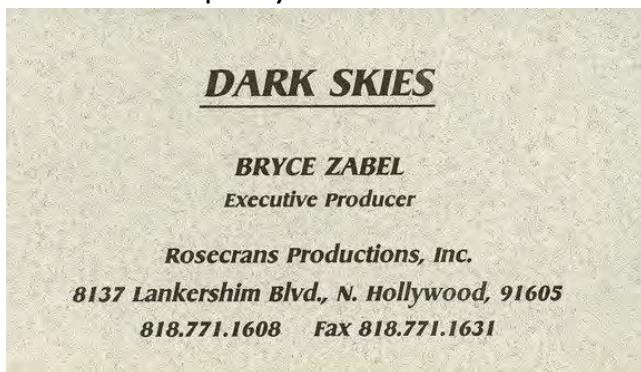
The series was as subversive as it sounds.

### Behind-the-Scenes

This article begins a multi-part series about the *Dark Skies* experience. My intent is to bear witness since, even as a cult-hit of the genre, the show is part of the history of this Phenomenon and how it has been reflected by our media.

Yet it is so much more than that. The show also appears to have attracted either the attention of the Phenomenon or the official cover-up that surrounds it, and maybe both. It became a meta experience with Brent and I squarely in the middle of it. It's one hell of a story.

Behind-the-scenes of the three year development and production of *Dark Skies*, this story includes a studio threat to "shut down your production and burn the negative," a mysterious stranger who crashed our premiere party and said he was from the Office of Naval Intelligence, and a personal experience with a cabinet-level official from the Reagan Administration that confirmed extra-terrestrial reality. These are real things that happened. We even had a bomb threat. Everything felt very high stakes at every level always.



It's a lot of behind-the-scenes drama for a series that didn't have the expected network ratings for Saturday nights at 8pm. Yet the people who did see it seem to universally say that they were affected by the experience of watching it. They knew it was about something.

*Dark Skies* clearly suffered by being offered to the public in a pre-DVR and pre-streaming world. If our viewers could have binged it all at once, my guess is that it would be far more widely known today than it is.

Still, it's clear that *Dark Skies* has had a place at the table on the issue of UFO/UAP reality. It earns this, I believe, through its central dramatic premise.

If we have been visited by extraterrestrials since at least 1947, and this knowledge has been hidden and suppressed, then the history you remember from growing up is only part of the story.

So, basically, we tried to write about the "other" part of the story. The one where humankind had contact with an extraterrestrial presence that was actively plotting our demise.

We made it personal by making our characters simultaneously confront this "we are not alone" reality while also hiding their actions and very existence from their friends, family, and fellow citizens.

That's why it still manages to shock and disturb. If just part of what it said was going on in the 1960s is true on the ET front, then imagine what's going on today?

Having a U.S. television network pony up over \$40MM to produce such a truly subversive concept and to air it on Saturday nights in prime time is shocking, even now.

By its very existence, the TV series raised uncomfortable questions about the world we live in. We



wrote a voice-over for the show's main titles that said the series premise as concisely as we could possibly put it, only had our main character record it as a breathless recording on the run with gunshots in the distance. We said this every week:

“They're here, they're hostile and powerful people don't want you to know. History as we know it is a lie.”

The words were written in 1996 even though they sound like they could come from a Tom DeLonge interview today.

Those main titles, by the way, won the Emmy award for “Outstanding Main Title Design.” [Check them out.](#)

At the end of the day, *Dark Skies* became a landmark 20-hour film treatise on Disclosure and how the history of the world was subverted by decades of denials that UFOs were real.

It was quite a ride, both on-screen and off-screen.

### Co-Conspirators

For a three year period, my co-creator Brent Friedman and I immersed ourselves in UFO history, including all the big cases from the 1960s, the cover-up both real and imagined, and the personalities involved on all sides.

At the same time, we skimmed our share of physics, biology, astronomy, and metaphysics. We saw everything through the lens of the consequences of human contact with extraterrestrial beings. We lived inside a Mobius strip of reality, constantly turning in on itself.

We were deeply sharing news, stories, research, opinions, and experiences about the UFO phenomenon on a daily, fully-engaged process. At the same time, we were also testing ideas about how they might best be expressed in the one-hour television series drama format. We had two brains worth of synapses firing on the same subject at the same time non-stop.

We became obsessed with creating a TV series that would go down in history as a piece of culture that, no matter how long it was on-the-air, would make its mark through the sheer power of its central ideas. We wanted it to be so shocking, but so obviously well-thought out, that a U.S. television network would roll the dice on it with us.



Bryce Zabel, Brent Friedman, Washington, D.C., November 1995

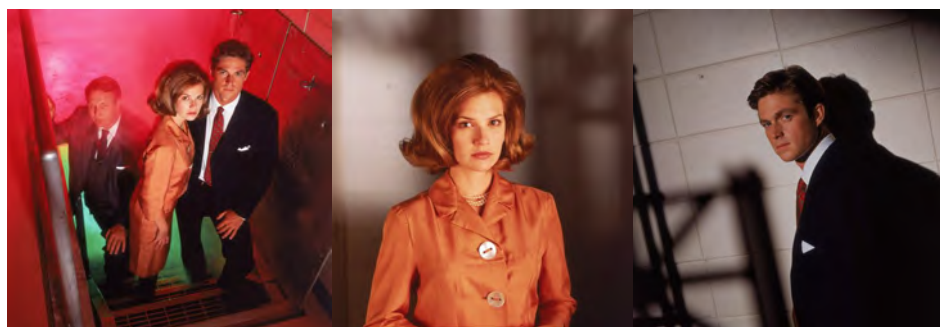
### The Loss of Innocence Gets Real in the 1960s

In order to make *Dark Skies* real, Brent and I had gambled on something counter-intuitive. We said to ourselves, let's make this a period piece about a guy who goes to DC to make a difference and loses all his innocence. As the main character, Loengard, says in an early voice-over:

“When I came to Washington at the beginning of JFK's New Frontier, I was 24 years old. I thought I knew everything. I found out that I knew nothing.”

### History as we know it is a lie

Actually, “History is a lie,” was our first draft of our catch phrase as presented in our Emmy-winning Main Title sequence. The network suggested we modify it to “History as we know it is a lie.”



This is how Hollywood often works. We made far fewer of these kinds of compromises than one might imagine, however, given the topics we covered.

Probably even more shocking than the series concept is the fact that the U.S. television network that endorsed our vision—NBC—literally spent millions of dollars (above the cost of production) promoting the show. The summer of 1996 had the network writing checks for wrapping buses, buying billboards, and scheduling magazine ads—all with the image that starts this article—an alien face staring through the American flag. We were the 8 pm start to NBC’s Saturday night Thrilllogy concept and they needed viewing eyes on their prize.

The NBC on-air promotional team was considered to be the best in the TV industry at the time and they went wild for *Dark Skies*. Here’s a [sample of their work](#) to see how America was first hearing about the series.

*Dark Skies* debuted on NBC on September 21, 1996 with a two hour pilot, “The Awakening.” On May 31, 1997, we aired our final episode. It made for a total of 20 hours of film.

This was not a series where the writers made it up as they went along. We knew where we were going and, while making concessions to incorporate good new ideas whenever possible, we also knew when to stick to the plan.

Yes, the plan...

### Top Secret, Eyes Only

As the story we were developing grew and grew, we came up with the idea of the “Briefing Book” as a tool that would help us organize and tame our own thinking on what we were creating together. It ended up being the primary marketing presentation for our network pitches.

And we went meta to the max, saying in our pitch that we had been asked by an agent of the Majestic-12 group to create a TV series “under the cover of fiction” in order to tell the truth about actual UFO reality.

In other words, we created a conspiracy to get the facts out before the public, then we invited studio and network executives to be a part of it. On one fine day in 1995, two networks—NBC and CBS—tried to buy the project on the same day.

That’s when things started to get extremely strange.



January 2, 1995

Bryce and Brent,

The truth must be told. You have been chosen as instruments to achieve this objective.

The truth, however, must not be represented as truth. Too many people who are needed in the struggle will die.

The cover of fiction must be used to present this truth. Those who fear the light will not want to bring attention to you by allowing your death.

This is the only way.

Do not be afraid.

The fight for Humanity demands your courage.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Loengard". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized font with large loops and a long tail on the final letter.

John Loengard

# DARK SKIES



# REBOOT THE DARK SKIES TV SERIES

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## BY BRYCE ZABEL



### **Respect|Reimagine|Reboot**

This past September marked the 25th anniversary of the *Dark Skies* series debut on NBC primetime. Interest in it has never gone away among sci-fi fans or those who pay attention to the history of UFO/UAP reality.

Audiences have responded to the in-your-face *Dark Skies* take on historical events from the 1960s blended with UFO news and sightings from the time. Viewers appreciated how the series looked for ways to tell its own story of extraterrestrial contact within the shadows and cracks that surround that known history.

What follows is now being reviewed by Sony TV, the owner of the series rights, based on its submission by the series creators.

### **The Property**

*Dark Skies* is an alien invasion series that mixes history with UFOs. It was the anchor series for NBC's "Thrillology" Saturday nights in 1996–1997. 20 hours were produced. It starred Eric Close (*Without a Trace*), Megan Ward (*Sleeper Cell*) and the late J.T. Walsh (*Slingblade*), and gave Jeri Ryan (*Star Trek*) her first starring role in television. It was produced by Columbia Television (now Sony) and Bryce Zabel Productions (now Stellar).

The series won the Emmy for Outstanding Main Titles and the writing of the pilot was nominated by the Writers Guild for Outstanding Television Longform for the work of the series creators Bryce Zabel and Brent V. Friedman. The pilot was directed by ground-breaking director Tobe Hooper (*Poltergeist*) working



with cinematographer Bob Butler (*Jaws*) to create a timeless historical look, using what they called “*The Godfather palette*.”

The executive ranks supporting the show have turned into a Who’s Who of Hollywood. The NBC executives were Warren Littlefield, David Nevins, and John Landgraf. The Sony executives were Jeff Sagansky, Jeff Wachtel, and Sarah Timberman.

### **The Original American Episodes (20 Hours)**

Set in the 1960s, *Dark Skies* tells the story of idealistic congressional aide John Loengard who comes to D.C. to be part of JFK’s “New Frontier” only to find himself recruited into the secret Majestic-12 organization. He joins the fight against a growing threat from an extraterrestrial Hive species that plans to take the Earth away from humans by placing themselves into our populations before we recognize the danger. The NBC/Sony series used real events like Beatlemania, Vietnam, the Warren Commission, and the Summer of Love. It wove them into UFOlogical keystones that included Roswell, Project Blue Book, Area 51, and the Betty and Barney Hill abduction. Along the way, real people became characters across multiple arcs, like Bobby Kennedy, Carl Sagan, Howard Hughes, John Lennon, Timothy Leary, and many more.

*“I thought I knew everything. I found out I knew nothing.*

*They’re here, they’re hostile and powerful people don’t want you to know. History is a lie.”*

– John Loengard, *Dark Skies* pilot, ‘The Awakening’

After *Dark Skies* left the broadcast networks, Syfy aired the series in its entirety multiple times into the early 2000s, causing it to gain cult status when viewers could watch all the episodes without interruption.

### **Growing Respect in the 2020s**

*Dark Skies* continues to inspire new fans today. Many respond to its actual relevance in a world where the U.S. military recently confirmed the reality of three striking cockpit videos from F-18 Super Hornet jets showing UFO encounters, and even *The New York Times* has published investigative reporting about the likelihood that wreckage from crashed UFOs exists.



In 2020, Obverse Books in Edinburgh published a book about the series aimed at the existing fan base. Author Matthew Kresal says:

“The series has proven to be ahead of its time...and remains unique. The combination of relatively recent history with the blossoming of UFO lore and an on-going, long-form narrative remains unmatched by anything else in the genre. Like the shadowy conflict it portrayed, *Dark Skies* has lingered in the background. At least, for now.”

Within the last several months, series co-creator Bryce Zabel has appeared on numerous platforms where the subject of *Dark Skies* always comes up. They include the global radio sensation Coast-to-Coast AM, Mystery Wire, Travel Channel, and many others. Every single one of them wants to know: “When are you guys going to reboot this?”

### A Global Fan Base

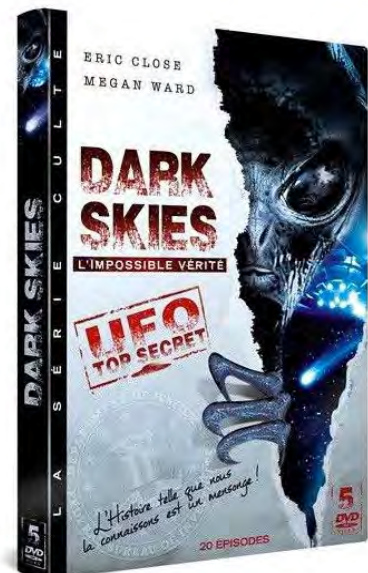
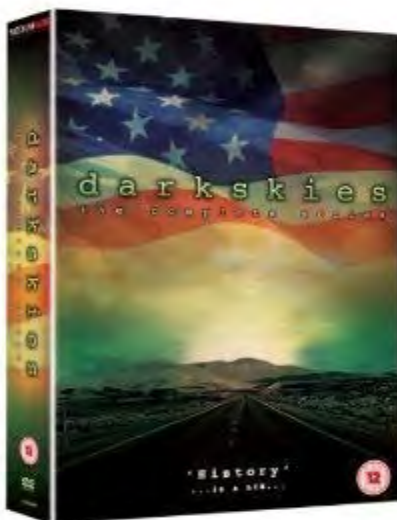
In the 2010s, fans were finally rewarded with being able to see the series the way it was intended, and the numbers indicate they liked what they’ve seen a lot and would like to see more of it.

After over a decade, mostly over a dispute over music licensing rights, *Dark Skies* was finally released on DVD. Fans who had missed key episodes because they weren’t home on Saturday nights at 8pm could now watch them in sequence or binge them in a lost weekend.

- Shout Factory curated the DVD collection, and produced over four hours of a compelling documentary that contained interviews with series leads and creators. On Amazon, the collection has nearly 300 reviews with a 4.4/5 average. The comments are incredibly positive.
- Medium Rare released a UK-only DVD collection. On Amazon, the collection has nearly 200 reviews with a 4.3/5 average. DVD sets have been released in France and other countries.
- These collections inspired a new generation of fans, reviewers, podcasters, and bloggers to reconsider the series and what it meant.
- Fan-favorite Topless Robot wrote a feature article, “11 Reasons Why *Dark Skies* Is Better Than the *X-Files*.”
- Just last year, *Screencraft* magazine listed the *Dark Skies* Series Bible in their list of “21 Series Bibles That Every TV Screenwriter Should Read.”

That series Bible contained a timeline that went from 65-million BC to 2050 AD. The 20 produced hours of the classic series barely scratch the surface of story possibilities.

In the original series mid-season, a so-called “bottle show” was produced that was set against the historical backdrop of John Loengard’s testimony before the Warren Commission that was investigating the murder of President Kennedy. Producers used that episode, “The Warren Omission,” as a chance to show new viewers what had gone on in the series previously and to surround that review with a riveting tale about one of America’s greatest national crimes. [The extended clip is here.](#)



## Toward a New Franchise

In 2021, a new *Dark Skies* could pick up the already fan-embraced mythology of the classic series and take it in a new direction. Such a series could take any of the following forms:

### 1) A Complete Reboot of the Original Series

Also set in the 1960s, it would make use of today's actors and state-of-the-art special effects to tell the classic story of John Loengard's recruitment into Majestic-12 in a compelling new way.

In the same way that the *Star Trek* origin and characters could grow from the original series to the franchise we know today, *Dark Skies* would reimagine its own Universe. They have their Captain Kirk that multiple actors can portray, we have our John Loengard.

### 2) The Story Continues Decade by Decade

Under this scenario, we pick up where the classic series left off, starting in the 1970s, complete with Watergate, oil embargoes, disco, John Lennon's UFO sighting, and all the music, fashion, and culture of the era. It would blend actors from the original series and a new generation of actors to create the world.

Under this scenario, the series would move on one decade in each new season. This option that is the most true to the classic series inspiration.

### 3) Present Day with Flashbacks to the Past

In this scenario, over fifty years have passed since the lead character of our classic series, John Loengard (Eric Close), was left on board a Hive Mothership. An entire new diverse cast would be alive now but Loengard would reappear today as our man-out-of-time, like Steve Rogers, trying to cope with the changes he sees.

*For demonstration purposes only*, using footage from the original series, mixed with clips from other sources, and actors from other films as representational only, here is a [short sizzle video](#) that re-imagines a new *Dark Skies* series, set in our present day. It's to serve as a launching pad to talk about the possibilities only.

The story engine here is that the malevolent alien race's grand scheme as suggested in the original series has now reached a tipping point. Loengard becomes the "Old Man," leading the modern resistance in the shadows, when he discovers that the Majestic-12 organization was infiltrated by the Hive and disbanded decades before.

## Series Continuity

All three of the original series leads, Eric Close, Megan Ward, and Jeri Ryan have expressed an interest in reprising their characters for any new series continuation or reboot. Subject to availability, all would be available for, at minimum, a limited arc to allow a creative hand-off to a new generation of *Dark Skies* characters, and all have said they would be interested in more significant attachments.

"I would absolutely be into anything you do with this project!" — Jeri Ryan

"I want to be a part of it." — Eric Close

"I would love nothing more than to revisit Kim." — Megan Ward





Close, Ryan, and Ward have all established their own independent fanbases since appearing on *Dark Skies*.

- Jeri Ryan, in particular, is embraced by the *Star Trek* universe for her role as Seven-of-Nine in both *Voyager* and *Picard*, plus starring roles on *Bosch*, *Body of Proof*, *Boston Public*, and *Shark*.
- Eric Close has established a compelling TV presence with his work on *Without a Trace*, *Nashville*, *Suits*, *Now and Again*, and *The Magnificent Seven*.
- Megan Ward has created memorable characters in episodic arcs on multiple series in the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* franchise, plus *Melrose Place*, *Party of Five*, *Sleeper Cell*, and *Boomtown*.

## Going Global



Given the new global marketplace that has sprung to life since the classic series aired on an American broadcast network, *Dark Skies* could break new ground again, not only for what it is creatively, but for how viewers will see it.

*Dark Skies* could become a global franchise where other countries produce their own independent series, set in the same creative Universe, but featuring their own actors, locations and history, both national and UFO.

Imagine our classic Hive alien looking out at us from behind the Union Jack (or any other country's flag in the TV production world).

The UFO/UAP reality issue is a global phenomenon. Even while creating and producing the flagship U.S. series, it was always the intent that the idea could become a global brand since an alien invasion is, by definition, a world-wide problem and not something that only the U.S. need worry about.

