

ABSTRACT

What is Gold? Narrative Structure, Technological Developments,
and Audience Behavior in Sitcoms

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The American sitcom can be traced back to the early days of television, and, for much of its history, it has relied on an episodic narrative format. However, in the past twenty years, this long-standing format has evolved in response to technological developments and alterations in audience viewing patterns. Three sitcoms, *The Golden Girls*, *Will & Grace*, and *Arrested Development*, serve as prime case studies in this thesis when examining the effects of VCRs, DVDs, TiVo, and Netflix on audiences and in turn on the narrative structure of the American sitcom.

What is Gold? Narrative Structure, Technological Developments,
and Audience Behavior in Sitcoms

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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, whose constant love, support, and friendship not only inspired me to start this work, but made it possible.

To my parents, who assisted me in my educational pursuits and put up with me when those quests included watching “too much” TV.

And to my best friend, who stuck with me through the process and by doing so learned much more about *The Golden Girls* than he ever desired.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The sit-com on television is in fact something new. It is a powerful and popular form of entertainment. It has developed much by accident, growing from small ideas and encouraged by the unique economic conditions of American broadcasting. Most of us have watched it all our lives, and for the most part we have taken it for granted as the most available and least demanding of the many forms of comedy.... In less than thirty years it [appeared], tested some variations, settled on its basic rules, and perfected its form. In the process, it has overturned more than two thousand years of comic traditions and established an entirely new and unique form of comedy.

David Grote, *The End of Comedy: The Sit-com and the Comedic Tradition*
(130-131)

As a child in the 1990s, I watched re-runs of *The Golden Girls* on Nick at Nite with my grandmother while staying overnight at her house. Spending time with my grandmother and people I interpreted as “her friends” made me feel as if I were a member of a special club of adults. I kept up with *The Golden Girls* for years and eventually purchased the individual seasons on DVD in the early 2000s.

Once I began to watch the episodes both in order and without commercial interruption, something stood out: the plot holes. What I had not noticed before was suddenly something I could not ignore. The show remained generally the same from episode to episode, but the storyline was never quite consistent. For example, character backstories would change drastically, and no one seemed to notice. During this time I watched more than *The Golden Girls*, and as my consumption of televisual texts increased, so did my understanding of how these texts are created. However, it took a

formal education to help me fully reconcile why seemingly significant plot holes were once acceptable to both the show's writers and the audience.

During my lifetime, television consumption in the home has gone through four distinct phases. The first started when I was a young child when we were able to record TV on VHS tapes (mid-1980s—late-1990s). The second began when we bought DVD box sets (early-2000s—present). Not long after TiVo was released, digital recording became the norm, marking the third phase (mid-2000s—present), until digital streaming was introduced and overtook digital recording to become the fourth phase (late-2000s—present). It has been a challenge to wrap my mind around the original format of television when an episode was ephemeral since that has not been the case in my lifetime. When *The Golden Girls* was on the air, it fell into the first phase, when television was mostly transitory, so the storytelling needed to fit that model.

As technology developed and audience's television consumption patterns evolved, the way in which programs were written changed as well. During this time, I came across two shows that exemplify the changes discussed above: *Will & Grace* and *Arrested Development*. *Will & Grace* falls into both the second and third phases because it coincides with the release of DVD box sets and TiVo; *Arrested Development* is unique because it fits into the last two phases since it was originally released on a major network in the digital recording era and then was later revived for a season on Netflix.

The goal of this thesis is to identify and analyze the impact of technological developments, audience expectations, and evolving viewing habits on the sitcom narrative. I will discuss this cycle of influence and change on the contemporary American sitcom and show how technological developments and the manner in which audiences

watch these programs has changed the nature of television storytelling itself. I will conclude that technological advancement, audience expectations, and viewing habits work in a cyclical way to shape the formation of television programs today.

To fully understand how sitcoms have been affected by technological development and audience viewing patterns, it is necessary to examine shows that exist both inside and outside the influence of the changes in technology. I will use *The Golden Girls*, *Will & Grace*, and *Arrested Development* as case studies in this project.

