

Character and . . .

Screen Life

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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This issue is dedicated to Allison Cress, 1998-2017.

Consuming Stories Not Our Own: On #Showholes and Character in the Age of Binge-Watching

Susan L. Forshey

Abstract

Humans enjoy stories, so it is not surprising that binge-watching shows is an enjoyable new pastime. Media marathoners breeze through entire seasons in under a week, use stories to work through issues vicariously, and often form communities around series. They can also become addicted and fall into the show hole, an experience of withdrawal only relieved by finding new series to watch. The effects of binge-watching can lead to lost time living our own stories and developing our character. This article explores binge-watching, its positive and negative effects, and offers suggestions for balancing life and watching habits.

A 2015 advertisement for Amazon Fire TV depicts a woman, alone on her couch, watching the rolling credits of the final episode of a series she has just binged-watched. Bereft and grieving, she has entered, according to the ad voiceover, a #showhole, the catchy hashtag at the core of Amazon's ad campaign.

The show hole is a place of despair and withdrawal from the characters and the story just consumed. The woman knits herself into a cocoon,

lying despondently on the couch. In the next scene, she is angrily burying her TV, complete with shovel and dirt, while the voiceover cries, “Why even have a TV?”

Then she’s back on her couch (TV restored) and her face lights up as Amazon’s streaming content scrolls across the screen. She smiles, enticed into watching a new series to fill the empty hole the previous show left behind.



Netflix's show hole ad campaign depicts a binge-watcher in despair and withdrawal.
www.ispot.tv/ad/Aw_U/amazon-fire-tv-show-hole#

As a lover of screen stories and an occasional binger of sci-fi and BBC-TV, the Amazon ad—one of many that are explicitly encouraging binge-watching behavior—resonated with me. It captures the intense enjoyment of engaging in a story and commitment to the characters over a season or multiple seasons, the vicarious living as if I were one more character in the story, and the very real show-hole emptiness at the ending of the series.

One binge-watcher describes the hole: “I do not know where to go or what to do without a series to watch. I find myself just aimlessly trying to find something to do with my free time, much like helplessly driving around looking for an address without a phone. The show hole is a terrible place to be, and I really would not wish it upon anyone” (Rosinski).

Novelist and frequent reflector on the creative life Annie Dillard writes, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives” (32). Even more directly, a classic maxim makes a similar point: Thoughts lead to actions, actions to habits, habits to character, character to destiny (Turak 102). Both statements speak about the power of daily habits over the life that we live, and the character of that life when taken as a whole. The latest estimates suggest that weeks and even months each year are giving to watching shows. Is it simply an innocuous form of relaxation, a screen vacation from the demands of life, or does it have a role in shaping our lives and character? Binging shows can be a

considerable time investment. Good investments require investigating costs, benefits, and whether there are ways to invest responsibly. While it's enjoyable to be immersed in a fictional story, I argue that the costs to our own real-life stories may outweigh the benefits.

The Amazon ad shows a person who has just binged on a show and the result. Before we can investigate the impact of the practice on our own stories, we need to define exactly what binge-watching is and why it has become such a popular practice.

Binge-Watching Defined

In 2014, the Oxford Dictionary added *binge-watching* to its lexicon, marking the term's explosion into widespread use.

What constitutes a *binge*? It often denotes the consumption of multiple consecutive episodes in one sitting, and more broadly, the rapid completion of an entire season or series in a compressed period of time. While it is considered possible to binge-watch TV in general (multiple episodes from different shows), the most common definition centers on immersion in one world with its story and its unique set of characters over a short span of time (Perks xii).

Ironically, Netflix resisted the term *binge-watching*, concerned that it had negative connections with addictive behavior. Finally, according to Netflix Vice President of Product Innovation, Todd Yellin, the company decided to embrace it as the best term to use, even actively encouraging the practice (Big Think). However, not everyone agrees. Some suggest that this mocks or normalizes behaviors that are all too painful and destructive to persons and their relationships (Cook). Communications scholar Lisa Glebatis Perks offers a less negative term, *media marathoning*, in her efforts to champion the positive aspects of the practice (ix), and avoid negative connotations.