*Dark Skies* is, by design, a big picture concept. No matter where it is set or the time period it inhabits, a global alien invasion that has been going on since the end of World War II has reached a critical turning point when the danger has never been greater.

## The World is More Ready Than Ever

Public awareness that we probably are not alone is at an all-time high. The *New York Times* put the reality of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena on their front page on December 17, 2017. The government has confirmed it has been studying UFOs throughout the 2000s. The Senate Intelligence Committee has demanded a full report from the DNI by June 25, 2021.

As the present-day focus shifts beneath us, it makes past historical events come alive. The *New York Times*' latest article, for example, is about the likelihood that the U.S. had crash wreckage from UFOs in its possession. Can a confirmation of Roswell really be far behind? Every single decade since World War II





comes with thousands of sightings and cases, many of them already famous. All of them are fair game for the *Dark Skies* treatment.

### The Series DNA Still Exists

The reason that *Dark Skies* can become a hit in the 2020s is simple. It is built on a solid creative foundation, a tested sci-fi genre embraced by viewers and fans alike, and it speaks to the current interest in UFO/UAP reality.

Any new series in a new *Dark Skies* franchise would share our creative canon while adding in new writing talent. It is no different than *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* as an idea that incorporates new ideas into the grand vision.

*Dark Skies* can be a classic reboot, a new continuation through the twisted history of alien contact, a present-day action thriller, or a global franchise. Or all at once.

The story DNA embedded in the *Dark Skies* Universe is that there is a battle going on, taking place in the shadows, and the stakes are the fate of humanity.

They're still here, they're still hostile and powerful people still don't want you to know.

Respect, Reimagine, Reboot.

*Dark Skies*.





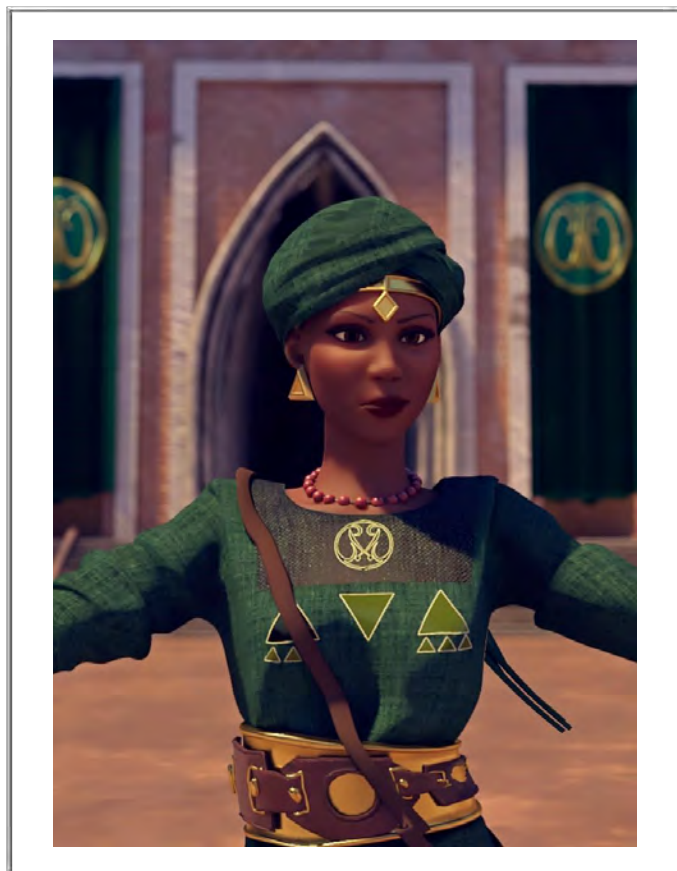
# NIGERIAN ANIMATED WORKS INCHING THEIR WAY TO INTERNATIONAL TV

←—————→  
**BY OGHENECHOWWE  
DONALD EKPEKI**

*As I noted in my introduction, when I approached Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki about looking about writing about Nigerian shows that had been cancelled, he responded, “If you are looking at spotlighting African or even Nigerian shows, you won't find many that were cancelled. The problem with our stories being not that they get cancelled but that they don't make it to big screen in the first place. Home video, yea. But that's a different thing. If you mean TV as I think you do, then not much. I could spotlight a lot of high potential indie shows crowdfunded and made by creators on the continent and in Nigeria that don't make it to big screen in an effort to draw attention to them. Quite a lot of them, animated shows mostly. Amazing stuff.” Since a major part of the idea behind this issue was to discover television shows of which the editors had been unaware, this seemed like an excellent suggestion.*

The Nigerian animation scene has seen a major boom of late, with a number of animated works by both homegrown and diasporan writers and animators being developed and itching to make the jump to international TV. Nigeria is home to a teeming mass of talented writers, artists, and creators of all kinds. Being the most populated nation on the African continent, Nigeria is home to about 200 million people from almost four hundred ethnic groups speaking up to five hundred languages. Its culture is rich and diverse, with legends and myths and beliefs that make excellent speculative fiction stories, which are being written and adapted to different forms daily. And a lot of it making or itching to make the jump to TV—and excellent TV they would be if they did make that jump.

A number of Nigerian operated studios, both home grown and diasporan, have arisen and are responsible for this novel interest in speculative animation, from Anthill to Komotion to Youneek Studios and many more. Despite that Nigeria is dubbed the poverty capital of the world, with the largest number of poor people on earth and overtaking India which has more than four times Nigeria's population, Nigeri-





an creators and animators have been able to obtain the funds to develop these projects by attracting investors, crowdfunding, and obtaining funds from wherever they may. This has yielded an amazing number of exciting projects all ready to make the jump to international TV and earn their creators remunerations for their hard work and innovation. Nigeria currently boasts the second largest film industry after Hollywood, no mean feat for a nation with dire economic standing. This is testament to the passion and dedication and fortitude of Nigerian artists, writers, and creators. And this passion and dedication is being manifested in the animations industry as well.

Below are some interesting animated shows developed or currently being developed by Nigerians and which are attempting to make or already making the jump to international TV:

**Iwájú** is a collaboration by Disney Animation Studios company and comic book company Kugali, run by Tolu Olowofoyeku, Ziki Nelson, and Hamid Ibrahim. The sci-fi series *Iwájú* will debut on Disney+ in 2022. Disney [tweeted](#) has about it.

**Malika: Warrior Queen** by Roy Okupe, the founder of Youneek Studios, in collaboration with Anthill Studios. This story is inspired by Queen Amina of Zazzau (Zaria), a 16th century northern Nigerian ruler. Malika is a tale rich with African history and culture and follows the exploits of the queen and military commander Malika who, after the death of her father, tries to keep the Kingdom of Azzaz from splitting in half in civil war. Roy Okupe is an award-winning filmmaker, author, speaker, and entrepreneur. His company Youneek Studios recently inked a deal with Dark Horse Comics to co-release ten graphic novels of existing and new material from the studio, featuring original superheroes based on African history and folklore. Hence, perhaps more amazing content than just Malika will be making the jump to TV from Youneek Studios. You can see the [animated pilot](#) of Malika online.

**Sango: Dawn of Thunder** is an animated show developed by Komotion Studios featuring the story of Sango the *orisha* known as the god of thunder. The studio released a short film as a teaser and crowd-funded in an effort to make more of the animated story. Crowdfunding efforts failed and foreign offers came with unsatisfactory stipulations; however, the creators were able to secure reasonable funding and production is currently underway. You can see [the teaser](#).

**Obi** is an animated series currently in development by HBO Max and Nigerian-American cartoonist, Obi Arisukwu, in collaboration with Michael B. Jordan's production company, Outlier Society. According to the synopsis released by HBO Max, "Obi is about a 30-year-old man-child chasing his dream to become an artist while navigating adulthood with his friends. *Obi* is an adaptation of Obi Arisukwu's popular Instagram comic strips. This project is co-created by Obi Arisukwu and Arthur Harris (*The Last OG*)." The animated series will also be produced by Michael Schreiber of Studio71, and David Devries. Obi Arisukwu, an artist and illustrator, has worked on other projects, comic strips, and artworks such as *Hair Love* and *Rapunzel*.

Apart from these four animated shows currently in development, a number of platforms, studios, and creators are whipping up exciting works that would make excellent speculative fiction TV as well, and possibly be adapted sometime soon. One of those is Comic Republic, a Nigerian online multimedia company that specializes in the creation and digital distribution of indigenously created comic books on its online platform. It was founded by Jide Martin and is responsible for the publication of several promising titles like *Guardian Prime*, *Ireti*, *Amadioha*, *Visionary*, *Trials of the Spear*, *Eru*, and many others. They recently inked a deal with agency giant CAA, so we can expect big projects from them in the near future.

Other creators and speculative prose fiction writers making the jump to TV are: Nigerian-American writer Nnedi Okorafor with her novel *Who Fears Death* already being adapted by HBO, while her novella *Binti* is being adapted by Hulu; Jordan Ifueko, a Nigerian-American writer based in the US who announced that her *Ray-Bearer* series is being adapted by Netflix; and British-Nigerian writer Tade Thompson's whose "The Murders of Molly Southbourne" novella is also coming to TV. According to Deadline, Edgar Wright's new production company, Complete Fiction, is developing the series of novellas in collaboration with Netflix.

In addition to these big names and prose speculative fiction authors whose works are already being adapted, the speculative prose and short fiction industry also has a number of promising works that would make great TV either as standalone episodes of anthologies or even complete TV series adaptations. *Dominion: An anthology of Speculative Fiction from Africa and the African Diaspora* edited by Zelda Knight and Oghe-



nechowwe Donald Ekpeki has a number of such promising short stories. The anthology won the British Fantasy Award and has been a finalist in the Locus and This Is Horror awards. It has a number of promising works which would make great TV if adapted, such as “Convergence In Chorus Architecture” by Dare Segun Falowo which was nominated for the Subjective Chaos kind of awards and “Ife-Iyoku Tale of Imadeyunuagbon” by Oghenechowwe Donald Ekpeki, which won the Otherwise award and is a finalist in the Nebula, British Science Fiction Association, the Theodore Sturgeon, and Nommo awards. There is also the *Africa Risen* anthology co-edited by a Nigerian, Oghenechowwe Donald Ekpeki alongside Zelda Knight and Sheree Renée Thomas, forthcoming on TorDotCom in 2022. It boasts an amazing number of excellent Nigerian short fiction writers as seen from its [Table of Contents](#).

The Africanfuturism anthology edited by Nigerian writer and editor Wole Talabi, which was nominated for the Locus Award also contains a number of excellent speculative short fiction stories which would do excellently as animated TV shows. *Omenana* magazine, the only Nigerian solely speculative fiction magazine, also boasts an interesting number of award-winning and impressive speculative short fiction writers and their works. It would also be a good place to scout for TV worthy content and which one can predict will see a number of its works adapted in the near future if they are not already being adapted.

Nigeria and its animators, writers, and other creators are positioned to contribute richly to the animated TV industry that will be emerging from the continent. Hopefully, these contributions will come in the not too distant future as the genre could use fresh injection of brilliance and diversity.



# BRIMSTONE

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# JOHN KLIMA

*Brimstone debuted on October 23, 1998 and it ended on February 12, 1999 after one season and 13 episodes. Starring Peter Horton as Ezekiel Stone, John Glover as the Devil with Lori Petty and Teri Polo in recurring roles. Brimstone was about a New York City cop who went to Hell after he died and is returned to Earth by the Devil to try to capture 113 souls who have escaped Hell. The series originally aired on Fox in the U.S. Although a DVD of the series was released, it is no longer in print, nor is the show currently streaming.*



In what feels like a cruel joke with many shows that get cancelled early, *Brimstone*'s episodes were shown out of sequence. Any narrative arc the showrunners created in writing the episodes is disrupted when they're shown out of order. For example, after the pilot, Stone is inexplicably in Los Angeles and not New York. It takes three episodes before it's explained that he headed to Los Angeles to look for his widow (the thirteen episodes aired in this order: 1, 3, 4, 6, 2, 7, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 11, and 13). There's even a New York-based blind priest that Stone confides in that also ends up moving to Los Angeles. It's hard to hold onto an audience when a network adjusts a show's episode schedule without giving credence to narrative thread.

*Brimstone* also received little promotion and moved around the network's schedule before becoming the lead-in to Fox's *Millennium* (from *X-Files* creator Chris Carter) on Friday nights; and who wouldn't want to watch two gritty, bleak hours of television at the end of the work week? The late 90s were the era of NBC's Must-See TV on Thursday nights: *ER*, *Friends*, and *Frasier* with low-hanging fruit comedies like *Veronica's Closet* and *Jesse* benefitting from being sandwiched between more popular shows. Most of the top 30 shows of the time were light and positive; this was not a good time to be a religious-themed horror police procedural. A dark, oddball show like *Twin Peaks* had been off the air and out of the public zeitgeist for almost a decade. Audiences were just getting captivated by anti-hero shows like HBO's *Sopranos*. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* were on the WB network, but they more along the lines of quirky and snarky than dark and brooding (yes, *Angel* was dark and brooding but his supporting cast was not). *Brimstone* was just different enough from a lot of what was on TV.

What the show did well, it did really well. The two male leads were perfectly cast. I was the wrong demographic to have been a fan of Horton in *thirtysomething*. You can feel the weariness in Stone as he faces his Herculean task, but somehow, he finds the will to keep going. Horton also does an excellent job of playing the man lost in time. It's something that could come off as hokey in the hands of a less skilled craftsman but it's one of the consistent successes that runs through the show. There's at least one moment in every episode where Stone encounters something he's never heard of from new NFL teams to the Internet.

The show's other lead, John Glover, is a revelation as the devil. I had never seen Glover before *Brimstone* (I would have hardly been aware of his Tony-award winning work in *Love! Valor! Compassion!* or its subsequent movie). The producers intended for him to only be in an episode or two but the chemistry between the two leads was so strong they increased the size of his role. It takes real skill to be both charming and nasty at the same time and Glover has skill in spades. You never forget he's the devil. He is quick to remind Stone who's in charge and what the cost is should he fail. But there is mischievousness in Glover's devil as well as a petty spite when Stone tries to do something other than the devil's task. I often wondered if the devil didn't have more pressing things to worry about than Stone and his task, but Glover was so much fun on the screen I wouldn't want him in the show any less.

Aside from Horton and Glover, *Brimstone* features excellent performances from Lori Petty as Max, the front desk clerk of Stone's Los Angeles motel and Teri Polo as Los Angeles Detective Sergeant Delilah Ash. While both Horton and Glover deliver dry one-liners with aplomb, it is Petty's slightly off-kilter clerk who infuses much-needed levity into this otherwise bleak show. It took me a while during this rewatch but it struck that the types of characters that Kat Dennings often plays are similar to the roles that Petty had in this point of her career. Max constantly harasses Stone because of the things he doesn't know due to his time in hell.

Polo and Horton have great, if a trifle-bit formulaic, chemistry as fellow police officers. Their intentions are often at odds on how to solve murders around Los Angeles which provides some nice tension between them. Ash finds it odd that Stone is always at her crime scenes but doesn't really enact obstacles to stop it from happening. Stone has obtained a Los Angeles police officer's badge, which gives him a lot of freedom in his investigations.

One of the things I was excited about in watching *Brimstone* twenty years later is that I would see actors that had gone on to bigger and better roles. It's one of the things I've enjoyed while re-watching TV shows with my kids. Alas, this was not the case. Octavia Spencer was in an episode and she might be the biggest name that was relatively unknown at the time. The rest—Mark Pellegrino (*Lost*, *Being Human*), Michael



Harney ([Orange Is the New Black](#)), and Mark Valley ([Keen Eddie](#), [Boston Legal](#)) while not unknowns are also not box-office superstars. Curtis Armstrong ([Revenge of the Nerds](#), [Moonlighting](#), [New Girl](#)) is in an episode playing the kind of throwaway oddball he always plays. One episode did feature Louise Fletcher ([One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest](#)) as a mom whose son came back from the dead and while it was great to see her on the show, it was a small role. The lack of future stars makes sense though. Had *Brimstone* had been the starting ground for a series of today's mega stars, more people would know about the show and it definitely would be available on DVD.

The show was also remarkably even handed when presenting complicated characters, particularly with Stone. Where it would be easy to paint him as someone wronged who is working to come back to the right side because of injustice, the show goes out of its way to depict Stone as imperfect. While he was a highly decorated officer, he was also not a "good" cop or person. He plants evidence on criminals, he talks about roughing up kids, specifically black kids, who looked at him the wrong way. He takes his wife's rape as a personal affront and rather than focusing on helping her, Stone decides the best option is to avenge her, i.e., deal with his pain and not hers. When her rapist is set free, Stone murders him and makes it look like an overdose. It's almost as if he's fetishized his feelings for his wife to the point where his interpretation of their relationship is what constitutes reality.

Beyond Stone, the show often goes to lengths to get the audience on the side of the damned. It doesn't happen for all the damned, but there are quite a few where Stone understands why they did what put them in hell and has serious qualms about sending them back. In an odd *It's A Wonderful Life*-style episode, Glover plays both the devil and an angel showing Stone where he went wrong and where he's gone right. You can see Stone growing or at least acknowledging that he wasn't always right. In *Brimstone* people face consequences for their actions and that applies to the hero, too.

\* START SPOILERS \*



The last point I want to make about what was done right is a major plot point of the show and quite the spoiler. The show is hard enough to track down that it perhaps doesn't matter. Regardless, skip the next few paragraphs if you don't want things spoiled.

As the relationship between Stone and Ash heats up, you start to feel that maybe Stone is getting ready to let his wife go and have the two of them move on with their lives. But as things start to get romantic in the detective's car, Ash stops after she gets Stone's shirt off

and sees all his tattoos. When Ash declares that she thought she knew who he was but now she doesn't, Stone shakes his head and leaves the car, not really understanding what happened.

But the truth is that Ash is not a Los Angeles detective but actually Ashur Bataku, an ancient Canaanite priestess who organized the breakout from hell. She stopped her make-out session with Stone because she saw her real name tattooed on his chest. Stone suspects nothing and rushes to a church where he believes that Ash is in danger. When he arrives, she's tied to an altar with a man nearby ready to plunge a knife into her. Stone and the audience realize together that Ash is the one speaking in an unknown language as the man stabs himself. Ash takes advantage of Stone's confusion and escapes.

When this reveal happened in real time to me, I literally gasped out loud. I had no idea it was coming. I never considered Polo's character anything more than an excellent foil for Horton. That certainly says a lot about how I viewed media and women's roles in television twenty years ago. Obviously, I knew the twist was coming this time around, but I also think the showrunners did a good job of making it a genuine surprise. Ash shows up again in the final episode of the show, displaying a greater set of powers than any foe Stone has faced to date due to her lengthy stay in hell.