The Golden Girls (1985–1992) aired before binge-watching (the act of watching at least four episodes of a television program in rapid succession, typically by means of DVDs or digital streaming) existed and audiences focused on an overarching narrative among episodes or seasons (Jenner 9). The show's writers followed a traditional sitcom framework and were able to focus on each individual episode without necessarily considering the season or series as a whole. *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) began a year before TiVo officially launched when viewers began to digitally record programming for later viewing. It was also on the air during the initial release of DVD box sets. The changes in viewing habits during the show's tenure challenged writers to shift from single episode focus, which no longer satisfied the audience's viewing habits, and consider the season and entire show when making narrative decisions. *Arrested Development* (2003–2006 and 2013) began long after "TiVo-ing" became a widely recognized term. The writers took a more serialized approach to the show than was common at the time before it was cancelled in 2006. It made a unique comeback when Netflix released the entire fourth season on May 26, 2013. This narrative is told in a highly stylized serial manner, which sets it apart from the first three.

Literature Review

There has been very little written about the evolution of the American sitcom in the post-network digital era, so I will build my analysis on literature concerning the history of the sitcom and what is written about technological impacts on television as a whole. In his essay on narrative complexity, Jason Mittell suggests that all technological developments have contributed to an increase in narrative complexity across all forms of contemporary television, but he does not focus specifically on the DVR or sitcoms. In fact, it is difficult to find anything written about the technological impact on the contemporary American sitcom past the introduction of DVDs and box sets. Most of the information released on DVRs and their impact is purely statistical. The lack of literature here is something I will deal with during the *Will & Grace* and *Arrested Development* portions of this project. The following section will focus on the history and development of the sitcom in order to ground *The Golden Girls*, *Will & Grace*, and *Arrested Development* within the genre and clarify its evolution.

Before examining its history, we must first define the sitcom. In the 1985 book *TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide*, scholar Lawrence Mintz defines a sitcom as:

A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters with the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled solved at the end of the half hour. . .

The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored... This faculty for the 'happy ending' is, of course, one of the staples of comedy, according to most comic theory. (114–115)

From the time television was born out of radio and became an established form of entertainment by the late 1940s, sitcoms began to develop the characteristics listed in

Mintz's definition, and they remained largely unchanged for sixty years. Until the last fifteen years, "every episode of a television series was supposed to stand alone.

Television was ephemeral, of the moment of its broadcast, then gone. You could not rely on viewers to watch every episode or to remember information from week to week, so storylines had to conclude in a single viewing" (Metcalf 2). Early audiences were inconsistent, which gave the writers the challenge of creating plots that kept audiences interested in unchanging characters. The end result was a sitcom season that consists of approximately twenty formulaic episodes with little or no overarching storyline and recurring static characters, taped using three cameras in front of a live studio audience and sweetened with a laugh track.

Sitcoms came to television by way of radio: "Sitcom's roots used to be radio (whose roots were movies, whose roots were vaudeville). Today's sitcom's roots, though, are yesterday's sitcoms" (Mitz 4). Many of the early sitcoms were first successful radio programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951–1953), *The Goldbergs* (1949–1956), *The Life of Riley* (1949–1950), *The Jack Benny Show* (1950–1965), and half a dozen others.

Tracking the history of the sitcom can be quite difficult: "The story of the sitcom mirrors that of broadcasting as a whole, and television in particular. Yet this history is problematized because the sitcom hasn't evolved through definitive leaps and bounds ... but through the conjunction of comedy forms that existed before broadcasting, and the natures of radio and television" (Mills 37).