Perks defines a marathon as consuming an entire TV series season or an entire movie series in a week (xii). For her, the key is not the number of consecutive episodes viewed or even the rapidity of the consumption, but the viewer's complete immersion in the story world to the near exclusion of the viewer's "world of origin" (6–8).

TiVo considers three or more episodes a binge. Netflix, drawing on data from 81 million global subscribers, nine years of streaming media, and three years of delivering their own content, defines it as two to six episodes in one sitting (Perks x). A 2016 study by consulting firm Deloitte, the Digital Democracy Survey, shows that 70% of US viewers binge-watch an average of five episodes at a time, and 31% of viewers binge weekly (“70 Percent of US Consumers”).

Netflix went further and specifically looked at the streaming habits for one hundred television series’ first seasons in a seven-month period, analyzing how rapidly subscribers watched entire seasons, and the speed for each genre (“Netflix & Binge”; Koblin). Horror, thrillers, and sci-fi seasons were consumed the fastest, in just four days, averaging 2.5 hours a day. This included shows like *Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead*, *American Horror Story* and *Orphan Black*. The quick binger watched dramatic comedies, crime dramas, and superhero shows at a pace of two hours a day for five days. Shows in this group included *Orange is the New Black*, *Fargo*, *Jessica Jones*, and *The Blacklist*. Finally, the relaxed binger enjoyed political or historical dramas or comedies, such as *House of Cards*, *Mad Men*, *The West Wing*, and *Arrested Development*, in just under two hours a day over six days (Koblin; “Netflix & Binge”).

Netflix data even shows at what point 70% of viewers go on to binge the rest of a season—the *hooked episode* for a particular series (“Do You Know”).

One of the results of Netflix’s studies was a change in their approach to original content release: many viewers want the whole season dropped at once, rather than the traditional weekly serial (Big Think). Release dates are advertised and social networking lights up with anticipation. Weekends are blocked out for binge-watching parties. While network and cable TV continue to present shows in the traditional way, citing that it keeps people talking and stakes a place in popular culture over an extended



76% [of viewers] find
binge-watching a
“welcome refuge from
busy lives.”

period of time (such as the week-by-week release of *Downton Abbey*), Netflix is convinced that this is the new way of TV series.

The viewers seem to agree: 76% find binge-watching a “welcome refuge from busy lives” (Lewis). Eight in ten find bingeing more enjoyable than watching a single episode. 73% of the 2013 Netflix study felt that binge-watching was socially acceptable, and TiVo found that social views of the behavior improved by 2015 (Karmakar and Kruger).

And for those who miss the first seasons of a series, binge-watching allows people to come rapidly up to speed, join the current conversations in the lunchroom, or avoid spoilers. *Breaking Bad* is a pivotal example of a series that bridged the old and new worlds of TV-watching: those who faithfully watched week to week and those who caught the buzz and began binge-watching to catch up and enjoy the final episodes spoiler-free and in real time.

In the midst of definitions and data analyzing numbers of episodes and binge-able genres, one aspect of binge-watching is often missed: *time spent*. Most definitions consider the number of episodes a primary measure. It is important, however, to look at the total time involved. Using the Netflix categories, a fast binger could watch 17.5 hours of TV a week; a quick binger, 14 hours; and a relaxed binger, a little over 10 hours a week. In a year, with viewing being consistent week to week,



What would you do with an extra month each year?

the totals equate to approximately 38 days, 30 days, and 22 days, respectively, of engaging screen worlds and characters. This does not take into consideration other forms of TV consumption—sports, news, reality TV, or movies.

What would you do with an extra month each year? We can easily see that bingeing, especially when it becomes a regular habit, is an investment of our time. Time is a non-renewable resource. Any habit that requires such an investment deserves some reflection on its cognitive, emotional, and physical effects.

Effects of Watching

One of the best ways to measure the impact of a practice is to investigate how it affects our brain, body, and emotions. While reading a book requires multiple brain processes to work together to decipher text and imagine it, watching screen stories is passive. Our brains are captured automatically by anything new that could be dangerous, edible, or sexual, so constantly changing images on a screen engage this survival mechanism. This is called the *orienting response*, and it locks in our attention to the screen. Since it is an autonomic response, it takes almost no effort, which makes watching shows seem relaxing (Heid; Neal).