*Brimstone* was cancelled partway through shooting its fourteenth episode (there's two minutes or so of the episode that can be found online) so it's unknown how the showrunners might else have used Ash.



Polo's performance stood toe-to-toe with Horton and Glover, and it would be easy to see her showing up again and again. Her presence even added to the relationship between the devil and Stone as the devil could understand how she kept getting away—she escaped him in hell after all—but also annoyed that she keeps getting away.

\* END SPOILERS \*

I have to admit, I did not enjoy my rewatch of *Brimstone* as much as I remember enjoying it in its day. The show never got a chance to develop despite a lot of promise. There was a strong cast. Much of the writing was strong as well and included a decent amount of social commentary. A lot of the issues brought up in *Brimstone* still exist today. Scenes with a Neo-Nazi spouting white nationalism were still shocking. The flawed hero/antihero is something we see come to its full power shortly after *Brimstone* gets cancelled with characters like Tony Soprano, Don Draper, and Walter White. At the time, however, audiences were used to heroes who were good and villains who were bad. Asking to see flaws in the protagonist or even sympathize with the bad guys was unusual.

The show was extraordinarily inconsistent on how it handled its own world building. Initially Stone wakes up in the same clothes he died in carrying the same objects he had, like some sort of video game respawn. Eventually this starts to slip and while he doesn't get new outfits, they do start to see wear and tear. Sometimes Stone had superhuman strength and speed and other times he didn't. Stone would occasionally jump from steep heights without damage and other times jump out of the way of danger. I would buy that Stone didn't always remember that he has supernatural powers, but it would have been easy for the devil to question him about this which never happened.

My biggest pet peeve was that it was very unclear how Stone figured out which soul to go after next. Sometimes the devil dropped innocuous clues, but other times it seemed that Stone just stumbled onto them. There could have been some humor and tension if Stone had a paper list of the names of the souls that was in constant danger of blowing away or burning up. Stone was fine once he had a soul to investigate as his police officer skills were still useful even if he didn't know how to use a computer.

You could argue that Stone knew about which souls to gather from the tattoos, but he was completely oblivious as to them beyond the fact that it was the names of the damned. A deleted scene from the eleventh episode shows Stone placing pins in a US map while reading articles from a host of newspapers with headlines like "My Dentist is the Marquis de Sade." It's too bad it was cut because in just a minute or so of screen time the show established how Stone tracked down the damned.

There's a scene where he goes into a college's admission office and by just flashing his badge, he's able to confirm that his wife was a student at the college and get an address for her. Maybe it's me, but I feel like schools are more protective of student information than that. It became almost comical how his badge worked like a magic artifact that just made it so that people let him into active crime scenes or give him information. Occasionally a character wonders why Stone is asking questions they already gave to the police, but then they go ahead and talk to Stone anyway. The fact that Stone was able to traipse through crime scenes without impediment drove me nuts.

Yes, I know this is a fictional show and there are liberties to be taken and disbelief to be suspended, but the writing unfortunately often comes across as lazy. I'll suspend my disbelief that people can shapeshift and fall from rooftops without damage. But if you set a show in our world in relatively recent times you should make the effort to have the non-supernatural aspects in the show work like they do in the real world. It would have been easy for the devil to give Stone a magical badge that would make it appear that he was part of whichever police force worked in the location he was in. Given both the deleted scene and the number of souls, it's likely Stone would have to be looking for souls in places other than New York or Los Angeles and the thought of him procuring a new badge every place he went feels like poor writing. Even so, police forces know exactly who is investigating a crime scene and who should be there and who shouldn't. Stone shouldn't be able to get near a crime scene without creating problems. Again, poor writing that didn't bother me the first time through.

It was as if the creators had the idea for the show but didn't know what else they would do with it.

Was Stone going to stay in Los Angeles and hope that all the escaped souls migrated to him? That would be easy to explain by saying that he worked as a living magnet that drew the escaped souls to him since they knew he wanted to send them back. Or Stone could travel the country (the world?) and find the souls wherever they were. Perhaps this would have been explored if more episodes had been made but there was no indication in the thirteen filmed episodes that the showrunners planned to move away from Los Angeles once they got there. The show feels like it was made without a clear sense of the story it was trying to tell. That's part of what makes *Brimstone* feel like a show that was cancelled too soon. There are a lot of good ideas and good execution of the material to make you want to see where it was going to go.

*Brimstone* lives in that odd online void from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s where you can't find what you want. Trying to find information about the show is very difficult. It had a website when the show was on air, but it was not archived in a way that you can look at it today. There's a fan site available via the Internet Archive that features scripts of the existing episodes, but its focus was more fan writing and creating scripts for episodes that never existed. There are a handful of contemporary reviews that can be found, but they were mostly written prior to the show airing. The only information about the show getting cancelled is typically a single line mentioning low ratings. Shows about heaven, hell, and the afterlife have always been popular with audiences (shows like [Highway to Heaven](#), [Touched by An Angel](#), [Pushing Daisies](#), etc.). More recently, there are shows like [The Good Place](#), [Good Omens](#), [Supernatural](#), [Lucifer](#), [Constantine](#), etc. that have interesting takes on the afterlife with flawed, well-acted characters. If *Brimstone* were made today, it would last more than thirteen episodes.



# BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR!

(A.K.A. THE CAUTIONARY TALE OF PETER DRAGON)

← BY DAVE MCCARTY →

*Action debuted on September 16, 1999 and it ended on December 2, 1999 after one season and 8 episodes, although additional episodes were burned off on FX in December of '99 and August and September of the following year, the last three episodes were burned off. The series starred Jay Mohr as Peter Dragon, Ileana Douglas as Wendy Ward, Buddy Hackett as Uncle Lonnie, Jarrad Paul as Adam Rafkin, and Jack Plotnick as Stuart Glazer. The series was a send up on Hollywood culture, focusing on producer Peter Dragon. The series originally aired on Fox in the U.S. Action has been available on DVD, but appears to be out of print. It does, however stream on Showtime and Amazon Prime.*



The candle that burns twice as bright only lasts half as long, eh? So how bright does a TV show that's only going to last 8 episodes before the axe get to burn? The answer is "As bright as it wants to because that's what Peter Dragon says and unfortunately for you, he's employee of the ^%\$(%\$%ing millennium."

In the late 90's, [Bosom Buddies](#) creator Chris Thompson had an idea to do a TV series about Hollywood. Rather than the usual self-congratulatory navel gazing pap that might be pitched...he wanted to do a show about the ugly, ugly, smarmy, and just plain ugly side of making films. His idea was to follow the exploits of a foul mouthed big budget wunderkind producer who is vacuuming the carpets in his office to find the final shreds of his thrice-sold soul to sell those again for his next hit film.

The premise had teeth and the initial work on it looked great, the only issue was where could you show such a series without sanitizing it? The plan was to take it to HBO, which had recently gotten into making its own series content, beginning with the prison show

*Oz* in 1997. It was a match made in heaven...a TV show built to create newer and filthier never-before-seen-in-nature cursing airing on a network where such a spectacle was not only allowed, but was likely to gather an audience. It was destiny, it couldn't lose...and that's why [Action](#) is getting ready to release its 22nd season this spring...oh, wait, yeah...that didn't happen.



HBO loved the concept and wanted to make the series, they were just a little tight on cash because they were trying to start up two new shows and figured they needed to save at least some of their money to get their other freshman series (*The Sopranos*) off the ground...so they offered what they could but it didn't seem enough to Thompson (and his partner Joel Silver by then). In order to get more money from HBO, the producers shopped the series around to other broadcasters to raise the interest and get a bidding war going. Boy howdy, did they succeed. The folks at Fox loved it. Seriously, they *loved* it. So much so that as soon as they got into the mix, HBO never had a chance...so the series that was going to focus on all the words you can't say on broadcast television was picked up for production on broadcast television. What could possibly go wrong?

The casting was inspired. Jay Mohr was ultimately cast to play the foul mouthed producer, Peter Dragon, and allowed to eat every piece of scenery that came within reach. Buddy Hackett was cast as his uncle/head of security, and Illeana Douglas was cast as Wendy Ward, the prostitute that Peter picked up the evening of his most recent premiere that just happened to be a former child star.

The situations just sort of seemed to write themselves. Peter inadvertently picks up a prostitute on the way to his new screening and when she's unceremoniously dumped onto the red carpet with him he introduces her to the crowd as "stunt woman Vicky Cox". They were committed from square one to be crude and smarmy on every level they could imagine and if you were game at all for that kind of thing...they delivered. After the screening, Peter is talking to his president of production and asking him to go into the men's room and listen to what they're saying in there to get a reading on the reception to his film. In his reticence to do so, he asks who Peter's date was. "She's my prostitute." "She's your **WHORE?**" "No, she's my prostitute. You're my whore."

While the laugh there is genuine, it wasn't nearly all that Illeana Douglas was there for. Her honest and brutal feedback of the film led to Peter bonding with her and making her part of his production company as they set out to find the film that was going to save his career after the disaster he'd just created.

Over the course of the 13 episodes they produced (only 8 of which ever saw the light of day on Fox), Peter and Wendy (yes, purposefully named for the boy who never grew up) navigated the perils of finding their script (*Beverly Hills Gun Club*), making her pimp an executive producer so she could be released to work for him, almost selling his pre-teen daughter to a middle eastern prince as a bride for financing, keeping his star out of rehab, replacing his director who died one week into shooting, and finally finding out that the script he was producing was actually owned by the slimiest twins ever to walk the planet...leading Wendy to get the rights by donning her child star outfit as The Elephant Princess and "entertaining" them for an evening...which ended up as a level of corruption so low that she decided she was quitting the business and returning to honest work as a prostitute.

From beginning to end, the show's over-the-top view of the moral bankruptcy of Hollywood was actually refreshing as hell and to this day, more than 20 years later, that one season of that one show remains the pinnacle of TV achievement for me.

# THE MOST AGONIZING EARLY CANCELLATION OF AN SF TV SHOW ...

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## BY RICH HORTON

*Firefly debuted on September 16, 2002 and it ended on December 20, 2002 after one season and 11 episodes, although three additional episodes were eventually burned off in July and August of the following year. It is well known that the episodes aired out of order and the network had little faith in the series. The series starred Nathan Fillion as Mal Reynolds, Gina Torres as Zoë, Alan Tudyk as Wash, Morena Baccarin as Inara, Adam Baldwin as Jayne Cobb, Jewel Staite as Kaylee Frye, Sean Maher as Simon Tam, Summer Glau as River Tam, and Ron Glass as Shepherd Book. An honest-to-God space western, it followed the less-than-savory crew around the system trying to make ends meet and avoid the powers-that-be. The series originally aired on Fox in the U.S. and led to an eventual movie as well as novels, games, and a continuation in comics. Firefly is available on DVD and BluRay. It can be streamed on Hulu, Apple TV, Amazon Prime, Google Play, Vudu, Microsoft, and Redbox.*

OK, I'll be honest. In 2002 and 2003, when [Firefly](#) was airing on Fox, I wasn't watching. I'm not sure exactly why, except that I'm not really that dedicated a TV watcher. So I can't say I mourned when it was cancelled.

I **was** watching when the movie, *Serenity*, appeared in 2005. I knew it was a sequel to a well-regarded TV series, and it looked like fun, so I saw it in the theater. And I liked it—but I didn't fully get it.



And I don't recall exactly why my wife and I decided to watch it on DVDs (rented from Netflix—remember when Netflix mailed DVDs to you?) a few years after that. But we did...and, suddenly, I was entranced. Immediately it became my favorite SF TV show of all time.

I was a Browncoat, I guess. I have to admit, that's not an identity I've ever been eager to adopt. The resonance with the Nazi "Brownshirts" is a bit too much for me. To be sure, the "Firebrony" alternative has its own problems, given the neo-Nazi aspect of certain corners of [My Little Pony](#) fandom. But, gosh, that's getting a bit serious, eh? Nobody has a monopoly on a color! That said, check out [this fairly convincing take](#) on the actual villainy of the *Firefly* crew, from Jay Kristoff: (Among other things, Kristoff points out that Josh Whedon's avowed inspiration for *Firefly* was sometime SF writer Michael Shaara's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Killer Angels*, which examined the effects of being on the losing side of the Civil War. By analogy, then, Mal and company are the Confederacy! A sobering analogy, but we really should remember that analogies are imprecise, and just because Mal fought for the losing side in a War doesn't make him an apologist for slavery, nor even an apologist for concentration camps.)

So, am I a still a Browncoat? Heck yeah, in the sense that being a "Browncoat" means I still think *Firefly* a great SF TV show. And I absolutely mourn its cancellation after a single season. That is a story in itself, as most unfairly early cancellations are. A testimony to the inability of TV executives to know what they have, usually because they want surefire hits, and shows that grab viewers from the start, rather than stories that can grow over time, and gather viewers as they develop.

There are lots of reasons given for Fox's decision. Some are vaguely understandable (if still wrong)... Whedon wanted to shoot *Firefly* in widescreen, which was too expensive, and too different, for Fox. The show was fairly expensive to produce. And, it wasn't (yet) drawing huge audiences. (Heck, I wasn't watching on the first run—maybe it's my fault!)

Other reasons are purely Fox's fault. Most notoriously, they didn't like the pilot episode, which crucially establishes the show's characters. So the second episode was aired first, and the pilot was the last to be shown on Fox. Their promotion was off-base, never managing to hit on what really matters about *Firefly*. (Which is, as ever, character character character.) They complained about really mindless things, such as that Wash and Zoe's marriage was happy—no drama!

Well, I've spent a lot of time not discussing the show itself! What about it? What do I love? Is it the science fictiony stuff? Not really. I mean, it is still cool to see spaceships in space, to think of isolated colonies on semi-terraformed asteroids, of dangerous space pirates (the "Reavers"), etc., etc. But little of this is exactly original: the show is overtly a "Western in Space," after all: and even *Star Trek* was sort of a "Western in Space," if you consider that it was pitched by Gene Roddenberry as "Wagon Train to the star." And, too, some of the SFnal background is a bit scientifically implausible: the star system seems absolutely stuffed with habitable planets, and terraforming is presented as a) pretty easy, and b) pretty fast. To name just two implausibilities.

No, what I really love is the characters. There are nine members of *Serenity's* crew:

Mal (Nathan Fillion), the captain, who is impulsive, sometimes violent, sometimes contradictory, but very loyal;

Zoe (Gina Torres), Mal's second-in-command, the voice of sanity, the calm one;

Wash (Alan Tudyk), the pilot, Zoe's husband, the less-serious, almost frivolous, crew member;

Kaylee (Jewel Staite), the mechanic, presented as almost mystically good at her job, and a very sweet, very innocent character;

Jayne (Adam Baldwin), a mercenary, very violent and seemingly untrustworthy, indeed rather an asshole, but also willing to challenge Mal sometimes when he needs it;

Inara (Morena Boccarin), a "Companion" who has her own shuttle and rents her berth on *Serenity*, which allows her to travel widely while offering her services (high-class courtesan, sort of Geisha-like) to her clientele;

Book (Ron Glass), a Shepherd, a committed Christian but with some seriously surprising criminal knowledge, the overt "conscience" of the crew;

Simon (Sean Maher), a doctor, of great value to the ship for those skills, but on *Serenity* primarily because he's given up his practice to protect ...

River (Summer Glau), Simon's sister, a brilliant young woman who has been severely harmed at a secret Alliance facility from which she escaped with Simon's help...she seems to have psychic abilities and is an incredible fighter.

Each of these characters is intriguing; and there is a lot of implied back story. One of the most regrettable things about *Firefly's* short run is that the series hinted at some truly cool secrets in the past of many of these characters, and I really wanted to learn, for example, a lot more about Book's past. There was a lot of room for future development too...some predictable perhaps, as with Mal's evident crush on Inara, and her evidently conflicted attraction to him; some less so, as with the potential for Kaylee's development (Kaylee was my favorite character), or as with the importance of River's abilities. There were also interesting characters in individual episodes, perhaps most memorably Saffron (Christina Hendricks), a con woman who tricks Mal into marriage (maybe?) in one episode, and returns with more tricks in another.

The other aspect that cried out for development was the system-wide society. Future seasons could have showed more of life in the Alliance, for example; or could have showed the possibilities for real change in both the Alliance and the outer system. And there was room to explore an end game of sorts for *Serenity*, though I doubt Whedon really wanted to go there: but at least some real grappling with the often dodgy ethical choices Mal and company make was sure to come.

There was, of course, the movie *Serenity*, which is very fine, and won a Hugo. (Alas, some wrenching plot turns were motivated more by the availability of actors than by internal necessity!) And *Serenity* does develop the story in some of the directions I could have hoped for. Alas, even though it was fairly successful, and sequels were bruited, none eventuated. Rumors of new seasons of the TV show kept popping up—and in fact Disney is apparently working on a Disney+ series. (Naturally, it's being recast—there was no avoiding that, two decades later—and, unfortunately, rumors suggest that it's being pitched as more “family friendly” than the original, which doesn't sound promising to me.)





# WONDERFALLS

← BY STEVEN H SILVER →

*Wonderfalls* debuted on March 12, 2004 and it ended on April 1, 2004 after one season and 4 episodes, aired out of order, although nine additional episodes were released when the DVD was issued. The series starred Caroline Dhavernas as Jaye Tyler, Tyron Leitso as Eric Gotts, Tracie Thoms as Mahandra McGinty, and Katie Finneran as Sharon Tyler. The series follows a young woman who hears voices telling her to perform altruistic deeds against her will. The series originally aired on Fox in the U.S. *Wonderfalls* is available on DVD. It is not currently available for streaming.



Sometimes a show's cancellation is, at least in part, the result of the coincidental similarity with another show. On September 18, 2006, [Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip](#), an hour long drama built around the production of a weekly comedy sketch show, debuted on NBC. Three weeks later, on October 11, NBC debuted [30 Rock](#), an half-hour long comedy built around the production of a weekly comedy sketch show. While *30 Rock* ran for seven seasons and 138 episodes, *Studio 60* only lasted a single series and 22 episodes.

A couple years earlier, a similar situation happened when *Joan of Arcadia* debuted on CBS on September 26, 2003. It ran for two seasons and told the story of a woman who was given tasks to perform by God. Six months later, on March 12, 2004, Fox aired the first episode of [Wonderfalls](#), a story about a woman who hears voices giving her tasks to perform. After airing the first four episodes out of order, Fox cancelled the show. Fortunately, one of the executive producers, Tim Minear, had experience with Fox (he had worked on *Firefly*), and they had plotted the series to complete a story arc within the 13 episodes initially ordered. The full

run aired on Canada's Vision TV six months after it was cancelled in the United States, where viewers had to wait until the DVD set was released in early 2005 with all the 'sodes in the correct order.

So, what is *Wonderfalls* and why is it so Wonderful?

While the glib answer is, it had an [awesome theme song](#) by Andy Partridge. In truth, there was more to it than that.