Scholars have differing opinions on which show should be considered the first true sitcom; because the range of possible definitions of the genre is so broad, it is impossible to pick one definitively. However, the show generally regarded as the first to

truly fit the standard sitcom definition accepted today is *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957). After a year of trying, failing, and trying again, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz brought a retooled version of her radio show, *My Favorite Husband*, to CBS in the fall of 1951. The couple teamed up with cinematographer Karl Freund and editor Dann Cahn to pioneer the three-camera setup, a new lighting scheme, and multi-camera editing for their show. The three-camera set-up allowed a single camera to shoot both characters while the other two cameras shot close ups of each of the characters, which allowed them to better capture physical comedy (Mills 39). This new format, which became part of the standard sitcom definition, allowed the episode to be filmed continuously and in sequence while also capturing physical comedy. The team filmed their show in front of a live studio audience rather than broadcasting live, which increased the quality of the image when it was finally broadcast from film. As scholar Jim Cullen puts it, “*I Love Lucy* was thus notable not only because it was one of the most successful television shows of all time, but because it established new methods and strategies for television production” (208). The new format and Ball’s antics quickly made *I Love Lucy* the nation’s biggest hit, ranking first in Nielsen’s (the company that monitors what programs are being watched) ratings for four of its six seasons (Edwards 113). Prior to the introduction of this setup, sitcoms were shot with one camera, which usually remained stationary throughout the program and often used canned laughter instead of a live studio audience. The three-camera setup was quickly adopted by other programs and remained the dominant, but not exclusive, format until the turn of the 21st century.

Sitcoms remained largely the same for several decades following *I Love Lucy*’s revolutionary approach. By 1964, 43% of programs were sitcoms and ten years later ten

of the fifteen sitcoms on network television were in Nielsen's top twenty programs (Mintz 107). During this time period, which many consider to be the golden age of sitcoms, audiences could not get enough laughs. Mintz writes, "The audience for situation comedy is enormous ... an average night of *Laverne and Shirley* [brought in] 50 million viewers against an estimate of between 32 and 38 million total audience for *Star Wars*" when it was released in 1977 (107).

The massive audience trend continued for years until the introduction and wide adoption of cable television fractured the television audience. The staggering number of viewers tuning into sitcoms began dropping in the 1980s and has yet to recover. Eighty-four million people tuned into the series finale of *Cheers* in 1993, a sitcom that had been on the air since 1982, but each week in its final season averaged less than 30 million viewers. The three critically acclaimed shows being examined in this thesis saw similar dips in viewership as audiences began and continued to fracture with *The Golden Girls*, *Will & Grace*, and *Arrested Development* averaging 12, 8.7, and 4 million viewers in their final seasons compared to 21, 17.3, and 6.2 million viewers at their peaks.

As mentioned above, the initial splintering of the audience occurred with cable television; prior to its introduction, programming was generally targeted toward mass audiences instead of specific groups. Cable allowed producers to tailor programs to particular groups of people: teens, mothers, children, etc. This new method of programming is often referred to as narrowcasting (Fleras 379). For the first time since the 1940s, audiences had a variety of programming for a range of interests; television was no longer one size fits all. Jim Cullen writes, "Cable's expansion shook conventional network television to its foundations. In 1976, 90% of television viewers watched

evening shows broadcast by ABC, CBS, or NBC. By the mid-1980s, this figure had dropped to 75%; by the early 1990s, it was down to about 65%, and sometimes even less” (261).

The significant drop in viewership as a result of cable is worth noting because it recurs when discussing the shows specifically and the impact of DVR and Netflix on viewership. It is also important to note the expansion of sitcoms on cable. Sitcoms are now designed to attract certain audiences, which Brett Mills predicted in his 2005 book *Television Sitcom*:

This pluralism of sitcom shows that the industry is becoming more attuned to what specific audiences want, but at the expense of the mainstream sitcom, meaning that contemporary series fail, on the whole, to unite audiences in the way that postwar radio comedies did... in a broadcasting industry in which the number of channels continues to increase, the sitcom’s once universal appeal may continue to splinter into ever more individualized examples. (49)

The fracturing of the audience has changed the way television is experienced by its viewers, which in turn has changed how programs are made.