Watching a show is also physically relaxing. When a person begins watching, the stimulation of the visual story unfolding causes the brain to release endorphins—feel-good chemicals that relax us and give a sense of well-being (Heid; Neal). Once the viewing session is over, inertia has overwhelmed the body (a.k.a. the *couch potato* feeling). The immediate physical cost is lower energy levels, passivity and diminished alertness. But more importantly, the relaxing effects of the endorphins cease abruptly, which makes the connection between watching and relaxation more pronounced (Dvorak; Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi).

These may seem to be short-term and minor consequences, but when experienced repeatedly, the discomfort from turning off the show may make it harder to stop watching. A physical habit is formed, both to seek the relaxation effect and to keep it going (Heid; Neal).


Emotional investment habits are also formed. Characters become “pseudo-avatars” for us to live through—and we invest them with our own sense of self, even though they operate in surprising ways. Exciting plot developments cause the release of adrenaline as our brains experience the story vicariously. We care for the characters. We grieve with and for them. The fuller the immersion, the more the brain believes this world is real, so much so, bingers find the boundaries between screen story and real life dissolving (Perks 40–44). *Washington Post* columnist Petula Dvorak describes her immersion in *Orange is the New Black*:

The other day . . . I grabbed my phone to text something really funny to Taystee. It was split-second impulse before I realized that the last three days spent with Taystee were a fiction. She’s a character. . . . She’s not my friend.

We feel connected to the characters because our brains have released relational chemicals similar to what would be released in a real-world encounter in the same situation. Neuro-economist Paul Zak offers a study that sheds light on this powerful sense of connection at both the physical and emotional level. Participants watched a video story about a father and his terminally ill son that showed both of their perspectives. Before and after the video, blood tests determined the levels of two hormones in the viewers: stress-hormone cortisol and human connection hormone oxytocin. Then participants were given the chance to give money to a stranger and to a nonprofit helping children with illnesses. The higher the levels of hormones, the more the participants were willing to give. Even though it was a fictional situation, the story influenced the viewers, not simply to feel for the father and son, but to act on those feelings (Lewis).

This can also help explain why immersive sessions with characters in a story-world can be tiring—the feelings of distress, connection, and care are real and draining, as if the viewer were actually going through the situation in real life.

The emotional content of the story, coupled with the pseudo-avatar relationship created with characters within the story, engages our hearts and minds, pulling us from our worlds into the screen world. Barriers dissolve and disorientation, such as a sudden desire to tweet a character, occurs. It is also encouraged. More and more, actors are tweeting and blogging about their shows, blurring the lines between their character and their own life. This is not a new phenomenon—classic screen characters like Mr. Spock or Princess Leia became interwoven with the people who played them. And when the actors die, Leonard Nimoy,



The emotional content of the story engages our hearts and minds.

Carrie Fisher, and others who have embodied characters we have come to love, we mourn.

Is this connection and identification bad? No, in fact, it can function in similar ways as reading novels, teaching a person empathy and the ability to assess what a person might be thinking or feeling, also called *theory of mind*. Perks argues that people learn tools for discerning good choices in their real lives through immersing themselves in screen stories. She argues that the more immersive the experience—the more intensive the binge—the more a viewer is transformed through engaging the story and can work through moral dilemmas (87–98).

Story arcs in TV and movies can give the viewer opportunities to explore strange new worlds, try on ideas, or be exposed to people who are different from them. Returning to *Star Trek*, the classic series broke ground in so many ways by showing a racially and ethnically diverse crew working together in an egalitarian context (Maloney). The *Harry Potter* series with Harry's committed circle of friends and *The Lord of the Rings* series' fellowship of comrades incarnated themes of friendship, sacrificial love, and perseverance, teaching the importance of friendship and community in facing challenging situations.


A Healthy or Unhealthy Habit?

The possibility of living through the characters and working out moral and other life dilemmas, or even the relaxation experienced, are certainly benefits of marathon immersions in a series. However, when does binge-watching become an unhealthy habit or even an addiction?