*Wonderfalls* focuses on Jaye Tyler (Ana Dhavernas), an under-achiever who is working a dead-end job in a souvenir shop overlooking Niagara Falls. The supporting cast includes Jaye's family, parents Karen (Diana Scarwid) and Darren (William Sadler) and siblings Sharon (Katie Finneran) and Aaron (Lee Pace). As you can guess by the naming conventions, Jaye is seen as the black sheep of the family. Jaye's old high school friend Mahandra (Tracie Thoms) works at a waitress at Jaye's favorite bar, where Jaye falls for the new bartender, Eric (Tyron Leitso).

In the first episode, an irate customer attempts to return a malformed wax lion, made from a Mold-A-Rama in the store. This sets the show's big concept in motion. The wax lion turns to Jaye and gives her cryptic instructions. As long as Jaye tries to figure out what she needs to do, which goes against every fiber of her self-interested core, the lion leaves her alone. When she works against the lion's instructions, he works to annoy her. Throughout the series, different inanimate creatures provide her with instructions (and provide their names to the episodes' titles).

On the surface, Jaye's character should be off-putting. She's somewhat morose. If not actively selfish, she is self-centered. When not putting in hours at her retail job (she can hardly be considered to work), she hangs out cadging drinks at the bar where Mahandra works or sits in her trailer making fun of the other trailer park denizens. She is estranged from her family and revels in it. However...

...However, despite her curmudgeonly exterior, it is clear that Jaye does take pleasure in being able to help people solve their problems, even if she resents being forced to do good deeds. Jaye also allows a more vulnerable side of herself to show through to the audience, mostly in her dealings with Mahandra and her pining for Eric.

Although each episode stands on its own, there are various story arcs that run through the entire series, although not all of them are obvious until they return near the end (and remember that only the first four episodes aired prior to the show's cancellation. The main one of those story arcs, dealing with Eric's wife, was one of those that is complete.

Eric landed at the bar during his honeymoon when he walked in on his wife being unfaithful to him. When she went back home, he remained in Niagara Falls, where he eventually met Jaye and began heavy flirtation with her, hindered by the fact that despite his wife's actions and their separation, he continues to take his marriage vows seriously.

Eventually his wife, Heidi (Jewel Staite), reappears in Niagara, leading to Jaye exhibiting some of her worst traits, along with a strong dose of suspicion, some of which may be misplaced. Over the course of the last several (unaired) episodes, the story of Eric's marriage plays out to its inexorable conclusion and forces Jaye to confront emotions that she doesn't want to admit having.

The viewer sees other story lines play out, but not conclude. Jaye's relationship with her family is a major story arc. Over the course of the season we see Jaye and her sister Sharon move from barely tolerating each other to beginning to build a relationship. Jaye's brother, Aaron, begins to twig that there is something going on between Jaye and the toys that she is surrounding herself with, although he can't quite figure out what it is. Her mother's concern for her is also demonstrated throughout the series.

As much as Jaye's half-hearted attempts to help people provides the heart of the show, Jaye's family, even with their issues and Jaye's desire to separate herself from them, provides as much heart. The Tyler family has issues, but they are still close to each other and there is clearly affection between them.

The manner in which the animated objects insinuate themselves into Jaye's life is clever and if their instructions are never quite clear, the way Jaye unscrambles their directives is intriguing, especially as they often point to multiple possibilities within each episode. Watching the actual message play out is like watching a detective solve a mystery without having all of the clues necessary.

In the four episodes that aired, Jaye was pulled into the world of unintentional altruism, mentored a young runaway, helped a woman on the run, and ran over her father accidentally. None of her attempts to

help people went particularly smoothly and the only thing Jaye really gets out of helping people is that the voices temporarily leave her alone (until the next episode), but the people whose lives she touches are all better off for her presence, a message that the world has a plan and the justice will prevail, which may not be a realistic message, but it is a satisfying one.

Pace and Scarwid would go on to appear in *Pushing Daisies* a couple years later (covered later in this issue by Becca Farrell). Pace played the lead role in that series and Scarwid appeared, not as his mother, but as the Mother Superior of a convent. Furthermore, one of the characters Jaye helped, Marianne Marie Beattle (Beth Grant), reappears in an episode of *Pushing Daisies*, allowing fans of *Wonderfalls* to see the long-lasting effects of Jaye's interventions.



# ROME

## BRENDA CLOUGH

Rome debuted on August 28, 2005 and it ended on March 25, 2007 after two seasons and 22 episodes. Starring Kevin McKidd as Lucius Vorenus and Ray Stevenson as Titus Pullo, the show followed two regular centurions as Rome began the transition from a republic to an empire. The series originally aired on HBO in the US and BBC2 in the UK. It is currently available on DVD, BluRay and streaming on HBO Max, Apple TV, Amazon Prime, Vudu, and Google Play.

Fans of toga drama will remember that [Rome](#) was a miniseries that ran for two seasons starting in 2005 on HBO and the BBC, in the UK. It is now available on DVD.

The story revolved around two Roman soldiers, Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo. Their lives and amours evolve against a background of the rise and assassination of Julius Caesar and the evolution of Rome from a Republic into an empire ruled by Octavian (later Augustus) Caesar. The emphasis was on the grittier bits of Roman life (more than a little on-screen sex). The common man's view of history is always a popular theme, and the writers were very clever inserting Lucius and Titus into the action.

According to Wikipedia the original plan was for the show to run for 5 seasons. In the two seasons we have today you can see the plot grinding deliciously forward. The first season works up to the assassination of Julius Caesar, and the sec-





and one goes into the machinations of the Triumvirate. This is one of the most delightfully thrilling parts of classical history, great full-bodied drama.

However the production costs were enormous. The creative team created a five-acre standing set, including a Forum that was 60% the size of the original. There were costly crowd and battle scenes, a training camp for the extras playing legionaries, all the extra costs of a historical production.

All this expenditure gave the accountants cold feet. The plug got pulled, and it was announced the series would end with the second season. Right up until the last episode there is meaty character development and side plots, but in the last episode everything's zipping by on fast forward, as Octavian defeats Antony and Lucius Vorenus is fatally injured.

What's annoying is that we can see how the final three seasons were going to go. IMDb tells us, "Seasons three and four would have revolved around the war between Octavian and Mark Anthony in Egypt, with season five focusing on the rise of Jesus in Palestine."

With this slight clue it's an easy guess that season three might have ended with the Battle of Actium, and Season four with the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra. You always want to end each season with a bang. Even Shakespeare knew that Cleopatra's encounter with a snake is major drama.

But season 5, I'd bet, would focus on Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo. At the end of the existing season 2 Lucius Vorenus gets severely injured. His friend Titus undertakes to get him home to see his children before he dies. Since going south to Egypt again is impossible, the only direction is north, to seek a ship in Palestine.

You can see what's going to happen, right? There were some notable miraculous healings going on around the Sea of Galilee in the first century BC. Would we get to see Lucius raised from the dead by the itinerant Jewish preacher?

I would particularly have liked to have seen how the creators were planning to get around the calendrical issues. Most Biblical scholars assume that Jesus was born between 4 and 6 BC. This means that Augustus had been running the Roman Empire for more than 25 years before that first Christmas. It passes belief that Titus was going to take a quarter century to walk from Alexandria in Egypt to Palestine, carrying his dying friend Lucius all the while. If it takes you 25 years to die from an injury, you got better already. To get Jesus to show up in the narrative there had to be some major fiddling with either the Bible's time line or Roman history. Since the series is called *Rome*, I would bet it's Scripture that was going to the wall.

If we accept that postulate, then how was this going to work? I can immediately pick out some of the likelier miraculous healings in the New Testament as candidates. The one in Mark 2 would be very suitable, when Jesus heals a paralyzed man. The house was crammed with people hearing him, and the sick man's friends couldn't get him inside. So they climbed onto the roof, pried away the thatch, and lowered the sick man down in front of Jesus. I could indeed see Titus Pullo doing this.

But possibly the best candidate is from Luke 7:1, the healing of the centurion's servant. There is some wiggle here about who exactly it was being healed because, in a parallel account in John 4:46, it's a royal official, not a centurion asking for help. The centurion goes to Jesus and begs Him to heal the sick servant at home. Jesus says okay, be right over. But the centurion says, Just like a commanding officer, you can just command something, and it gets done. Just say it, and he'll be healed. Jesus is on record as being impressed with the centurion's confidence, declaring that no one in Israel has so much amazing faith. And of course He says it'll happen, and the sick man is healed. Titus is easily slick-tongued enough to do this, and we can count on Jesus to assess his inner character rightly.

A socially distant miracle, this is less impressive and visual than prying off the thatch of a house and lowering the sick man down on ropes. But there's a nice opening for ambiguity here. While Titus is talking Jesus around, who is taking care of Lucius? I could imagine these other friends making the rounds of all the proper temples, Apollo, Asclepius, and so on.

Sadly, we will never know. Even after the axe fell the show was sufficiently popular that there was some talk of reassembling the cast for a movie. But nothing came of this, and we must accept that this is all of *Rome* that we're going to get.



# DAY BREAK

A STUDY IN PREMATURE CANCELLATION

MICHAEL CAPOBIANCO

*Day Break* debuted on November 15, 2006 and was cancelled on December 15, with only six episodes aired. The remaining seven episodes were eventually posted on ABC's website and in 2008, TV One aired all 13 episodes. The show starred Taye Diggs as Brett Hopper, Moon Bloodgood as Rita Shelten, Victoria Pratt as Andrea Battle, Adam Baldwin as Chad Shelten, Meta Golding as Jennifer Mathis, and Ramón Rodríguez as Damien Ortiz. Hopper is framed for the murder of an Assistant District Attorney and tries to clear himself and find the culprits while living a Groundhog Day existence. The series originally aired on ABC in the U.S. The show is available on DVD, but it is not currently available for streaming.



When Steven Silver mentioned that he was looking for people to write an essay about television/streaming shows that had been cancelled too soon, one show immediately came to my mind even though it was cancelled a relatively long time ago (2006) and, as far as I know, doesn't have a fan base or was even very popular. It never got enough viewers; that's why it was cancelled after 6 episodes. I believe it represents a perfect storm of factors that made its cancellation extremely memorable and eminently suitable for a write-up.

Two thousand six was a primitive time when the TV networks were still largely in control of viewing content. The show *Lost* had ended its second season in May and had demonstrated how profitable a continuing, non-episodic show that

relied on a central mystery could be. In fact, many consider *Lost* to be a pivotal work that was reshaping how people viewed prime time television, destroying the myth that each episode had to be able to stand by itself. Unfortunately, Damon Lindeloff and Carlton Cuse, *Lost*'s showrunners, were riding high, providing clues and frustrating viewers desperate to know what was going on on The Island, and the puzzles and mythology of the show were a large part of its appeal. For various reasons, ABC decided *Lost* would take a hiatus in its 2006 schedule and its Wednesday, 9:00 pm timeslot would need a temporary replacement. They looked for something that *Lost*'s viewers would find appealing during a *Lost* hiatus.

*Lost* had already paved the way for the creation of a number of *Lost*-like knock-offs. [Invasion](#) (ABC, 2005-06) and [Threshold](#) (CBS, 2005-2006) are the ones that stand out. Both ended after one season and, if I remember correctly, prematurely. There would be many more over the years, and it could be argued that *Lost*'s format now dominates. I was clearly a sucker for it. I had just retired from my day job and had acquired a DVR from Dish Network that gave me the time and ability to watch these shows on my own schedule and watch them I did. The TV show [Jericho](#) also premiered in 2006 on CBS and I hope someone has chosen to write about it in this publication; *Jericho*'s history is an epic story of cancellation and rebirth.

ABC chose [Day Break](#), a show with a promising premise to take over *Lost*'s slot. The elevator pitch must have been something like *Groundhog Day* meets *LA Confidential*. Throw in elements of *Memento* and Choose Your Own Adventure books and you've got a great *Lost*-ian show with a mystery at its heart that would, presumably, keep viewers coming back.

I had no expectations when I tuned into the first episode. The opening title showed a series of letters tumbling over one another to eventually reveal *Day Break*, hinting at a cryptographic puzzle that might reward a slow motion replay at some point. The first scenes feature a handsome diverse couple, Brett Hopper and Rita Shelten (played by Taye Diggs and Moon Bloodgood) waking up at 6:17 AM, obviously in love, and beginning their day. In 2006, this might have been a moderately ground-breaking thing in itself. Various normal, everyday events are shown, specific enough that they can be referenced later when they repeat. During the course of the day, we find out Hopper (yes, he time hops) is an Angeleno cop. On the way to work he witnesses a bus crash that kills a woman and, sometime later in the morning, is arrested for the murder of Assistant D.A. Alberto Garza. He is questioned and we are introduced to other police personnel that work with him and are now interrogating him, and a number of familiar faces appear. Mitch Pileggi, playing the sleazy head investigator Detective Spivak, instantly adds a bit of *X-Files* mystery to the proceedings and Adam Baldwin, playing the supercilious Detective Shelten (Rita's ex-husband), adds an amusing note. The day ends when Hopper is abducted by mysterious forces and ends up in a very science-fictional looking canyon surrounded by rows of machinery where an ageless, pre-[Breaking Bad](#) Jonathan Banks tells Hopper ominously that "actions have consequences" and he is injected with some chemical. Then, suddenly, it's 6:17 again and the day repeats, with Hopper slowly realizing what's happening and altering his behavior to change the results. This day also ends with Banks in the canyon and the injection. By the end of the first episode, I was intrigued and wanted to see where they were going with this idea. Moving the pieces around into different configurations created an interesting puzzle. But most of all, I want to know what their explanation would be for *why* this was happening. The end scene, which was beautifully staged, suggested that this would turn out to be science-fictional in some way, or at least that there would be an explanation.

The next five episodes expanded on this premise, with each day presenting variations on the theme and each day adding a little more to the solution of the puzzle. The acting and writing is first rate, and many of the secondary characters stand out and prevent the essentially repetitious nature of the drama from curdling. More and more details of the underlying LA government's corruption and subsequent murder of Garza are revealed as the day is examined from various angles. I can't say how many times I've seen Los Angeles's government presented this way, most recently in the excellent Amazon series [Bosch](#), but it seemed like a good set-up to allow Hopper to discover the wheels-within-wheels nature of the conspiracy to frame him. And, just as Hopper confronts the Banks character on his home turf in episode six, the show is cancelled. Poof. No ending. Not even another hint about the larger picture of what's going on and why the day is repeating. Very frustrating.



As it turned out, the show had not been cancelled entirely, just moved to the nascent ABC.com, but for whatever reason I didn't follow it there. At this remove I'm not sure if I didn't know about it or my crappy Verizon DSL Internet service wasn't fast enough to watch videos. I have to say that for the vast majority of 2006 viewers, ending the run on ABC effectively killed it.

Eventually, years later, I did have the bandwidth and the will to watch the remaining seven episodes. I have to conclude it didn't really live up to my expectations. The show does retain the energy and intelligence of its beginning and, surprisingly, the gimmick of days repeating never gets tiresome. Some episodes have a different feel to them; there's even an episode where instead of investigating the forces framing him, Hopper and Shelten head off for repeated vacation days in Mexico that, unfortunately, grow wearying for him. The nature of the conspiracy grows clearer and clearer. Hopper confronts his own past and that of his family in a way that is satisfying, and all the bad guys are apprehended and get their just desserts. At one point, Hopper determines that three weeks' worth of repeating days have passed so it's possible the total elapsed time is about a month. Interestingly, the idea that the events in one repeating day do have some influence on the next (aside from Hopper's memory and any wounds he acquires) is broached but never fully explored. I couldn't follow what was going on well enough to know how much fudging was going on in the various time-lines, but if there were inconsistencies, this effect could be used to explain it. It's an interesting concept but it's underdeveloped.

As in *Groundhog Day*, what's going on in a science-fictional or fantasy sense (SPOILER) is never explained. When Hopper addresses the interpersonal and family issues tied up in the events that led up to the day that started repeating, it just stops. The next day begins. Left dangling is a tantalizing thing that never gets explained. A character is introduced in one of the first episodes who seems to be deranged and has been diagnosed with a brain disorder, but there's evidence that he is also enmeshed in the same repeating day. One of the last things we see in the last episode is him, now on this new day shaved and in a suit, looking on knowingly. Whether he had something to do with the day or whether the writers stuck him in to produce a *Lostian* frisson, we will never know. After a few iterations, we don't see the end of the repeating day; presumably many end with Hopper in the canyon. But what about the others? Some things are demystified: At one point, in the seventh episodes, one of the big machines in the canyon is revealed to be a dump truck.

All in all, I would recommend *Day Break* despite my disappointment. It does present an interesting puzzle, and the show plays fairly with its complicated premise. What could be a somewhat cliché police procedural is torn apart and reassembled in such a way as to revitalize the elements. My guess is that it was cancelled because the general TV audience of 2006 was not willing to play along and didn't want to expend the effort. One [newspaper](#) called it "even more infuriatingly baffling than the series it was spelling." If you enjoy that sort of thing, you'll like *Day Break*. It's still available on DVD.

# THE CIRCLE BROKEN: PUSHING DAISIES LEAVES ROOM FOR PIE

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## REBECCA GOMEZ FARRELL

*Pushing Daisies* debuted on October 3, 2007 and it ended on June 13, 2009 after two seasons and 22 episodes. Starring Lee Pace as Ned, Anna Friel as Charlotte Charles, Chi McBride as Emerson Cod, and Kristin Chenoweth as Olive Snook, the series explores the adventures of a man who can raise the living with a touch of his hand. The series originally aired on ABC in the U.S.. It is currently available on DVD, BluRay and streaming on HBO Max, CW Seed, Apple TV, Amazon Prime, Vudu, Google Play, and Microsoft.

"At that moment in the town of Coeur d'Coeurs, events occurred that are not, were not, and should never be considered an ending—for endings, as it is known, are where we begin."

– Narrator, *Pushing Daisies*, Episode 2.13

*Pushing Daisies* jumped high on my list of all-time favorite shows in 2007, when the fairy tale debuted. While it aired for only twenty-one episodes more, it's maintained its nostalgic hold on me for a decade and a half. The show's romantic score, fantastical segments (claymation in the first episode!), and mix of primary color palettes and patterns left a lasting impression. *Pushing Daisies'* aesthetic was Barbie's Dream House manufactured by Willy Wonka's factory—catnip to television viewers like me who enjoy a healthy dose of whimsy with their science fiction elements and plot mysteries.