Before discussing the impact of other technologies, we must look at the historical sitcom experience for audiences. In the early years, television was based on making audiences feel a part of something: families and friends would gather in front of the TV set to catch the latest episode of their favorite television show. When shows were not filmed in front of a live studio audience, producers enhanced the experience by adding a laugh track. According to Greg Metcalf, author of *The DVD Novel*, “The basic principle behind the laugh track is that people will laugh more if they hear others laughing, but they will also feel better because they feel the comfort of being part of a group” (127). Once programming expanded with the development of cable television and viewing

became a more isolated activity, audiences kept the group experience alive with the “water cooler phenomenon.” Although people were largely watching television alone, or at least in smaller groups, everyone was watching the same shows at the same times and could then discuss them together the next day at work or school. Even though fewer people were watching the same shows, the shows were targeted to specific groups, which resulted in viewers watching the same programming as many others in their specific circles.

In the last few years even this has changed: “TiVo and Internet viewing, along with the availability of DVD sets, have made it increasingly antisocial to discuss a show because those who will watch it later don’t want ‘SPOILERS.’ Water cooler moments [have] been replaced by water bottles and spoiler alerts” (Metcalf 127). With the introduction of DVDs, DVR, and Netflix, audience members are no longer watching shows separately at the same time, but instead are watching them on their own schedules. This has led to the widespread “spoiler alerts” phenomenon in conversations both in person and online. For many young people today, it is difficult to imagine a time when a TV show’s plot could not be spoiled by some viewers seeing it ahead of others and blurting out the ending. These changes have not reduced the amount of programming viewed, but have impacted the way people not only watch but experience television altogether. Todd M. Sodano writes, “The traditional linear broadcast flow that marked the network era has been challenged and subverted by time-shifters, cable channels, online venues, [and] emerging media.... Television consumption continues to increase alongside the increased fracturing of the viewing audience” (27–28). The change in viewing experience has been spurred by the adoption of new technologies, which has lead to new

viewing patterns. While these changes can be traced back to the introduction of cable and VCRs, it was not until the release of DVDs and DVD box sets that large portions of the American audience began watching shows in a way that will eventually be termed “binge-watching” (Mareike).

In his 2006 article on the narrative complexity in today’s television programming, Mittell writes, “The complete packaging and visual quality of DVDs have led to a boom in a new mode of television viewing, with fans binging on a show a season at a time ... and encouraging multiple viewings of what used to be a mostly ephemeral form of entertainment” (31). Mass retailer sales of DVD players and DVDs began in the United States in 1997, and by 2003 DVD rentals surpassed VHS rentals at Blockbuster (Industry History). The television industry took note of the success of DVDs and began releasing seasons of television programs in the early 2000s; in fact, the complete first season of *I Love Lucy* was first released on DVD on September 23, 2003.

In the 1990s, a few shows had several episodes released on VHS but it was quite rare; DVDs gave the industry a new and unique opportunity to sell their shows all over again, some of which had not been seen since their original broadcast and others that had only been seen out of order in syndication. As Metcalf writes:

There are several important shifts in thinking here. The importance of the DVD set is that it formalizes the idea that what we thought of as television - the ephemeral programs broadcast onto the box in the living room at one time on one evening (unless the show reran or went into syndication) - is not the true state of television shows. The version that appears on the DVDs, in the order they appear on the DVDs, is the true version of the program.... Episodes of series become chapters of a season rather than the stand-alone short stories of the past. (6–7)

The release of these DVD sets first impacted the way audiences consumed shows. As Mittell mentions, audiences began not only binge-watching but also were able to re-

watch certain episodes or any particular portion of an episode as many times as they desired. Of course, this was possible with VHS, but only for shows that were being broadcast and for those who took the time to record them. The new ability to examine the shows in more detail brought the dwindling “water cooler phenomena” to the forums and discussion boards online.

This change in consumption and discussion was not lost on Hollywood as producers began to recognize that all episodes of a television show are not “individual stories, with the expectations of independence and closure,” but are instead chapters of a single novel with the story developing from episode to episode (Metcalf 9). This realization “fundamentally changes how a series is written” because writers must now “try to balance the need for a closed experience from each chapter episode with a sense of a longer story being told” (Metcalf 9). Here Metcalf is referring to television as a whole, but this was especially true for sitcoms. Sitcoms have always been resistant to the longform narrative. Originally, this was the case because television was ephemeral, and later, as shows aired in syndication out of order, they needed to be free from long arcs and dramatic change. However, as the consumption patterns changed, so did the attitude toward creating sitcoms: “The sitcom is a form even more resistant to longform narrative arc than television drama, but it arrived there, nonetheless, by a few different routes. To paraphrase Shakespeare, some are created with a long arc, some achieve the long arc, but others have the long arc thrust upon them” (Metcalf 127). *Will & Grace* was caught in this tidal wave of change and ended up with the long arc thrust upon it, an issue that will be discussed in detail later in this thesis.