What the human brain is given to do repeatedly, it learns to do both rapidly and efficiently. Cognitive biologist John Medina describes the making of memories and habits in the brain using a college campus map. If all the sidewalks were removed between the buildings and grass replaced, what would happen during the next semester? Slowly, paths would be worn in the grass, the shortest routes between buildings. Over time, certain paths would deepen and widen, as more students walked them repeatedly; lesser-used paths would remain faint. The most used, efficient paths could then become sidewalks, set with concrete.

As the brain learns by deliberate practice, neurons fire and connect together, rehearsal strengthens the pathways, and over time, what has been learned enters into long-term memory, i.e., the concrete sidewalks. Adding additional sensory stimuli to the learning process, such as visuals, smells, touches, and sounds, can add more ways for the brain to access the memory. Adding strong emotional content even further solidifies the experience (Medina 137-139).

In light of this, watching screen stories, especially the fully immersive experience of binge-watching, contains many of the necessary requirements for making a powerful memory, as well as setting the stage for an ongoing habit. This habit of watching screen stories may begin to color our own stories by taking away time from other enjoyable and interesting activities and pastimes. If the time for real-life relationships and character-building experiences is slowly squeezed out and the screen stories take precedence, what is the cost to our lives, which, as Dillard suggests, are formed by daily practices over a lifetime (32)?



If the time for real-life relationships and character-building experiences is slowly squeezed out, what is the cost to our lives?

The occasional splurge, the screen vacation that is carefully planned, anticipated, and taken after responsibilities are completed, is not the problem. The concern here is with splurges that become repeated binges, week after week, and a screen life that

becomes an intentional escape from the messiness and unpredictability of real life. As with many activities, too much of a good thing can cause unpleasant effects.

A potential downside with anything that releases brain chemicals for good feelings, excitement, or emotional connection is that the brain wants more, especially when it temporarily blocks out stressful real life. At first the brain is disoriented with this surge of new hormones but then the person becomes habituated, or tolerant, to the new normal—in other words, it takes more of the stimulus to achieve the same effect (May 26; 75-78).

After a screen binge, the brain goes through withdrawal, not unlike withdrawal from a drug, so the Amazon Fire TV ad is accurate in its depiction of both the sense of emptiness and frustration that can be experienced after finishing a series, especially for people who use binge-watching to procrastinate important tasks or as an escape from stressors (Sifferlin; Reinecke et al.).

The trouble is that, as with anything that promises escape, the discomfort is only temporarily masked; the real-world tasks are still coming due or overdue; the stresses are only temporarily forgotten. The mental escape seems to be relaxing but in reality it is more like drinking strong coffee after little sleep—it juices the brain on stimulation without really solving the long-term weariness. The crash still comes and the discomfort returns—until the next show pulls us in.

Psychologist Gerald May writes about the many ways we can seek escape. We often limit the idea of addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, and sex, but May argues that we all have habits we use to avoid facing discomfort. In serious addictions, the damage to health and relationships is severe, but the quieter, socially permitted addictions can still seep into the rest of life (May 37-41).

While the impact of socially acceptable addictions is not immediately obvious, there are still emotional, mental, and physical consequences.


Perks found that media marathoning could lead to four negative outcomes: bingers lost sleep in order to consume the series; their eating habits were poor during the binge—forgetting to eat, or eating only quick foods in order to get back to the story; they ignored family responsibilities; and they put off work, either missing work, calling in sick, or procrastinating tasks (22–26). According to Gerald May, these would be symptoms of an addiction, a distortion of attention, as the act of bingeing has begun to impact the viewer’s ability to attend to important aspects of life (May 28-30).

Encouraging Binging

If the cognitive, physical, and emotional encouragement to continue watching were not enough, the content creators and viewing platforms

actively exploit them. New York University marketing professor Adam Alter argues that online technology, such as social media and streaming media, actively entices us into behavioral addictions. Due to the enormous amount of user data, platforms can craft a user experience that precisely targets the brain's reward and pleasure centers, making the technology difficult to use in moderation (5). Entire seasons are now released, so there is no need to delay gratification. The autoplay feature on many platforms removes active choice from watching. Even the structure of the episodes are crafted to encourage continued watching. The main plot point may be resolved at the end of an episode, but a new revelation or suspenseful cliffhanger is introduced, tempting the viewer to keep watching for the next resolution in the first moments of the next episode, and the pattern continues. The show hole's gnawing hunger remains satisfied with each cliffhanger/resolution (288–289). Alter cautions, "As an experience evolves, it becomes an irresistible, weaponized version of the experience it once was. In 2004, Facebook was fun; in 2016, it's addictive" (5).