Plus, there were synchronized swimmers treated like hometown heroes. Delicious pie in every fruit flavor. A private eye who stress-knits. And singing! A full two years before *Glee's* premiere, *Pushing Daisies'* Kristin Chenoweth and Ellen Greene burst out in song with abandon. Alas, *Pushing Daisies* never drew the rat-



ings that *Glee* did, whose first season launched it into the pop cultural stratosphere just two years later. *Pushing Daisies* had similar ratings and critical praise for its first season, but by the second, those ratings had dropped four points. Those two years made all the difference in terms of networks recognizing that they'd never pull in as many viewers as they did before the onset of streaming platforms. Thus *Pushing Daisies* was touched by death too soon, snuffed out before its time just like its murdered characters of the week.

Death, birth, life, and the timing of each was *Pushing Daisies*' playground. In its "Pie-lette" pilot, whose title tells you all you need to know about the show's playful wordplay, we learn its foundational myth. Oh sure, you could call it simple backstory, but *Pushing Daisies* is about mortality, like much of creator Bryan Fuller's work. It's about stopping death, but only for a little while, lest something foundational shift. It's about wrestling with the times that stopping death are worth such consequences.

*Pushing Daisies* is the story of a young boy who possesses the power to bring anything back from the dead, but only for a minute. His first touch brings life, his second, death, either to the alive-again or to something else in close proximity. That's the stuff of myth for sure, particularly ones that relish challenging the natural lifecycle and its endless circling from life to death to a rebirth or new life. Ned's "gift" throws a wrench in that wheel.

Poor nine-year-old Ned learns he has this power through bringing his dog Digby back to life after a car accident (Nice!). Then his mother dies by burst blood vessel while baking a pie, and Ned uses his new skill to save her (Hooray!). In doing so, he accidentally kills his childhood sweetheart's father, as Ned did not yet know that someone else must die in the newly alive-again's place (Oh no!).

But that's not enough torment! Ned then accidentally kills his mother again by touching her and learning that his second touch brings the opposite of his first: final death (That's just cruel). It's the first vicious cycle Ned falls into, one in which no one wins, and him least of all. A Hollywood brand of karma sees to it that young Ned still suffers, however. At least he gets to keep his alive-again Digby, though like anything else Ned may wish to keep dead-alive, he can never touch his pet again.

The loom of fate keeps spinning. Ned grows up, makes pie. Chuck, that childhood sweetheart, steps back into his lifecycle by dying. At 28, Charlotte "Chuck" Charles is murdered. Ned cannot resist bringing her back to life to see her one more time and maybe solve the crime while he's at it, a side gig he undertakes on the regular with private eye Emerson Cod. Except Ned finds he cannot let Chuck die, instead letting the fates decide who dies in her place. Of course he can never touch her, or back she steps onto that wheel of

birth-life-death again and out of his own.

It's a strong foundational myth. So much so that it's repeated at the beginning of nearly every episode, and if not, we'll be reminded about it by one of the characters during the show. *Pushing Daisies* is ultimately a tragedy wrapped up with a bright, happy bow. The present, once opened, overflows with entertaining corporate capitalism caricatures, larger-than-life side characters, and murder—so much murder.

Also, it's chockfull of circles. Did you think I was throwing out those spinning wheel

metaphors just for fun? The lifecycle, of course, is commonly illustrated as a circle. The Pie Hole, Ned's bakery, has circle doors, circle windows, circle entryways, and circular light fixtures in the form of cherries. Very often, characters are seen looking through a circular object, whether a mirror or a periscope or donning a circular costume piece, like Episode 2.2's oversized Dandy Lion dandelion hats. Often the framing of camera angles is circular, suggesting the motif of an interrogation room. Characters are shot leaning over the camera, and it feels as though that ubiquitous, blinding, and circular overhead light is just out of frame.

The characters even speak with a noticeable, infectious rhythm, pushed ever onward by the need for the Narrator to keep telling this story, which is Ned's story, and our story as the audience watching it. It has a teaser and multiple acts to get through before each episode's end. The Narrator knows we must travel that loop together to a satisfying completion in about 42 minutes of runtime. Then we circle on to the next.





Did I mention the watches? *Pushing Daisies* was cancelled before we got a full explanation of their plot significance. Ned uses one to count down those sixty seconds of life he can give the newly alive before killing them off again. Chuck is buried with her father's prized pocket watch, which we later learn he was given while serving with Ned's father overseas and Dwight Dixon, a Season 2 villain who likewise, never gets his full significance explained. All three had matching pocket watches. The thematic tie-in is clear, even if the plot purpose is unexplained. Time is a circle, a lifecycle. Of course those who play with the permanence of death, like Ned and his companions, need a reminder of that.

You'll note I haven't said much about the multitudinous murders. They're the procedural element, the plot that matters only for one rotation of the episodic clock. Mostly, they're very clever background noise, and some of the guest-starring characters and actors are quite memorable. Watching Joel McHale, pre-*Community*, as a dog-breeding bigamist is a treat. As is Molly Shannon as Dilly Basalm, the competitive owner of a candy shop rival to the Pie Hole. Her adoring brother ends up drowned in a vat of taffy.

The few side characters that matter more do so by taking the off-ramp from their episodic plots into the overlapping circles that make up the central story arc. One of McHale's wives becomes Cod's primary love interest. The grave-robbing mortician Ned kills by proximity so that Chuck may live reappears as a corpse a few episodes later, his twin brother seeking to solve his murder.

But as Olive's two suitors could tell you, even when a character does successfully hop from an episode into *Pushing Daisies*' Olympic rings of plot significance, they're likely to be consumed by the core story in the end. Chuck's two hermit aunts are eventually pulled into the Pie Hole's gravity, despite not having left home in years. Paul Reubens's memorable appearances as a sewer-dwelling super sniffer begin when an old friend frames him for murder, but soon, he's investigating how Chuck doesn't smell quite right and threatening to expose her secrets to the world, once he learns them.

The grave-robbing funeral director? His second episode was never really about dipping back into his life so he could have a satisfying end. Rather, the brief resurrection comes for the sake of exploring our foundational myth more fully. It exposes how Ned's role in waking the newly dead is much less passive than he likes to believe. Ned regularly pulls people off their cycle of life and death, only to throw them back onto it again, all without their permission or often, their awareness. The murdered, even those that enjoy a longer narrative life than most of the show's living side characters, are still ultimately at the mercy of the show's





core story. That's made clear by how the vast majority of them are rarely upset about their deaths after Ned awakes them for questioning. In service to the central story, they need to accept their murders before the "time to touch you dead again" clock runs out.

Only Chuck is ever deemed important enough to escape her own lifecycle. When she arranges it so Ned is unaware he's brought her father back to life, it's clear she's violated the rules, shaken the show's foundations, or at least those of her and Ned's relationship.

That exception for Chuck was already annoying me by the beginning of Season 2 back in 2008. Always, the show sought to convince us that Chuck's alive-again status wasn't really a breaking of the circle, like allowing the other murdered characters to live would have been. Ned did not *really* violate the ground rules; he merely pulled Chuck out of her own lifecycle and plopped her into his, no foundational myth-shaking required. Even the times when they broke up seemed to support that concept. No relationship conflict lasted for longer than two episodes, and Chuck chose Ned over pursuing her own dreams time and again. Her new life was but an extension of his.

Huh. Maybe my nostalgia for this shiny, lacquer-coated show glossed over a few things I'd already grown weary of on first viewing. Maybe I was tiring of some of its kitsch even then. Could it be?

It could. Of course a show about a pie-maker who can raise the dead then un-raise them with a touch is implausible, so lots of the shenanigans around that conceit will be too. What bothered me most about it, however, was the show's romantic crux: How *do* you maintain your emotional connection with someone you can't touch? Let me tell you: it's not by putting your loved one in constant danger of your deadly caress. That allowed for fun gimmicks, like Ned scratching Digby with a wooden arm and Chuck surprising Ned with a kiss through saran wrap. But the novelty of those moments faded fast when I considered the risk taken for those laughs. All three of them lived in the same apartment, shared the same bedroom! Often, Ned and Chuck would sit in the same booth at the Pie Hole or stand side-by-side in the kitchen, with barely enough room for the Holy Ghost between them. One scare jump, and Chuck would have been a corpse bride again. If it were truly true love, wouldn't Chuck's continued living be more important than their close proximity? Wouldn't it make more sense to meet up at a safe distance every day for a well-shouted chat rather than risk their pastries brushing too fast?

Maybe there was a plan for that, a way for the lifecycle of the central love story to come to its own completion, fully satisfying my doubts of their love's veracity. Or maybe we'd have explored more of the faults in the relationship, seen how allowing it to exist threatened the foundations of Couer d'Couers and all the vibrant, fully breathing characters within its environs. Unfortunately, we don't know how that relationship and its effects on everyone else would have shaken out.

Which brings us full circle, to the quote that begins this essay. The Narrator recites it at the very end of the finale. It was tacked on after cancellation in a rushed attempt to provide some closure for all the main characters, and it's preceded by a brief summary of where they go next. The words convey what *Pushing Daisies* promised its viewers, but ultimately, what it could not deliver on—a show's full lifecycle where endings become beginnings again. Oh sure, the Narrator attempts to cast its characters' futures in a positive light. But *Pushing Daisies* had no satisfactory completion. Instead, it was snuffed short. The circle was broken.

Will *Pushing Daisies* be forever cursed to stay that way, like so many of its murder victims? Maybe like Chuck, it can be blessed with second life at the expense of some other show's timeslot. With the schedules and star power of Lee Pace and Kristen Chenoweth these days, that's not likely. Fuller has spoken of various reprisals over the years: a comic book to finish the arc of Season 2, a movie, a Broadway show. None have ever been fully baked.

Episode 2.13's last image is another circle, a shutter lens framing of Digby running through a field of sunflowers, the same oversaturated image that begins the show and led to his original death by car. The shutter lens never does quite close on Digby's joyful frolicking this time. The circle shrinks, but it remains unbroken, a final symbol of what might have been but was not.

Maybe that's for the best. Varnished in the preserving glaze of nostalgia, the show's goods hold up well under the display case lights. *Pushing Daisies* as it was is more perfect than it likely would have been if we'd licked the pie plate clean. That last slice, the one that completes its cycle of stories, will always remain there, just out of reach. Fans of the show can forever gaze upon it with unquenched yearning.

# FADE TO BLACK. THE END.

←—————→

## BY MARGARET DUNLAP

*The Middleman debuted on June 16, 2008 and it ended on September 1, 2008 after a single season and 12 episodes. Starring Matt Keesler as the Middleman and Natalie Morales as Wendy Watson, the show is an even more tongue-in-cheek and pop-referential take on Men in Black, based on a comic book that showrunner Javier Grillo-Marxuach wrote. The series originally aired on Family Plus in the US. It is currently available on DVD, BluRay and streaming on HBO Max, Apple TV, Amazon Prime, Vudu, and Google Play.*

Before [The Middleman](#) ended, it began.

For me, that was in February 2008. I was working as a contacts editor for an entertainment industry tracking database. All day, every day, I called agents, managers, publicists, and attorneys and asked if they were still representing the people we thought they were and making updates as necessary. Two people were responsible for literally millions of pieces of information which were constantly going out of date. I had been on the job for about a year and a half, and had learned a lot, but the educational curve was flattening.

Also weighing on my mind was the fact that it had been four and a half years since I had graduated from USC with an MFA in Screenwriting, a program during which we had been told more than once: “After five years, you’ll either be working in the entertainment industry, or you will have decided to do something else with your life.”

However, I wasn’t packing my bags just yet. In fact, I had my cell phone out on my desk beside me. I was waiting for The Call.

Of course my boss walked by and spotted my phone. He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “My best friend from college is about to have her first baby and I’m waiting for news.”



This was completely true. It was also not the only news I was waiting on.

A few minutes later my phone rang, and I ducked out of our open plan office to take the call in some semblance of privacy. On the other end of the line was Javier Grillo-Marxuach, my friend and mentor since graduation, and the creator of *The Middleman*. “It’s official,” he said. “ABC Family has picked up the pilot to series. The writers’ assistant job is yours. Give me a couple of days to iron out details and you can quit your day job.”

I returned to my desk, buzzing. A few hours later, the phone rang again. This time, it was my college friend, still loopy on drugs and endorphins calling to let me know that she was fine, and it was girl.

I didn’t get a lot of work done that afternoon.

#

A week and a half later, I began my first “Industry” job as the writers’ assistant for the new ABC Family series: *The Middleman*.

Javier Grillo-Marxuach (Javi) wrote the first version of *The Middleman* pilot almost a decade before it made it to the screen. After every network in town had declined to make it, he turned it into a limited series for Viper Comics, and those comics eventually caught the eye of an executive at the network then known as ABC Family (now Freeform). I had met Javi when he agreed to be my mentor out of USC. From there, shared nerdy interests had led us to become friends. Now, he was my boss.

It’s easy to look back on the past with a false sense of nostalgia, but I can honestly say that I could not have asked for a better first show to work on. By the time he sold the show, Javi had spent fifteen years on TV staffs and was determined that no one working for him would have to live through the abuse and managerial incompetence he had so frequently encountered. He also fought to shoot the series in Los Angeles, so that the actors could be close to home, the writers could be on set every day, and the show could tap into the depth of experience of the Los Angeles crew base—a crew base ready and eager to go back to work after the recently concluded writers’ strike.

The show fostered a culture of mentorship where every department was empowered to use their own creativity to bring Javi’s sweetly strange brainchild to the screen. Because let’s be clear: we were making a show about a twenty-something art school graduate working a series of dead-end temp jobs until she was recruited into a super-secret organization devoted to fighting comic book evil in the real world; for a network best known for family-friendly melodramas and *The 700 Club*; on a budget that was minimal even by basic cable standards.

It should have been impossible.

Instead, more than a hundred people came together and made magic.

To even begin to list the things—both practical and philosophical—that I learned on *The Middleman* would tax even the world limits of an e-zine, not to mention my own time and your patience. Instead, I will bring us back to theme:

Because in addition to everything else, *The Middleman* taught me how television shows end.

The statistics are grim. Every year, studios and networks hear hundreds of pitches. Occasionally, a pitch leads to the network ordering a script. Out of the dozens of pilot scripts, a handful are actually shot. Out of those few, even fewer get picked up to series.

If that weren’t depressing enough for a would-be television creator: out of all the shows that have a first season, nine out of ten won’t get a second. So if you’ve ever wondered if networks were analyzing your viewing habits so they could find out which shows you loved and cancel them, the answer is no, they just cancel almost every show they make.

Most shows come and go without a ripple. In the years since *The Middleman*—remember, in 2008, Netflix was still doing most of their business shipping people DVDs—it’s only gotten harder to make an impression on the American collective psyche. And in so doing collect enough viewers to convince the network that it’s worth their time and money to make more.

And, as you may recall, on *The Middleman* we were making a show about a twenty-something art school graduate working a series of dead-end temp jobs until she was recruited into a super-secret organization devoted to fighting comic book evil in the real world, on a network best known as the home of family-friendly melodramas and *The 700 Club*.

It was always going to be an uphill climb.

Still, on the night the pilot episode premiered, the writers—all full of excitement—went out to a bar together to watch it and discovered that—due to the vagaries of West Coast cable feeds, our show was airing an hour after we had thought it would be, and was—moreover—bracketed by two airings of *The 700 Club*. Normally in those days, when you had a new show, the hope that was people watching whatever was on before it would see your show coming up and decide to stick around to check it out.

I have to assume any Nielson families who were watching both *The 700 Club* and *The Middleman* that night were dead of carbon monoxide poisoning.

The other patrons were supportive and bought us a round of drinks once we explained why we'd briefly put Pat Robertson on a West Hollywood bar's TV screen, but it was not a great sign.

Back at the office the next day, Javi called the network to get the overnight ratings.

Already, this is less than ideal, because if the ratings had been amazing, the network would have been calling him first thing with the good news. As it was, it took a few days for us to get an answer, and when Javi finally picked up his phone to find the president of the network on the other end, he still didn't get a number. Instead, the head of the network told him, "Don't worry about it. You're doing great work, and it's going to be a great DVD box set someday."

Encouraging, but also...ouch.

<Aside> I want to take a minute here to speak in defense of the team at ABC Family. Yeah, they eventually cancelled the show, but they also kept us on the air for twelve episodes, and frankly, given our numbers (which we did learn, eventually) they would have been justified in pulling us after two, and just run *The 700 Club* three times in a row. </End Aside>



Despite everyone's support, critical acclaim, and our best efforts to improve on our initial audience through social media and word of mouth, we were not turning into a late-breaking hit.

I was on set shooting episode 11: "The Clotharian Contamination Protocol," my first episode of television, when Sarah Watson—a writer/producer on the series—and I got a message that we were needed in the writer's room. Once we arrived, Javi told the writing staff that not only were we cancelled, instead of a first season of thirteen episodes, number 12 (*The Palindrome Reversal Palindrome*) would be *The Middleman's* last ride.

For me, that was the first end of the *Middleman*.

The second ending came the next day, when Javi came down to set just before lunch to tell the crew. Our show was made by dozens of people who never get asked to talk about their experiences in essays or on panels, but who were just as heartbroken that the world hadn't loved our show as much as we did.

Javi was the kind of showrunner who knew the names of everyone on set by the second day of shooting, up to and including the guys in the catering truck. Nearly every single crewmember came up to him as we broke for lunch to say how sorry they were. Many of them were working below their usual rates because work had been so scarce right after the strike, and now they were going to be looking for their next job even sooner than they had thought.

Javi made it clear that if anyone had to leave before we wrapped to take another job, he understood and they had his full support and thanks. We did lose a few people, but the vast majority of the team stayed with the show until the end.

In the years since, I've learned it was a blessing that we knew *The Middleman* was ending before pro-



duction wrapped.

It meant everyone had a chance to say good bye.

(On [Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance](#) we memorably got the news we were cancelled the day after we won an Emmy for Best Children's Program. Timing that admittedly would have stung more if it hadn't been more than two years since most of the writers had finished their work. As much as we all wanted to come back and tell the conclusion of our story arc, the writing at the point was pretty much on the wall.)

Hanging around set during the filming episode 12 was a little bit like lingering at the tail end of a party no one quite wanted to leave. In between takes, I made sure I was friends with everyone on Facebook. I took dozens of pictures. I had all of the writers, cast and crew sign one of the prop uMasters (the Middle-verse version of an iPhone) that had been built for my episode.

On the last day, nearly every scene ended with an extra announcement from the First Assistant Director:

"That's a series wrap for Mary Pat."

"That's a series wrap for Matt."

"That's a series wrap for Brit."

"That's a series wrap for Natalie."

The final shot of the final day was an insert of guest star Kevin Sussman in a flying harness against a green screen that would appear in the final episode as super-villain The Palindrome being sucked into an evil mirror dimension.

Another day or two to strike the sets, and for Production, the show was over.

For Post-Production, there were still weeks to go. Sometime in August, almost seven years to the day after I arrived in Los Angeles, I drove across town to a studio where I sat in on the final sound mix of episode 11, and my first official episode of television was ready to air.