As mentioned previously, VCRs did have an impact on audiences, and while that is outside of the focus of this thesis, it is important to note that many scholars consider VHS to be the predecessor of DVR. The VCR gave audiences their first opportunity to “time-shift” programs: “The VCR had a major impact on television viewing. One of the most important changes was the ability to time-shift, i.e., to tape shows at the time of broadcast but watch them later... Time-shifting gave viewers more control...” (Cullen 271).

Time-shifting became much easier once DVRs were introduced in 1999, and the technology has only become easier to use and more widely adopted over the last fifteen years. According to a study released by Nielsen in 2011, 38% of households in the U.S. had a DVR and, in the last quarter of 2010, the average American watched two hours and twenty-one minutes of time-shifted television per week. Another study in 2012 revealed that the number of households with DVRs jumped to 44%. The 2012 study also showed that those who used DVRs were using them more often, particularly young adults: “Just 47% of viewing by young-adult DVR users was live, down from 61% four years earlier” (Levin, “DVRs”). Once again, a new technology has changed the way audiences consume their favorite programs.

The final technological development that must be discussed is perhaps the most important: digital streaming. As mentioned previously, there is a scarce amount of literature written about how the changes in technology have specifically affected the structure of sitcom narratives. Most published material had not considered the most current changes in distribution (i.e., streaming) and its implications for the genre. This is mainly due to the speed at which media consumption habits are changing. In 2012

Nielsen released a study that revealed that, among the 28,000 global respondents, watching video content on a computer was as popular as watching content on a television. In a study two years earlier, respondents were watching video content on TV more than on a computer.

According to Metcalf, “In practical terms, television is being absorbed by the Internet. Both come into our homes through the same ‘intertubes,’ only one of them, television, attempts to hold on to the same time-limited rigidity of a broadcast schedule” (212). The statistical data supports Metcalf’s claims. In September of 2013, Nielsen released the results of a July survey of two-thousand consumers (half of which use Netflix) that showed that 38% of Americans “use or subscribe” to Netflix, a 7% gain over the previous year (Levin, “Nielsen”). The numbers are up for other streaming services such as Hulu and Amazon Instant Video, as well. These streaming services have been built into many Blu-ray players and gaming consoles, making it even easier for viewers to digitally stream their favorite shows. Although Hulu and Amazon Instant Video are outside of the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that streaming is growing across the board, not only with Netflix. This thesis focuses on Netflix for several reasons: Netflix was the first service to offer digital streaming; it was the first to create original programming outside of the network model; it remains the most subscribed to digital streaming service, and, perhaps most significantly, it produced and released the fourth season of *Arrested Development*.

Time-shifting and binge-watching have become so prevalent that Nielsen expanded its definition of television in 2013: “In an effort to capture all forms of TV viewing ... Nielsen’s goal is to track any sort of video viewing from any source... For

years, networks have been complaining that Nielsen keeps miscalculating its statistics by sticking to its traditional methods” (Kar). In fact, in July of 2013, a study found that 88% of Netflix users reported watching three or more episodes of a TV show in a single day. The change in viewing habits and audience-wide adoption of these habits encouraged Netflix to create its own original programming outside of the traditional network/cable television machine.