A viewer caught in the pull of a binge-watching session might feel powerless to resist the hunger for more. Stanford University professor of psychology Kelly McGonigal argues that human willpower is not a switch that can be turned on and off, nor is it something that some people have and others don't. It is more like a muscle. It can be exercised and strengthened, it also can be exhausted from overuse. The ability to delay gratification and focus on tasks and responsibilities is best when rested, and weakest after a long day (55–79). The combination of easy access, platform tactics and cliffhangers, mental and physical weariness, and depleted willpower may make an unplanned binge inevitable.



Human willpower is not a switch that can be turned on and off.

Spiritual Wisdom on the Show Hole and Addictions

While streaming content and binge-watching is a 21st Century experience, the gnawing emptiness of the show hole is not a new experience. In the Christian tradition, John of the Cross, a Carmelite brother and poet, describes a cavern in the depths of the human heart.

The emptiness of this cavern causes discomfort. Humans tend to dislike discomfort, so they try to fill it with things, experiences, people, or self, but this is only a temporary satisfaction, “because nothing less than the infinite can fill them” (202). The cavern’s openness is meant for God first—the only one who can fill it with love in a way that is life-giving rather than addictive. Because John of the Cross believed that all things are in God, once the hole is filled with God, then the person can receive everything else in life freely (232). The need to use experiences, people, or possessions to assuage the ache is gone, leaving only enjoyment and love.

Psychologist Gerald May draws upon this same tradition of the cavern or void in his discussion of addiction. If something, such as screen life, has begun to fill a void or help avoid the discomfort that void creates, then letting the show hole remain empty for a time allows space for other possibilities to grow (160). It may at first seem unbearable (179)—withdrawal from the endorphins produced by bingeing screen stories is real—and not unlike the depression and lethargy portrayed in the Amazon ad.

Writing Our Own Stories

What might inspire us to turn our attention away from the screen stories—physically turning off the show, getting off the couch—and let the show hole remain empty? One place to look for motivation is in our own lives. How are our daily practices building who we are as people—our characters—and our vocation in the world? If our favorite screen characters become “pseudo-avatars” imbued with our own hopes, then to step away from the screen would mean to step back into our own lives and stories and embody the very things we look for in our favorite characters.



What do you want your own story to be about?

To put it another way, would we find watching a story about a person binge-watching shows interesting? Would we root for them to watch

the next episode or would we encourage them to get off the couch and get out into their lives? If binge-watching is practicing us into *watching* life, rather than *participating* in our own lives, then it is vital that we change course. We must recognize the importance of our own stories as well as our participation in them.

In *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, Donald Miller describes the often uncomfortable process of getting off the couch to write our own stories. In the process of making a movie based on his memoir, he learned what makes stories—good stories—interesting, and realized that he was not living a good story with his life. He avoided facing conflicts in his family, taking care of his health, and pursuing relationships. Making the movie was the catalyst—an *inciting incident* in story terminology—for him to take a hard look at his daily choices and begin working toward a more meaningful, fully engaged life.

Poet Mary Oliver asks, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” (94). The first step is taking a hard look at the stories we are writing with our own lives and understanding how binge-watching functions within that story. Why do you watch? Who are the characters you love? What are the stories that draw you in time and again?

Maybe there is a screen story that repeatedly pulls you back into re-watching. Paying attention to the themes of the story, the characters you’ve identified with, and the structure of the world in which the story takes place can provide important clues to why *this* story is so captivating. We find our own lives are often woven together with our favorite stories; we return again and again to reflect, and we even learn from beloved characters how to write our own stories.