On August 25, 2008 I invited the writers and some friends over to my apartment to watch my episode together. Sarah couldn't make it, but she had a bottle of wine delivered.

A few weeks later, Sarah followed up the bottle of wine with an email asking if I could possibly move to New York on very short notice to be the writers' assistant on the new show she's been hired on. It was official, my first job in television would not be my last.

I said yes, and dug out my winter coats from college.

*The Middleman* was over, and I was moving on.

Except...

The following April found Sarah and me in a New York recording studio with a satellite link to Javi, Andy Reaser, and Jordan Rosenberg, all back in Santa Monica, California to record a DVD commentary track.

The series was becoming—as the head of the network had foretold—an excellent DVD set.

That July, almost a year after *The Middleman* series finale, I was on stage with the writers and cast at San Diego Comic Con for a live table read of our un-filmed final episode 13: "[The Domsday Armageddon Apocalypse](#)." Andy Reaser and I conferred beforehand as to whether we were going to do weird voices for our roles as possessed succubae. We decided to go for it and did not regret our life choices.

When the table read ended, I looked out at the packed room of cheering fans—who incredibly all seemed to be there for our panel, not the *Battlestar Galactica* panel after us—and decided this was the closest I was likely to get to being a rock star.

Backstage the team hugged, took pictures, and agreed that this had been a great note to go out on.

The show was over.

Until...

2014, when Javi launched *The Middleman: The Crowd-Funded Franchise Resurrection!* on Kickstarter.

The goal was to raise funds to put the original *Middleman* comics back in print so that they would be affordable for fans who hadn't found the comics or the show during their initial runs, but had discovered it since. A stretch goal paid for the creation of a final comic which would bring together the comic book and television series continuities in an epic, multiverse-spanning adventure.

The fundraiser culminated in a live table reading of [\*The Middleman: The Pan-Universal Parental Reconciliation\*](#) featuring the TV cast in their original roles, special guest actors as the comic book versions of the lead characters, and the writing staff filling in the rest. Javi must have thought I really slayed as a possessed succubus in the last table read because I had been cast this time as the comic book version of the *Middleman*'s cranky android assistant, Ida.

Fans from all over packed the Downtown Independent Theater in Los Angeles, and after finishing to a standing ovation we all signed autographs before heading to a nearby restaurant for an unofficial wrap party. It was the first time many of the cast had seen each other since 2009.

With the passing of Mary Pat Gleason in June of 2020, that day officially became the last complete *Middleman* cast reunion.

Somehow, even though the show has already ended half a dozen times and seems unlikely to return to the small screen anytime soon, it keeps going.

Fans still find the show to this day, and it's always a joy when I meet someone in person or online who tells me how much they loved *The Middleman*. After all, I loved it too.

My Facebook feed is peppered with updates from the writers and crew. Some of them are still in the business, some of them have moved on to other things. But every year, the algorithm reminds us of the time the Friday theme on set was: "Dress like Javi day."

I have had writing students doubt my word when I tell them that my first writing job was for a show that featured episodes about the cursed tuba of the Titanic, a haunted sorority, and a boy band that was really five intergalactic dictators harvesting the power of the screams of teenaged girls to open a warp-hole back to their home world. But the DVDs, comic books, my autographed uMaster, a nanobot helmet, and the bomb the Clotharians planted in *Voyager 2* before returning it to earth that sits above my desk, remind me that yes, it was a real show.

The concept art for the inside of Ida's brain, designed by Art Department assistant Logan Wince hangs framed in pride of place on my dining room wall.

Last but not least, once a quarter I get a green envelope from the WGA with a residuals check: my share of the money some large corporation has earned from re-airing or re-selling a television episode I wrote. The one for *The Middleman* is modest, usually less than a dollar after taxes.

But I deposit every single one as a reminder that our show is still out there somewhere, alive for someone.

Art crawl!

# STARGATE UNIVERSE: NOT YOUR TYPICAL STARGATE ←—————→ BY BARBARA BARNETT

*Stargate: Universe* debuted on October 2, 2009 and it ended on May 9, 2011 after two seasons and 40 episodes. The show starred Robert Carlyle as Nicholas Rush, Louis Ferreira as Everett Young, Elyse Levesque as Chloe Armstrong, Alaina Huffman as Tamara Johansen, Jamil Walker Smith as Ronald Greer, and David Blue as Eli Wallace. Unlike most of the shows covered in this 'zine, this one was part of a franchise that included three previous series and three films. This series originally aired on Syfy in the U.S. It is currently available on DVD, BluRay and streaming on Hulu.



Air, water, light: essential elements to our survival as humans. [\*Stargate Universe\* \(SGU\)](#) begins in the quiet of a vast empty spaceship gliding through the starlit cosmos. She comes to life slowly as if awoken from a deep sleep, and then, through a shimmering mirror-like portal, people hurtle through along with luggage and other portables. Dust-covered and dazed, some injured, these people stand, if they can, gazing around to take in their strange and very unfamiliar surroundings. They are military and scientists, all expecting to be on Earth; they are not. But where are they? The military personnel amongst them try to assess, warily peering around corners, weapons poised, not knowing where they are or what to expect. They are on the vast (and no longer empty) space-

ship, stranded, as they will soon learn, with no way of getting home, several billion light years from Earth. They've no idea where they are, nor why they are here.

I've read many of the reviews written by *Stargate* fans (and even some critics) comparing *SGU* to the old '60s series [Lost in Space](#). There is actually little to compare the two shows. *Lost in Space* was a light take on *Robinson Crusoe* wrapped around a heartwarming family drama. The Drs. Robinson, their children and pet robot wandered from planet to planet looking for a way home. Stowaway Dr. Smith was a cowardly but generally harmless curmudgeon (because he was so over-the-top cowardly). *SGU* is not *Lost in Space 2.0*. But neither is it *Stargate 4.0*. It is very much its own series, borrowing a shooting style from gritty dramas like [The Shield](#) and [Battlestar Galactica](#), but telling an original story (well, nothing, I suppose is ever completely original).

All space exploration, I suppose, is a bit of vanity, even hubris. Why put so much money and effort into unlocking an ancient, unknowable portal? Why bother? What's on the other side of it? To put it in classic sci-fi TV terms, "to go where no one has gone before." It is the nature of exploration, whether by ancient mariners on Earth's high seas or the Mercury astronauts of the '60s or Neil Armstrong and his "one small step for [a] man; one giant leap for mankind" moment.

In the alternate (presumably) near-future world in which the *Stargate* franchise resides, that next small step is unlocking the final, ninth "chevron." No one knows where it will lead, either physically or metaphorically, but in the interest of exploration, of science, go they must. With the support of a friend in the Senate, Alan Armstrong, aided by his bright, idealistic daughter Chloe, the *Stargate* Program is about to take this next leap into the unknown.

An extremely rare class of planet is located after a two year search; it meets the immense power requirements of the Ninth Chevron dialing sequence. But the power requirements must be calculated with such precision that it presents a nearly impossible mathematical problem for even the brilliant scientist at the head of the project, Dr. Nicholas Rush (the equally brilliant actor, Robert Carlyle). With the problem now embedded into a video game called *Prometheus* (an idea originating with Chloe Armstrong), Rush hopes that someone will succeed where he has failed. And when MIT dropout, quintessential slacker hacker Eli Wallace (David Blue) solves the problem, Rush engineers his solution into a way to dial the Ninth Chevron.

The solution doesn't work properly, but rethinking it with Eli's fresh perspective, they come up with means to dial. But the base soon comes under attack. Although the base commander Col. Everett Young (Louis Ferreira) orders them to evacuate via the stargate back to Earth, Rush sees his last chance to attempt the Ninth Chevron quickly fading, and instead overrides Young's order. He dials the Ninth Chevron.

Dialing Earth would be too risky, he explains to Young. Should the planet's radioactive core go critical, the entire planet will explode, translate through the wormhole and be "catastrophic" on the other side. He has no explanation for why he'd not chosen, then, to evacuate to any number of other known destinations. We can only assume; he risks them all to grab at what is likely his last chance.

Now aboard this dark, damaged ship, they are immediately faced with their first life or death challenge. The ship's ancient life support system is long past its designed life; it is barely adequate and failing fast. If they can't solve this dilemma, they will all die. As Rush frantically seeks a solution, he works against time, the unfamiliarity of the ship, the distrust of the crew, and the growing trust the crew have in Eli, who, while bright, has nowhere near Rush's breadth of knowledge about Ancient technology and language.

I like my science fiction dark. Not necessarily physically dark, but atmospherically and tonally dark. Dystopias, creaky starships, journeys into the unknown by flawed heroes (or, more probably antiheroes) never fail to catch my eye, whether in a novel, movie, or television series. Problem is, I have to actually be aware of them—and therein, my friends, lies the rub. So many good SFF series escape our attention because they have vanished into the ether before we know we're even aware they are on the air. Fortunately, the "ether" is alive and we are able to find those hidden gems that may be otherwise lost to us.

I'd never really been a huge fan of the *Stargate* franchise in its many forms. I saw the movie when it came out in the 1990s, and I liked it, but never watched *SG-1* or [Stargate Atlantis](#), preferring the more cerebral *The X-Files* (when it was still cerebral) and *Battlestar Galactica* for my TV sci-fi fix. The incarnations of *Stargate* were a bit too light and comedic for my darker tastes. Yet, the concept of a galaxy-traveling ancient civilization out somewhere in the cosmos has always been an intriguing idea to me.



So I was mildly surprised when I felt drawn into *Stargate Universe* (*SGU* for short). I'd heard little good about it from the various fan communities: "It's too dark." "It doesn't feel like *Stargate*."

I'd not really discovered the show at all until it was six months off the air. By then, it had aired 40 episodes, pulling in about 2 million viewers each week—apparently not enough to keep a Syfy series on the air; the network cancelled it in May 2011.

There are many things I loved about the *Stargate* concept even before tuning in to my first *SGU* episode. There is something compelling about an ancient civilization (in *Stargate* parlance, The Ancients) predating us by hundreds of thousands of years. The Ancients were space mariners, bent on exploring our solar system and way beyond—galaxy by galaxy, star by star.

They explored via stargates (hence the franchise name), devices able to control wormholes in time and space, and able to transport millions of light years in a moment, stepping through an "event horizon"—a shimmering "puddle" of light. The Ancients launched seed ships to place these stargates on planets distant and more distant, which would allow them access to the universe by dialing up a code controlling a series of "chevrons."

The Holy Grail for modern the modern researchers at Stargate Command at the time we are introduced to the universe of *SGU* had been a ninth, almost mythic, chevron. Where it led, no one really knew, and through a scientific expedition to a planet rich in the element needed to meet the Ninth Chevron's immense power requirements (Naquadria), a team of scientists worked to crack the code and uncover the mystery—the destination this mysterious gate.

But as fate would have it (or not—since there is the suggestion in the *SGU* pilot of an enemy spy from another universe, in the Icarus Project), just as Dr. Nicholas Rush (Robert Carlyle), with the not-insignificant assistance of a math-genius slacker Eli (David Blue) crack the code, the Icarus Base comes under attack.

The immense onslaught triggers a catastrophic nuclear chain reaction in the planet's core, and the few survivors must get out before the planet explodes. Ordered by base commander Col. Everett Young (Louis Ferreira) to dial the "chevron" to take them back to Earth, Rush instead makes a fateful (and, knowing Rush, perhaps calculated) decision, and risks dialing the untested Ninth Chevron—taking what would likely be last opportunity to complete his research.



The critically acclaimed science fiction series had me from the first scene as we observe civilian and military personnel hurtled through a luminescent portal, stunned and dazed, into an empty dark hall.

They have as little idea of where they are as we do as viewers. They are, we learn, aboard an unmanned spaceship designed by an advanced civilization known as the Ancients, creators of a network of such portals—wormholes—linking planets and galaxies to the end of the universe. Aboard the ship, which we eventually learn is called *Destiny*, the ill-prepared survivors, remnants of a deadly attack on Icarus Base embark on a journey not of their own making.

Soon they learn there is no way back home to Earth; Rush has stranded them all—injured and ill-equipped aboard a ship they have no idea how to fly; no clue how it works. Although Rush is an expert at Ancient technology, even he, with his vast knowledge understands little of this complex and immense ship. And he, among all the survivors, really doesn't care if they ever get back to Earth. *Destiny* is his destiny, he believes.

The crew fights amongst themselves: military vs. scientists and other civilians, trying to establish some sort of workable social-political structure. The central conflict of the series is between lead scientist Rush and the military commander Young. They encounter adversaries both human and alien.

During season two, they make a discovery that could change our understanding of the universe, but even this discovery is fraught with philosophical, religious and even political challenges. Their journey provides a unique context for insight into the human condition.

Ultimately, how can this small, unprepared group of people manage to survive dire circumstance without losing their humanity or perhaps rise above their individual struggles and conflicts for the benefit of all? *Stargate Universe* is a compelling commentary on everything from politics to the nature of scientific discovery to religious belief and philosophy.

*Stargate Universe* takes its time in establishing relationships and its small society; nothing is easy, and everyone is on edge for much of the first season. Uneasy alliances form and shatter, and the only communication with Earth is through a clever bit of Ancient technology (and an equally clever plot device) that enables the consciousness of two individuals attached to the “communication stones” to exchange. But even this device causes occasional trouble for the *Destiny* crew.

What makes the series so good are the characterizations; there are no true villains in the series; even Rush, Machiavellian though he may be, is a fully realized character, deep and complex. Robert Carlyle gives a stunning performance, layering Rush with just enough humanity to let us into his soul and soulfulness. Col. Young, the nominal “hero” character is just as deeply flawed, as are all the other characters comprising the main cast.

The series was cancelled as a disappointment for the franchise. Expecting to expand the *Stargate* universe, the creators failed to garner the support of die-hard *Stargate* fans who didn't like the darker tone, the seriousness, of the series. Those (like me) who would have been natural fans, instead, dismissed it without a second thought and without watching a single episode assuming it would be more of the same.

Fans of *SGU* longed (and perhaps still do) for a third season although the series exited ten years ago. And reams of fanfiction and fan-based graphic storytelling explore what a third season might resemble. The creators of the series as well had an idea of where *SGU* would go next if given a chance, but it was not to be.

But at only forty episodes, the series is eminently watchable, bingeable and available with commentary (and a director's cut version of the three-hour series pilot) on DVD.

To help you quickly accommodate to your bingeing pleasure, a scorecard of a few of the main players as you begin your journey with the *SGU* crew:

**Dr. Nicholas Rush:** In the very first episode, we see many sides of Icarus Project's complex lead scientist. He is important, but not well liked. He's a bit of a sycophant, eager to please a politician, Senator Armstrong, whose committee oversees the project. Rush has been unsuccessful in dialing the Ninth Chevron, and the senator's patience may be wearing thin with both Rush and the project.

Dig a little deeper, and we see Rush feeling overshadowed by the much younger, less ambitious newcomer Eli Wallace (David Blue), a 20-something who's thrown away an education at a world class university, able solve a problem he'd been unable to conquer. Observing Eli feted at a dinner on the base, Rush retreats to his quarters, despondent. We wonder how he became so isolated from the rest of the base leadership.

Hesitantly retrieving a photograph from his bedside table, he weeps. Who is the woman in the photo and why is Rush so upset? Is there something more to this scientist than cold logic and ambition?

But then, we observe him in the ship's mezzanine above the chaos as the evacuation continues. A satisfied grin appears as he realizes his victory; he has conquered the Ninth Chevron and captured his Holy Grail. How can he be so callous in the face of all the injured and dead both back at Icarus and below him on the ship's deck? Yikes.

And then, another facet appears as he gazes out the observation deck and out into the cosmos, awestruck and consumed by the wonder and beauty of the unexplored universe around them. So, who is Rush? Dreamer? Logician? Romantic? Renegade? Crank?

**Col. Everett Young:** The series' main conflict is between Young and Rush, and from the start we begin to see its origins. Although Rush is the lead scientist, Young is the base commander. Young is clearly no fan of Dr. Rush, overruling him when he wants Eli to continue working the problem after it's unsuccessful on the first attempt to dial the Ninth Chevron. He is furious with Rush when he dials The Ninth Chevron address, and not the address to Earth, and it is clear Young has no trust in the scientist. But when the base commander comes hurtling through the stargate, he is badly injured.

**Eli Wallace:** An MIT dropout, Eli spends his days living at home and playing computer games. When he seems to beat a particularly nasty level, he is instead, sent back to the beginning. Believing it's been a waste of his wastrel time, Eli is surprised when he's visited by a General O'Neill (Richard Dean Anderson) and Dr. Nicholas Rush. He's won, they tell him, "somewhat of a prize." Transported aboard a spaceship headed towards Icarus, Eli finds himself in a place he's always longed to be.

Math Boy, as he calls himself, has solved the Ninth Chevron problem that has plagued Dr. Rush for months. Generally, a nice kid, Eli has an arrogant streak, however that might get him into trouble someday. Aboard the ship, he believes he knows more than Rush, and because he's more likable than the scientist, he's more easily trusted. Eli may indeed be even more of a genius than the project's lead scientist, but he doesn't have either Rush's breadth of understanding, nor his experience. And that might get him (and the rest of the crew) into trouble.

**Lt. Tamara Johansen (Alaina Huffman):** We don't learn much about medic "TJ" until a little later in the series, other than the fact that she was about to separate from the military. The death of the base physician makes TJ the only medical professional on the ship. Her immediate concern is the badly injured Col. Young.

**Lt. Matthew Scott (Brian J. Smith):** Placed in an impossible situation, the young lieutenant is placed in charge of the disoriented and terrified group of survivors aboard the ship. Wanting only to the right thing and "get these people home" after their trauma, he is in over his head. But he rises to the occasion, needing to get a feel immediately for who and what he can trust. Should he trust Rush or Eli? Can he control the volatile Sergeant Greer (Jamil Walker Smith)? Will he be able to assert enough authority to step into Young's shoes, even for a short time, against the presence of those who outrank him: Senator Armstrong, Camille Ray (Ming-Na), and Dr. Rush?

**Chloe Armstrong (Elyse Levesque):** Young, smart Harvard graduate Chloe is aide to her father, a California senator. It was her idea to embed the Ninth Chevron problem into a video game in the hopes of identifying young geniuses who might otherwise go unnoticed. We see her tenacity in play when her father is trapped on the base, refusing to evacuate until she knows he's safe.