For the first time since the 1940s, television is being created in an entirely new manner in order to suit the demands of the audience. Netflix began with the Emmy-winning series *House of Cards* in 2013 and has since produced and released ten other original series including *Lilyhammer*, *Bad Samaritans*, *Hemlock Grove*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Turbo FAST*, and *BoJack Horseman* among others. In 2012, 45% of subscribers reported watching original programming on Netflix. Each season of these programs has been released in a single day, encouraging audiences to binge-watch episodes. *House of Cards* writer Beau Willimon spoke out about writing for binge-watchers in a June 2014 *Variety* article, “You’re on a slippery slope if you’re trying to write a binge-watching experience; [viewers] might watch it all in two days, or over two months [so] it has to be able to work both ways” (Verini). While Willimon seems to be against changing the narrative structure to satisfy binge-watchers, *Veep* co-executive producer Simon Blackwell says that their writers tailor the show for “sippers and big gulpers alike,” and he believes that binge-watching “could possibly be a richer experience. . . You’d be attuned to the characters more acutely than if you were watching on a weekly basis. You’d be immersed in the world more. Like a bath of *Veep* instead of showers” (Verini). While there is hardly any scholarly exchange on the influence of these

new technologies and habits, many in the industry have been discussing it for the past two years. This is something I examine in detail while discussing the season of *Arrested Development* released on Netflix in comparison to the previous seasons.

Chapter Breakdown

The first chapter will focus on *The Golden Girls* as a traditional network sitcom. I will analyze the characteristics of the show and discuss how it fits the typical sitcom framework. I will also use the show as an illustration of the classic sitcom. *The Golden Girls* will serve as a sort of control in this analysis of American sitcoms because of its placement historically, which will be discussed later.

The second chapter will focus on the next show chronologically, *Will & Grace*. Here I will begin to look at the evolution of the sitcom as both DVDs and DVRs are released and adopted by audiences. *Will & Grace* works well for this discussion because it began before either of these technologies was widely adopted. In the early seasons the show's narrative structure largely resembles that of *The Golden Girls*, but there are notable changes to the traditional sitcom configuration that are arguably a result of new technologies.

I will then look at the two versions of *Arrested Development*. First, I will analyze the original seasons that aired on FOX from 2003 to 2006 as an example of the post-DVD and post-DVR sitcom. Because of its placement historically, the show could (and does) bend the rules of the genre by using longform narratives and self-referential jokes, among a number of other techniques. The second installment of *Arrested Development*, released on Netflix on a single day, will serve as my source for analysis in the second half of this chapter. I will compare seasons 1–3 to the fourth season in order to examine the

differences between them. I will then explain how the evolution of the show was made possible through technological advancements that changed audience's viewing habits.

Finally, I will conclude my thesis by synthesizing the analyses of *The Golden Girls*, *Will & Grace*, and *Arrested Development* and use that information to examine how technological advancements and the ever-changing audience viewing habits have drastically altered the sitcom over the last fifteen years.

CHAPTER TWO

The Golden Girls: Sitcoms in the 1980s

The Golden Girls aired on NBC from September of 1985 until May of 1992 for a total of seven seasons and 180 episodes. During its runtime, the show won eleven Emmys and was nominated for more than sixty. Each of the stars, Bea Arthur, Rue McClanahan, Estelle Getty, and Betty White, won an Emmy for her role, which makes *The Golden Girls* one of only three sitcoms to have all principal actors win an Emmy. Although viewership dipped in the final season, the series finale ranks as the seventeenth most viewed finales in history with an estimated 27.2 million viewers. Its popularity both with audiences and critics make it an ideal show to examine when considering audience viewing habits.

The show revolves around four middle-aged to elderly women sharing a house in Miami, Florida, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is a natural stasis because the show focuses on four adults rather than a family with children. One of the most striking characteristics of the classic sitcom formula is that at the end of each episode, the characters return to the same state they started in and nothing changes. This is especially true in *The Golden Girls* because, although the women age, it has no significant impact on their situation, which makes it perfect for this project. Other sitcoms do not necessarily have the same sort of stasis. *The Cosby Show*, for example, featured children as many of the characters. These children aged and moved on with their lives, often changing the character composition of the program. However, the show did not abandon

the classic sitcom rule because the children's age and departure did not change the fact that, at the end of each episode, everything resolved.