In my own life, I remember a painful season in high school, full of stress and uncertainty. At least once a week, my mom would start *The Empire Strikes Back* when I got home from school and we would watch it together. At a basic level, the story is simply about the characters courageously reacting to events and going from place to place looking for answers. While there is pain, there is also joy and optimism underpinning the action. It helped my mom and me face the

uncertainties together. The story gave us a common language to talk about our lives and hope for the future.

On the other hand, if screen stories have become a habit of escape, then slowly reducing the time spent watching each day, each week, is the next step. One of the best ways to get a handle on how much time is being spent is to keep track for a few weeks. Add up the screen time—both what would constitute bingeing and just watching TV and movies. From this, estimate how much time screen life will take from the year, how much time is being taken away from your story. What would you like to do with this time? This makes the investment in screen life or in real life a conscious decision.

Even armed with the knowledge of why we watch and how much we watch, breaking the habit of binge-watching may still be difficult.

Breaking the Habit

Studies have found that those who planned their screen splurges experienced more enjoyment and less guilt after watching than those who found themselves sucked into a story spontaneously (Feeney). Planning a screen story event makes the immersion experience an incentive to get necessary tasks completed rather than as an escape from those tasks.

If life feels disorganized or rushed, then reclaiming some of the time otherwise devoted to screen life and focusing on some basic practices—getting more sleep, eating better, exercising, completing responsibilities at work, school, or home—can go a long way to reducing stress rather than using binge-watching as an avoidance strategy. Because of physical, emotional, and mental dependence on the endorphins, this may be uncomfortable at first, but over time, the discomfort will diminish.

In order to combat the basic physical costs—the sluggishness and lower energy that hit after a binge-watching session—watching while exercising can alleviate the inertia of sitting, offer a different form of relaxation, and put limits on the length of time spent watching.

Finally, as Kelly McGonigal found in her willpower research, bringing to mind a future goal that will be affected by choices in the present can help us delay gratification. First, craft a clear description of the future goal. Then, when temptation strikes, delay 10 minutes and recall the future goal (161). Inserting a delay into binge-watching can help restore long-term vision. The autoplay feature on streaming content platforms can be disabled, making the next episode an active choice. If late night watching means that sleep is being delayed, setting your internet modem to shut off at a specific time each night can be enough of a reminder to go to bed. When watching on a computer, using an app like *Stayfocusd* can limit time on streaming media sites. Many similar productivity apps allow the user to schedule times when certain websites are available, providing time for watching but setting limits beforehand. In whatever way the delay is achieved, having a clear future goal and seeing how current behaviors are affecting it can short-circuit an unplanned binging session.



Canceling home cable and internet access creates space for offscreen life activities.

If these strategies are not enough, at least at first, removing access to streaming content and screen life completely may be the only way to break a deeply ingrained habit. It's not easy, but it can help reorient the brain and body away from dependence and give us a chance to focus on writing our own stories.

Miller writes,

Here's the truth about telling stories with your life. It's going to sound like a great idea, and you are going to get excited about it, and then when it comes time to do the work, you're not going to want to do it. . . . People love to have lived a great story, but few people like the work it takes to make it happen. (100)

Living our own stories can be difficult. We often know what practices are life-giving and what habits hold us back, but choosing to do the hard work of living our stories sometimes requires a significant change in *how* we live. In my own life, I discovered that the best way to support

the story to which God has called me required the canceling of my home cable internet access. While I can still use my smartphone when necessary, this one choice has helped me create more space for non-screen life activities: reading, writing, creating art, gardening, playing music, and welcoming people for dinner. Sometimes I leave my phone at work and experience completely screen-free time for an evening or a weekend. The simple joy of screen-free reverie in the early morning and late evening hours has been an unexpected and rejuvenating blessing.

Conclusion

Understanding the physical, cognitive, emotional, and overall time investments that come with the practice of binge-watching can help us prioritize and cultivate our own meaningful real-life stories and watch responsibly. Daily practice of living one's own meaningful story builds over the years into a life of character, which can have a profound influence on others we meet. Even more, it opens us to the joys of life, joys which cannot be experienced vicariously—watched passively on a screen—but can only be lived. Such joys require our full engagement in our own story and the greater Story in which we all live.

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