# FLASHFORWARD

← BY ROBERT J. SAWYER →

*In the television show FlashForward, based on Robert J. Sawyer's novel Flashforward, the entire world blacked out for just over two minutes on October 6, 2009. On October 6, 2021, I reached out to Rob to see if he had anything about the show that we could run in this issue. Rather than a look at the show's cancellation, Rob provided this glimpse into the creation of the show with an e-mail he sent to the writers, providing them with guidelines for the flashforwards characters experienced. The show debuted on ABC on September 24, 2009 and aired its 22<sup>nd</sup> and final episode, a cliffhanger, on May 27, 2010. It starred Joseph Fiennes, Jack Davenport, Sonya Walger, Christine Woods, Cortney B. Vance, John Cho, Dominic Monaghan, and, frankly, a whole bunch of other people. The series was released on DVD, but does not appear to be available for streaming.*





To: FlashForward writers  
From: Robert J. Sawyer  
Subject: Rules for flashforwards  
Date: 21 November 2009

Hi, All.

I want to take some time to discuss what I believe the ground rules for the flashforwards should be, as a prelude to me writing the scene for episode 117 in which Lloyd sets out those rules for our audience.

[FlashForward](#) the TV series differs from my novel in a significant way. Contrary to what's usually said in the press, the significant difference is not that in my book the flashforwards were 21 years into the future instead of six months, and is not that in my book the main characters are physicists rather than FBI agents, and is not that in my book the main setting is Geneva rather than Los Angeles.

Rather, the significant difference is that in my novel, the apparent cause of the flashforwards is obvious from the first chapter, but in the series, you've set it up as a mystery. More: you've set it up as a mystery wrapped in a conspiracy. That's the game changer: how I handled the physics and the underlying philosophy in the novel doesn't matter; the question now is, what physics and underlying philosophy works given that the series is a conspiracy-oriented mystery.

As I've said before, the audience expectations is that the clues laid out in 101 matter, and that the future that they were shown glimpses of is going to play out largely as suggested.

In my novel, the glimpses of the future were mostly what one might realistically expect: random, isolated slices of life, as banal as any given two minutes out of anyone's life might be.

The series didn't go that way: instead, it chose to have the glimpses (as improbable as it seems) frequently be absolutely key, life-altering moments in people's lives: The exact moment alcoholic Mark takes a swig from his flask, the exact moment masked gunmen come after Mark, the exact moment Lloyd happens to see a formula that could crack everything wide open, the exact moment Nicole is being drowned, the exact moment Janis learns the sex of her baby.

We need to get to—or damn close to—these very specific moments for a couple of reasons:

- 1) They're so important in the character's lives that to say, well, those things just never happened is a cheat.
- 2) They're so important to our conspiracy plot (indeed, the whole Mosaic clue board comes from Mark's vision, and the reality of what's on the board is what gives him the moral authority to spring Nazis from jail and gives Wedeck the moral authority to blackmail the seated US president) that to say, well, that's just a bunch of irrelevant stuff from some alternative timeline that we're not living in now is a cheat.

The fundamental philosophical question is whether our characters are living the life of Scrooge or that of Oedipus:

\* Scrooge got a wake-up call: Hey, dude, continue being a douche-bag and no one will ever mourn your death. And so Scrooge changed his ways; there was no predestination; they universe was just giving him a friendly warning.

\* Oedipus didn't get a warning, he got a PROPHECY [a foretelling of his future]—and you've repeatedly referred to the visions in FLASHFORWARD as prophetic. Wedeck and Aaron both speak of prophets and

prophecies. Oedipus was told, dude, the fates OWN you; try all you like, but you're screwed—you're going to marry your mother and kill your father. Deal with it.

Oedipus did everything he could do to avoid that fate—he took huge deliberate steps to avoid it—but it turned out that he was trapped by it anyway.

(Why did Oedipus fail? The template for Greek tragedy is that each character's downfall is caused by his hamartia—his fatal flaw; there's much debate about what Oedipus's fatal flaw was, although most argue that it was his arrogance in thinking he could outwit the Gods [a somewhat circular argument]. But there's little doubt what Mark's hamartia is: his drinking. It's the thing that he can't control. There's little doubt what Simon's fatal flaw is: his obsession with getting even. You've established these things on screen; use them.)

Of course, we want our characters to be proactive (Oedipus is very proactive throughout the play, by the way), not passive. Our other metaphor, as I've said, is HIGH NOON: people don't just do things that might change their fate for the worse because they're stymied (someone trying to get out of town before he's shot but having his flight canceled), but because their moral code or conscience compels them to do so: Gary Cooper sticks around for the gunfight he knows is coming in HIGH NOON, because any other choice is a violation of who he really is; Humphrey Bogart doesn't run off with Ilsa in CASABLANCA, because Bogey knows Victor needs her to fight the good fight—and then he goes and joins the fight himself.

Indeed, if you can clear them, we'd do well to have clips of both HIGH NOON and CASABLANCA appear in the series: the audience's railing against Mark and Olivia's constant fighting in our series is really just the audience saying what Rick Blaine says in CASABLANCA: "The problems of two little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." There's the sweep of history all around them, and sympathetic characters in a time of worldwide crisis ["the crazy world:" World War II in CASABLANCA, the aftermath—and impending repeat—of the GBO in FLASHFORWARD] have to be conscious of that.

All this is preamble to WHAT we want Lloyd to tell our audience that the ground rules are. He's going to articulate for the viewers the broad strokes of how the rest of season one is going to play out.

Given all of the above, the cop-out answer is to say, well, Al Gough proved that the future isn't fixed; anything can happen, and no future is any more likely than any other, so, dear viewer, you know all that stuff you'd been expecting to see on April 29? We was just shittin' you; you can go watch BONES now.

But the dramatically interesting answer is for Lloyd to say the exact opposite: DESPITE the death of Agent Gough (and indeed doubtless others who had visions since October 6), for the vast majority of humanity, at least in broad strokes, without (and maybe even with) Herculean efforts, the future we saw IS largely going to come true.

Now, what's the physics case for this? (That is, why does Lloyd have the authority to say this and have the audience believe it?)

Answer: quantum mechanics is a STATISTICAL discipline. There's nothing to say that any given oxygen molecule in a room might not go to the far right corner of the room. Indeed, that's as likely a location as any other. But what keeps ALL the oxygen molecules in a room from all going there, and everybody in the room asphyxiating? Statistics.

Likewise, in quantum physics, electrons aren't discrete points; rather they are clouds of probability. You can never say that the electron is exactly here, only that it's most likely to be more or less here, but it could be anywhere in this general region.

The difference between quantum physics (which deals with the very small scale) and classical physics (which deals with large-scale objects) is this: in quantum physics, all you can say is that it's highly likely that the majority of the electrons and protons making up a hammer are more or less over here; in classical physics, you can say the hammer is absolutely sitting on the table. And WHY is there a difference? Because when there are huge numbers of electrons involved, the randomness of individuals is overwhelmed by the statistical tendency of the entire group: in aggregate, on balance, the electrons are almost all where we expect them to be.

Al Gough was an outlier; he managed to break out of his destiny—or so it seemed. But in aggregate, the seven billion human beings on Earth have a combined statistical inertia: they're going in unison in one direction. The future people saw is the PROBABLE one, the MOST LIKELY ONE, the one the pressure of quantum statistics is driving humanity towards.

There's a secondary argument for why this is true: the interlocking nature of people's observations; they corroborate each other in an endless web.

It's far easier for the universe to push back against small changes than to rewrite the whole interconnected web.

Lloyd can argue that if people's visions hadn't overlapped—if people hadn't seen a single, consensus reality made up of an overlapping mosaic of tiles—that actions of individual might be game-changers for everyone; but BECAUSE all the observations showed the same thing, the cumulative force of seven billion sets of observations gives inertia to that future.

And then we need to prove this point in our story: Fiona Banks, whose future is now invalidated because Al Gough can no longer be in it with her, has to die (the observations canceling each other out); Charlie has to give Mark the replacement friendship bracelet (restoring the future to the form it was tending toward before Mark tried to change it).

[Hell, if you want to really go out on a limb, Janis has to be pregnant DESPITE having been rejected by the fertility clinic and never having slept with Demetri or anyone else. She's a Lesbian Mary, carrying a female Second Coming (at least in some interpretations by some of our characters—say, born-again Nicole—but I digress ...)]

The whole point of Schrodinger's Cat is that observations MATTER: it's the ACT OF OBSERVING that shapes reality. Until a qualified, conscious observer looks in the box, the cat is neither alive NOR dead; it's unresolved: it is a superposition (a stacking one atop the other) of all the possibilities; only observing collapses the wavefront (the stacked unresolved possibilities) into ONE concrete reality.

But here we have seven billion observers all agreeing that they saw the same future. The box has been opened, the wavefronts have collapsed, a consensus has been reached: the future WILL be thus.

I deal at length with the notion of the pressure of consensus observations in one of my short stories, "You See But You Do Not Observe," a Sherlock Holmes pastiche, which—cough, cough—won France's top SF award. You can read it [here](#):

This short story is also, as it happens, a high-noon piece: a character walks into an almost certain doom that he's well aware is coming, but not out of stupidity but because to do anything else would be a violation of WHO he is.

Now, having said all the above about why we owe it to our audience to take this interpretation (that the future is going to unfold largely as we promised, although, of course, people may have wildly misinterpreted

what we showed them in the pilot), let me also say that there's a good psychological reason for Lloyd to believe this; he has an emotional, character-driven reason to also push this view of reality:

If we're all caught up in forces we can't control, if we were destined to do the things we do, then he doesn't have to take personal responsibility for pushing the button that killed twenty million people.

And so, pursuing the future he saw with Olivia isn't for him just about finding love, it's also about proving to himself that the timeline is pretty much fixed: the actions we all took in the past were the ones that we were destined to take, just as the things we saw in the future are the things that are destined to happen.

But it's not just that we need to establish that the flashforwards shown in 101 were of things that are probably going to come true for the sake of getting the audience to stick around until April 29.

We also need to establish that this is our rule if we want anyone to give a damn about whatever is revealed in the April 30 flashforwards at season's end (or any subsequent flashforwards we might portray in future seasons).

Otherwise, no matter how intriguing those visions are, people will say, well, there's no particular reason to think any of that will actually come to pass, so why bother investing emotionally in the characters who saw those things? Why continue to watch?

We can't afford to rob the flashforward notion—the central conceit of the series—of its power; we have to establish that the visions are indeed prophetic not cautionary; that our characters are mostly tragic Oedipus figures caught up by forces mostly beyond their conscious control.

I'm going to take a stab now at writing Lloyd's interview scene from 117, in which he lays out that the futures are probably true—but I wanted you all to understand in depth why, for our dramatic purposes, I think that IS the case he has to make, and why we have to live up to that premise as the rest of the season unfolds. :)

All best wishes.

Rob





# FOREVER

← BY MARGUERITE D.A. REED →

*Forever* debuted on September 22, 2014 and it ended on May 5, 2015 after one season and 22 episodes. Starring Ioan Gruffudd as Henry Morgan, Judd Hirsch as Abe, Alana De La Garza as Jo Martinez, Joel David Moore as Lucas Wahl, and Donnie Keshawarz as Mike Hanson. *Forever* was about a New York medical examiner who uses his knowledge to solve crimes while also trying to figure out how to end his mortality. The series originally aired on ABC in the U.S., CTV in Canada, and Sky1 in the UK and Ireland. It is currently available on DVD manufacture on demand and streaming on CW Seed, Apple TV, Amazon Prime, Vudu, and Google Play.



[Forever](#) was a show so square it gave you an A in geometry. It was so corny my husband's great-great-grand-parents would've called it maize. It was trite, serious, and would have made a brilliant cross-over with [Murder She Wrote](#). And even though it was listed as a "fantasy crime drama," I loved it.

I loved it because of Ioan Gruffudd, because of beautiful antiques, because of a bone-deep entanglement with the past, because of mordant flashes of humor, Jane Seymour, BDSM, and clues in Latin. Other people loved it too: viewers in France, Germany, and Spain made the show a success in Europe.

The network didn't love it. Despite a social media campaign, *Forever* was canceled after one season. Why it was canceled makes no sense to me, after shows such as [According to Jim](#) lasted for eight seasons, *24* had to last until Jack Bauer's five love interests had been killed off, and *Castle* tried to limp along after the sexual tension between the two main characters was resolved.

An entry into the television genre of whodunits, *Forever* can be lined up in the category of forensic dramas using a medical examiner as the main sleuth. The twist here is that Our Sleuth is solving the crimes with two hundred years of practical knowledge. Yes, handsome Henry Morgan is immortal, and has turned his gift/curse into one of those extracurricular benefits we're always asked to cite on employment applications, but never do. He dies, and dies again, sometimes through accident, sometimes through murder, and sometimes on purpose trying to ascertain a murderer's method. After he dies (charmingly, he keeps a journal detailing means of death, complete with drawings and pain scale), he resurrects perfectly naked in the nearest body of water.

What's not to like?

To give a bit of a through-line to the episodes of solving the crime of the week, we're told that Henry became interested in the arts medical in order to find a way to end his dilemma. As if that quest weren't enough, in the very first episode he's assigned a stalker. In classic stalker fashion, there are a lot of mysterious telephone calls and unsettling notes in hand-delivered envelopes; Henry is yanked between fear that this individual will expose him and hope that he will at last find out the answers for his two centuries of yo-yoing back and forth between life and death.

Standard prop characters surround him, such as his adopted son Abe, widowed detective Jo, and comic relief lab assistant Lucas. These and other characters highlight Henry's exceptional qualities as well as providing pat little aphorisms meant to rein in the immortal ME from being Too Much.

The plots and subplots are standard, following television convention: the formula generally toes the narrative line of Here is a murder, Henry Morgan shows off his smarts, Detective Jo is mystified by said smarts but comes around to his thinking; either Jo's partner or her boss voice opposition, Henry shows them all, the criminal is identified, if not either killed or apprehended; and Henry and Abe wrap up with either a cheesy bon mot or an observation of life that wishes it were pithy. Winding throughout these well-trodden paths are Henry's moments of angst at his two hundred years of seemingly pointless existence and flashbacks of time and love lost. Perhaps not terribly gripping?

However, Henry Morgan is played by Ioan Gruffudd, a charismatic Welsh actor who should be more famous than he is. Historical drama geeks will remember him from the A&E adaptations of C. S. Forester's *Hornblower* series. In the late 90s, Gruffudd was possibly the next Hot Young UK Thing, all tousled curls and soulful brown eyes. Sadly, his agent got him roles in a Disney movie and then in *Fantastic 4*—and his career took a dive. It seems to be slowly on the rise again, thanks to a couple of excruciatingly suspenseful dramas from Australia and the UK, but he's deserved better than what his agent has snagged for him. As an immortal medical examiner, Gruffudd is miserably gleeful in his Sherlockian deductions and delivers many of his lines with self-awareness just this side of arch. His fussy weirdness and occasional curveball dialogue elevate the interactions with the rest of the cast.

Judd Hirsch plays Henry's adopted son Abe, and serves as the resident oracle of Grizzled Life Wisdom—this is supposed to be clever, given that Henry is roughly 20 decades old to Abe's mere 7. He did provide an excuse for us to see the always-appreciated Jane Seymour, who plays his twice ex-wife in one episode. This subplot crashed my suspension of disbelief, as she shows up in a tight red minidress to attempt rekindle their relationship in a trip to Europe—and he turns her down! True, at first he agrees to go, but then the very guy who's always preaching the virtues of *carpe diem* gets all noble and turns her down. Buddy, you're 70 years old and you have a chance to do the Grand Tour with a smoking hot age-appropriate minx? I enjoy Hirsch, but Gandalf he's not; he's not even Uncle Iroh.

Other cast members include the severely underused Lorraine Toussaint as the precinct boss, and Joel David Moore as the sporadically amusing lab assistant. The precinct boss is there to do exactly what you'd assume, and the lab assistant serves to remind us what a closed-off weirdo Henry Morgan is. Detective Jo Martinez is played by Alana de la Garza, who looks like an interesting combination of Barbie Benton and Pat

Benatar. She's a softer Kate Beckett from *Castle*, one who wears sensible shoes and knows what a hair elastic is for, but we never really see her be much more than a somber love interest for Henry.

These two main characters are allowed more than one love interest, thankfully. Jo dates, albeit reluctantly. And in what I deemed a brilliant move, Henry gets involved with a dominatrix. I can't say I've ever seen BDSM on television that wasn't handled with mock pearl-clutching and a certain amount of smirking (See *Castle*). *Forever* rejects that viewpoint and presents BDSM as a valid modality of interaction—perhaps even therapy for Henry. The dominatrix was portrayed as being intelligent and compassionate. She and Henry were a match that made sense (and in some alternate universe where this show continues, she's won out over the plot expediency of the detective as girlfriend).

So finally we get to why I'm peeved that *Forever* was canceled: so much of this show exuded promise. Sure, some of the writing was worn a little smooth in spots, but a first season should be all about finding the rhythm, the sparks, the character beats—what to throw away and what to develop. Nobody threw Jessica

Fletcher away, even though *Murder, She Wrote* went on for twelve flipping seasons.

So why not *Forever*? My parents and my parents-in-law got to have their cozy faux-atmospheric murder mysteries every week. Solid, predictable, occasionally amusing. Something where you could nod knowingly to your partner as you drank your evening beverage of choice or ate a piece of pie and say "I knew it was the student the whole time."



Was *Forever* not edgy enough? Not dark enough? I think it was dark enough: Henry Morgan and his associates are steeped in death—Detective Jo mourns her husband, dead a year; Abe faces his own impending death by retaining an Epicurean grip on life (Jane Seymour notwithstanding). And Henry dies gruesomely at least once an episode. The show's palette is dominated by drear grey and browns that contrast with Henry's places of retreat—Henry's lab and the cozy antique shop that Abe owns. The harsh sterility of the present vies with the munificent nostalgia of the past just as the violence and drive of his unhappy quest clashes with his literally sepia-tinted memories. I think for a first season that's pretty good.

Perhaps the network didn't think Gen Xers and millennials wanted nostalgia. Maybe they thought that all we wanted was angst, cutting wit, sex, and a gruesome body count. That stuff's fine, yet who wants a diet of nothing but?

A friend of mine in a recent conversation expressed a desire for "the kind of low-stakes pastoral gentle things my brain needs right now. I don't think many folks are craving brutal action..." Even younger people want television they can put their slippers on with. Speculative fiction is a wide umbrella, and there should be enough room on the small screen to give shows like *Forever* a chance.