The Golden Girls is also one of the last sitcoms to bring in millions of viewers, an average of nearly 18 million over the seven seasons, before the audience was significantly fractured, which will be discussed later. *The Golden Girls'* unique position in sitcom history and the natural stability of the show's plot make it ideal to examine as an illustration of the classical sitcom that was on the air as both VHS tapes and cable began to dominate the market.

The Classical Sitcom, Narrative Structure and Viewing Habits

As mentioned previously, *The Golden Girls* follows the classic sitcom framework, which had been used since *I Love Lucy* pioneered the three-camera set-up. Although *The Golden Girls* aired nearly thirty years after *Lucy's* series finale, very little had changed concerning the format of the show. *The Golden Girls* was shot on tape in front of a live studio audience, just like *I Love Lucy*. These episodes were sweetened with a laugh track, which helped unify those watching the show. At the time, families and friends were tuning in to watch together and viewing the show was seen as a group activity rather than an isolated one.

Each episode featured the same four characters, Dorothy Zbornak (Bea Arthur), Blanche Devereaux (Rue McClanahan), Sophia Petrillo (Estelle Getty), and Rose Nylund (Betty White), in the same situation in which the audience last saw them: four single ladies sharing a house and their lives as they try to navigate the world around them. Typically, one of the girls would have a personal problem or some sort of conflict for which she needed the assistance of the others. This usually involved gathering around the

kitchen table to eat cheesecake and one or more of the girls telling a story from their own lives to help the girl in trouble make sense of her problem. Together they would try to find a solution, which usually resulted in some hilarity before either the situation solved itself or they were able to find an appropriate answer to the predicament. In very general terms, this is the plot trajectory for the majority of episodes.

One of the main recurring storylines had to do with the girls' many relationships. Out of all four, only Rose maintains a steady boyfriend, but that relationship is often a source of conflict and adds another dimension to the show. Their single status, Martin Gitlin posits, "Provided story line opportunities that showed off their vulnerabilities in their relationships with men and, particularly in the case of Blanche, their aggressiveness in pursuing the opposite sex" (146). Although Rose has a relationship for part of the show's tenure, it is still used as a device to show her vulnerabilities as the relationship faces some typical, and a few unusual, challenges. An episode did not relate to the story of the previous one or the one that was to follow. No matter the problems faced during any particular episode, the girls always found their way back to each other at the end of the half hour for the genre-necessary happy ending.

Each self-contained episode was created in that way so the audience could consume without consideration toward another episode or the series as a whole. Writers did not rely on audiences to watch every episode from week to week, and because each episode was "of the moment of its broadcast, then gone," the writers had to bring the characters back to where they started so that inconsistent audiences could keep up whenever they chose to watch (Metcalf 2). The need for this cyclical structure gave the writers freedom to tailor the story to a particular episode without necessarily having to

consider what was written before. Because audiences and writers at the time held a single episode focus rather than focus on the season or series as a whole, the show is seemingly plagued with plot holes that would not go unnoticed by audience members today. I will discuss several examples of these “mistakes” and explain why they were considered acceptable at the time of broadcast.

At the show’s onset, Dorothy Zbornak (Bea Arthur) is a fifty-something divorcee after her husband of thirty-eight years, Stan Zbornak (Herbert Edelman), leaves her for a much younger woman. As Dorothy comically puts it, “He left me for a stewardess that he met on a business trip to Hawaii. It was her first flight. They said ‘On arrival, give the passengers a lei.’ She got confused, he got lucky, and they now live on Maui” (“The Engagement”). A large part of Dorothy’s backstory concerns her relationship with Stan. For much of the show, Dorothy maintains that, on their first date, she and Stan slept together which resulted in a pregnancy that forced them into marriage sometime near the end of her senior year in high school. That being said, her oldest child, Michael Zbornak (Scott Jacoby), should be between thirty-seven and thirty-eight in the show’s first season. However, when Michael appears in three separate episodes during throughout the show, his age ranges between twenty-two and twenty-nine years old. His first appearance is in “Family Affair” (season two, episode seven), and Dorothy describes him as a twenty-nine year old musician who cannot figure out how to navigate adult life. In “Mixed Blessings” (season three, episode twenty-three) Michael turns up unexpectedly with a fiancé twice his age. In this episode he is referred to as half his forty-four year old fiancé’s age, which makes him only twenty-two years old. The fact that he lost seven years between season

one and season two is never addressed narratively. In addition to this age change, he should be at least ten to seventeen years older to fit Dorothy's backstory.