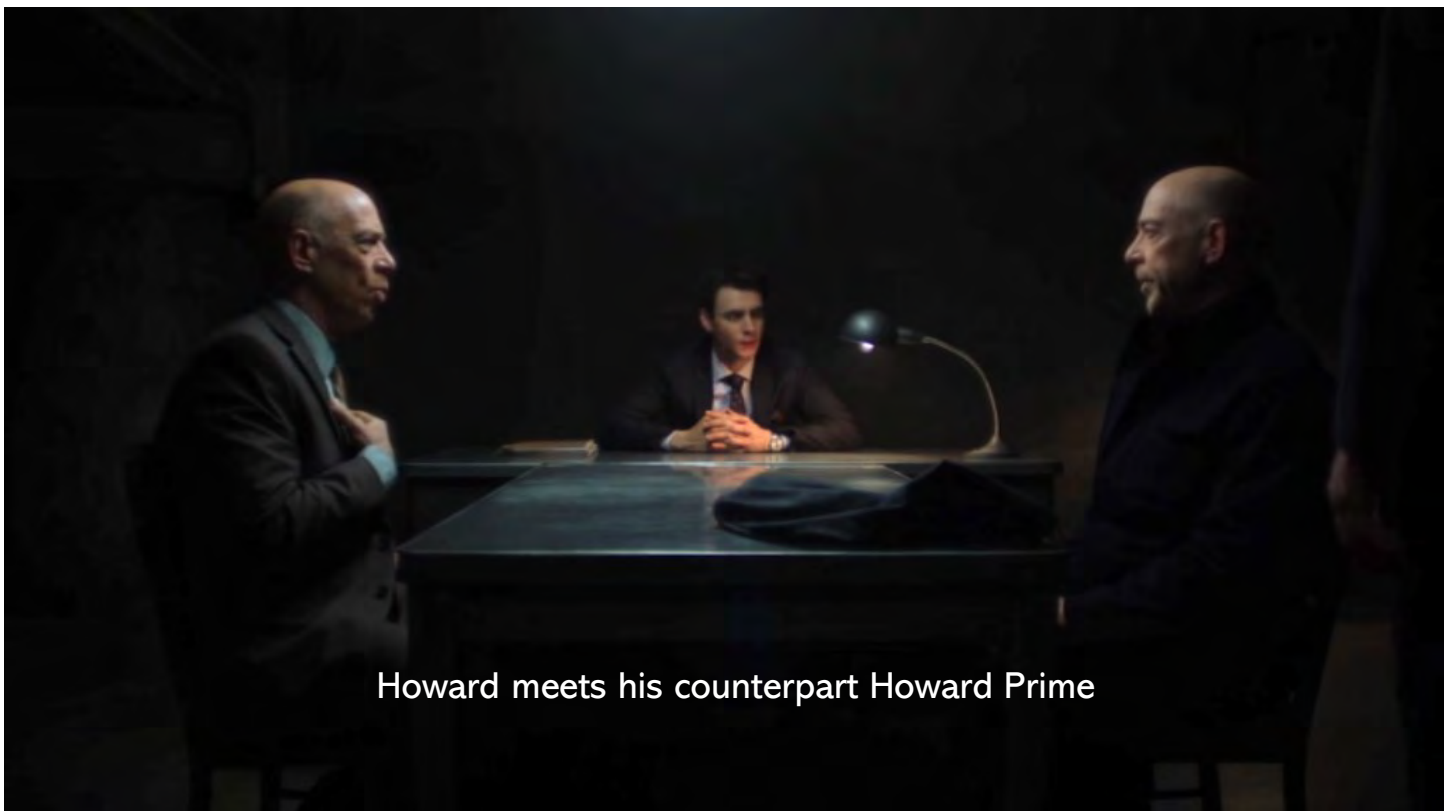
# COUNTERPART

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## HENRY BALEN

*Counterpart* debuted on December 10, 2017 and it ended on February 17, 2019 after two seasons and 20 episodes. *Counterpart* starred J.K. Simmons as Howard Silk, Olivia Williams as Emily Burton Silk, Harry Lloyd as Peter Quayle, and Nazanin Boniadi as Clare Quayle. Simmons plays a UN functionary who stumbles across the fact that he is in contact with a parallel world that is diverging from his own world. The series originally aired on Starz in the U.S. It is available on DVD and BluRay and can be streamed on Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Vudu, Google Play, and RedBox.

It is rare for there to be a good science fiction TV series—I am not including fantasy or super-heroes, there is a lot of genre TV but not a lot of good SF. That may be changing, but the volume is low. We are also in an era of reboots, perhaps it is nostalgia or lack of imagination? In 2017 a new series was launched that only lasted for two seasons before the network STARZ decided not to renew. It had depth, believable world building, and good acting. This was [Counterpart](#).



Howard meets his counterpart Howard Prime



We may not know why STARZ did not renew (at least I do not). It may have been small audience (but the show did not get much publicity), and this is one show that you cannot jump into the middle of. It has an arc and a complicated storyline with plenty of twists that you need to watch from the beginning. This would not help gaining new viewers unless you could start from the beginning—perhaps a streaming platform would have been better than a network/cable channel? Perhaps the fact it is set in Berlin and the show uses sub-titles when the characters speak German reduces viewership in the U.S., though the main language of the Office of Interchange and throughout the show is English?

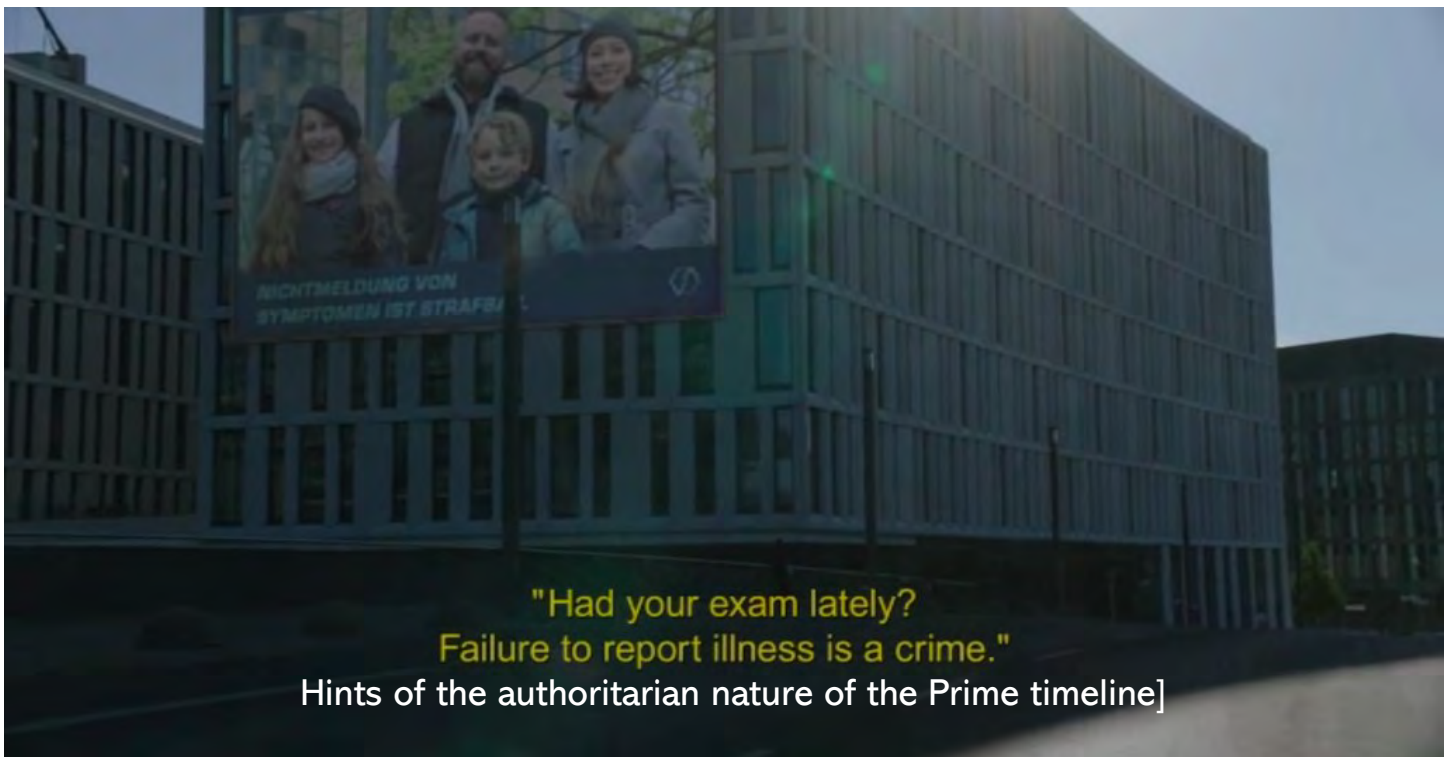
So what was *Counterpart*? It was definitely a spy thriller *and* a story of alternate realities. The show starts with a crime scene and what appear be agents using translucent phones, which is the first indication that this is not quite our reality. Then we switch to following Howard Silk (played by J.K. Simmons) who is a low level bureaucrat in the mysterious Office of Interchange (OI) working in the “Interface” division. He has a phone that looks just like ones from our reality. We learn he has been in the job for almost 30 years and does not know what OI actually does. During his “interview” for a promotion to “Strategy” we see that the computer the director is using is straight out of the 80’s.

The stage is set about 20 minutes into the first episode: we come across another division “Housekeeping” (obviously they deal with security rather than hygiene) and Howard is introduced to his counterpart (Howard Prime). We come to think of one reality as “Prime” (the one less like ours) and our reality as “Alpha.”

We learn about the opening up of a corridor between the two realities. During the Cold War an experiment (in Berlin) opens a passage between two versions of our reality and the each world starts to diverge. In what we come to think of as the alternate reality (called Prime) there was a flu epidemic in the 90’s that wiped out a large section of the population. A subset of Prime’s Office of Intelligence believe that this was a deliberate flu outbreak and they form a rogue group (Indigo) to enact revenge.

What do you do when the spy could be your counterpart? We find out that Indigo has been sending in people to replace their counterparts in the Alpha reality, and we find out more in season 2 more about their plan to exact revenge for the “flu pandemic.”

Now we have a SF show combined with a spy thriller set in Berlin with echoes of cold war dramas. There is an agency monitoring both sides, secret embassies, espionage between parallel worlds and a rogue group (Indigo) from the Prime reality out for revenge on the Alpha reality. All of the ingredients for what could be a long meaty story, there are lots of avenues that can be explored in such a situation



We do not get far into the socio-political situations of both realities. There is enough to hint at the concerns round disease in the Prime reality. When the Howard Alpha visits the Prime reality we see street scenes of pedestrians with masks, street hand sanitizers, and posters stating failure to report an illness is a crime. We rapidly get the impression that the Prime reality is more authoritarian.

Small things show the difference between the realities. The sky line for Berlin in Prime is very different from Alpha's. Alpha has cell phones that are translucent (Prime's are like ours). Alpha's people wear gloves and are fastidious about sanitation (because of the pandemic). A visual difference is apparent between the two realities because of the different lenses used to shoot the scenes. This was achieved by pairing old 1950's lenses with the digital cameras for some of the city shots. The Prime world has a harsher and cooler palette, Alpha's is warmer. Similarly Howard Alpha wears browns and is more sympathetic whilst Howard Prime is dressed in black and more aggressive.

The acting is great, the characters are believable and have depth. Both J.K. Simmons and Olivia Williams come across well and believable in their Alpha and Prime counterparts. Olivia plays Emily, Howard's wife, in both realities. In Alpha we are introduced to her in a coma and Howard Alpha visits her often in the hospital and is obviously in love. In Prime she also works for OI but is separated and estranged from Howard. As the series progresses we see more of the differences between these characters.

I do not want to give away too much of the story. While the show is only two seasons and there was obviously more to tell, is this something that can still be watched? My answer is a definite yes. I would have loved for there to have been a third season (there are a lot of threads that could be followed). But I think that the end of the second season works as an ending for the story. It is not a happy ending, but if you have read spy thrillers (especially John Le Carre) the ending stands up well for that genre. So if you can go and watch it.



Health concerns in the Prime reality

# RECOMMENDED WATCH LIST

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Below is the list of 125 shows recommended by people in response to the initial [Facebook post](#). Shows with articles appearing in this fanzine are in bold, most of the non-bold non-linked titles have links in the preceding articles.

- The Adventures of Brisco County, Jr.* (1993) 1 season  
[Agent Carter](#) (2015) 2 seasons  
[Alien Nation](#) (1989) 1 season  
[Almost Human](#) (2013) 1 season  
[Alphas](#) (2011) 2 seasons  
[Amazing Stories](#) (1985) 2 seasons  
[American Gothic](#) (1995) 1 season  
*The Americans* (1961) 1 season  
[Ascension](#) (2014) 1 season  
[Awake](#) (2012) 1 season  
[Babylon 5: Crusade](#) (1999) 1 season  
**Battlestar Galactica (1978) 1 season**  
*Better Off Ted* (2009) 2 seasons  
[Birds of Prey](#) (2002) 1 season  
[Blood Drive](#) (2017) 1 season  
[Brain Dead](#) (2016) 1 season  
**Brimstone (1998) 1 season**  
[Caprica](#) (2009) 1 season  
[Century City](#) (2004) 1 season  
[Charlie Jade](#) (2005) 1 season  
[The Chronicle](#) (2001), 1 season  
[Clone High](#) (2002) 1 season  
[Council of Dads](#) (2020) 1 season  
[The Crossing](#) (2018) 1 season  
[Dark Angel](#) (2000) 2 seasons  
**Dark Skies (1996) 1 season**  
[Dead Like Me](#) (2003) 2 seasons  
[Defying Gravity](#) (2009) 1 season  
[The Dresden Files](#) (2007) 1 season  
*Eerie, Indiana* (1991) 1 season  
[Emerald City](#) (2016) 1 season  
[Emergence](#) (2019) 1 season  
[The Event](#) (2010) 1 season  
[The Fantastic Journey](#) (1977) 1 season  
**Firefly (2002) 1 season**  
[The Flash](#) (1990) 1 season  
**FlashForward (2009) 1 season**  
**Forever (2014) 1 season**  
[Freakazoid](#) (1995) 2 seasons  
[Frequency](#) (2016) 1 season  
*Galavant* (2015) 2 seasons  
*Going to Extremes* (1992) 1 season  
[Harsh Realm](#) (1999) 1 season  
[Hex](#) (2004) 2 seasons  
[Holmes and Yoyo](#) (1976) 1 season  
[Human Target](#) (1992) 1 season  
[Human Target](#) (2010) 2 seasons  
[The Immortal](#) (1969) 1 season  
[Intelligence](#) (2014) 1 season  
*Invasion* (2005) 1 season  
*Jericho* (2006) 2 seasons  
[Joan of Arcadia](#) (2003) 2 seasons  
[John Doe](#) (2002) 1 season  
[Journeyman](#) (2007) 1 season  
[Key West](#) (1993) 1 season  
[Kolchak: The Night Stalker](#) (1974) 1 season  
[Kröd Mändoon and the Flaming Sword of Fire](#) (2009) 1 season  
[Krypton](#) (2018) 2 seasons  
[Land of the Giants](#) (1968) 2 seasons  
[Legend](#) (1995) 1 season  
*Level 9* (2000) 1 season

[Life on Mars](#) (US version) (2008) | season  
[Limitless](#) (2015) | season  
**Max Headroom (1987) 2 seasons**  
[Men Into Space](#) (1959) | season  
[Mercy Point](#) (1998) | season  
**The Middleman (2008) 1 season**  
[Minority Report](#) (2015) | season  
[Misfits of Science](#) (1985) | season  
[My Own Worst Enemy](#) (2008) | season  
[New Amsterdam](#) (2008) | season  
[Night Visions](#) (2001) | season  
[Nightmare Cafe](#) (1992) | season  
[No Ordinary Family](#) (2010) | season  
[Now and Again](#) (1999) | season  
[Nowhere Man](#) (1995) | season  
[Nowhere Man](#) (2019) | season  
[Odyssey 5](#) (2002) | season  
[Omega Factor!](#) (1979) | season  
[Once a Hero](#) (1987) | season  
[The Others](#) (2000) | season  
[The Outer Limits](#) (1963) 2 seasons  
[Persons Unknown](#) (2010) | season  
[Perversions of Science](#) (1997) | season  
[Point Pleasant](#) (2005) | season  
[The Prisoner](#) (1967) | season  
[Probe](#) (1988) | season  
**Pushing Daisies (2007) 2 seasons**  
[Q.E.D.](#) (1982) | season  
[Quark](#) (1977) | season  
[Reaper](#) (2007) 2 seasons  
[Revolution](#) (2012) 2 seasons  
[Roar](#) (1997) | season  
[Robocop: the Series](#) (1994) | season  
 Rod Brown of the Rocket Rangers (1953) | season  
[Search](#) (1972) | season  
[The Secret Adventures of Jules Verne](#) (2000) | season  
[Sens8](#) (2015) 2 seasons  
[The Sixth Sense](#) (1972) 2 seasons  
[The Society](#) (2019) | season  
[Space: 1999](#) (1975) 2 seasons  
[Space: Above and Beyond](#) (1995) | season  
[Special Unit 2](#) (2001) 2 seasons  
[Star Cops](#) (1987) | season  
[Star Trek: The Animated Series](#) (1973) 2 seasons  
**Stargate Universe (2009) 2 seasons**  
**Strange Luck (1995) 1 season**  
[Strange World](#) (1999) | season  
[Surface](#) (2005) | season  
[Swamp Thing](#) (2019) | season  
[Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles](#) (2008) 2 seasons  
[Terra Nova](#) (2011) | season  
[Threshold](#) (2005) | season  
[Time Trax](#) (1993) 2 seasons  
[Time Tunnel](#) (1966) | season  
[Timeless](#) (2016) 2 seasons  
[Tripods](#) (1984) 2 seasons  
[Tru Calling](#) (2003) 2 seasons  
[Turnabout](#) (1979) | season  
[The Unusuals](#) (2009) | season  
[Upload](#) (2020), | season  
**Voyagers! (1982) 1 season**  
[VR.5](#) (1995) | season  
[Whiz Kids](#) (1983) | season  
[Witchblade](#) (2001) 2 seasons  
[Wolf Lake](#) (2001) | season  
**Wonderfalls (2004) 1 season**  
**Woops! (1992) 1 season**  
[Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist](#) (2020) 2 seasons  
 Chris Garcia, who apparently wasn't checking Facebook at the time, adds these, among his all-time favorite series, with their position on Chris' Top 100 Favorite Series of All-Time  
 #16 [Greg the Bunny](#) (2002) | season on Fox  
 #44 [Human Giant](#) (2007) 2 seasons on MTV  
 #77 [Kurt Vonnegut's Monkey House](#) (1991) | season on Showtime  
 #5 [Lucky](#) (2003) | Season on FX  
 #87 [Martial Law](#) (1998) 2 seasons on CBS  
 #94 [Nikki](#) (2000) 2 seasons on The WB  
 #98 [Off Centre](#) (2001) 2 seasons on The WB  
 #8 [Outsourced](#) (2010) | season on NBC  
 #61 [Selfie](#) (2014) | season on ABC  
 #83 [Sherman Oaks](#) (1995) | season on Showtime  
 #21 [Stella](#) (2007) | season on Comedy Central  
 #45 [Strip Mall](#) (2000) 2 seasons on Comedy Central  
 #88 [Wrestling Society X](#) (2007) | season on MTV