Other mistakes deal less with numbers and more with the general backstory of the characters. In "In a Bed of Rose's" (season one, episode fifteen) Blanche Devereaux (Rue McClanahan) tells the other girls she was notified that her husband died in a head-on collision by a policeman eating chips. Contrarily, in "Sick and Tired: Part One" (season five, episode one) she claims she was getting a pedicure when her husband, who had been in a coma for weeks, died. The discrepancy between the stories is not mentioned narratively. In addition to the incongruities concerning her husband's death, depending on the episode, the number of children Blanche has changes. In "Bringing Up Baby" (season three, episode three) Blanche is attempting to convince Dorothy to let her keep a Mercedes they purchased together, and she says, "I'll give you one of my sons. I have given this a lot of thought, Dorothy. I have had four kids; I have never had a Mercedes. What do you say? Which one do you want?" She goes on to list three of her sons: Biff, Doug, and Skippy. During the course of the show her daughter Rebecca is prominently featured in several episodes and another daughter named Janet makes an appearance toward the end of season seven. In "To Catch a Neighbor" (season two, episode twenty-four) she mentions a son named Matthew who works as a CPA. If all of this were true, it would mean she has six children, yet this is never clarified.

Rose Nylund (Betty White) also faces several inconsistencies within her backstory. In "The Heart Attack" (season one, episode ten) Rose tells a story about her childhood cat named Lindstrom Lindstrom. In "The Way We Met" (season one, episode twenty-five) the girls meet for the first time. Blanche has put up an ad for a roommate on

the local grocery's bulletin board; Rose is facing eviction because her building's new owners do not allow pets and she has a cat, which she is holding while examining the bulletin board. However, in "High Anxiety" (season four, episode twenty), which deals with Rose's addiction to narcotics, Rose tries to con the other girls into giving her drugs by telling them it is the anniversary of the death of her cat, Fluffy. Dorothy quickly responds by telling her that she has never had a cat named Fluffy because she is allergic. This statement is in direct contrast to not only what audience members had heard about the character, but had also seen. These irregularities occur consistently throughout each season of *The Golden Girls*.

Today's audiences may watch the show and think the writers were lazy or had no concern whether the show made sense or not. However, if you examine the show in context to television viewing habits at the time, the inconsistencies are not only justified, but can be seen as purposeful, as well. Plot holes can be explained by the show's stand-alone nature because, at the time, "everything had to be tied up and put back in the box" by the conclusion of an episode (Metcalf 2). Storytelling at the time was not about creating a long-running narrative; instead, it was about telling the same story repeatedly in new ways. The writers tailored the backstories and other "facts" to their needs for a particular episode because it was all about the comedy and story of a single episode, rather than the arc of an entire season. Audiences were not necessarily tuning in every week to catch each new episode, and even when they did, they were not focused on specific details from episodes or seasons before; therefore, they were able to enjoy each episode as a single entity without distraction.

Technological Advancements

Now that the show's structure has been addressed, it is time to examine the technologies of that time, specifically VHS and cable TV, and the impact they had on the show. The first episode of *The Golden Girls* aired on September 14, 1985. At this time VCRs were in a reported 30% of American households, which is a 20% increase from 1983. By 1988, during the show's third and fourth seasons, video rental revenues exceeded box office revenues ("1980 – 1989: A History of Home Video and Video Game Retailing"). *The Golden Girls* was on the air as VHS took a hold of the American market. For the first time, audiences were able to record programs at home or rent a movie from their local video rental store. This development is significant because it marks a change from the ephemeral episode to the examinable episode. Prior to the introduction of this technology, an episode of television was fleeting unless it was syndicated, and even then those episodes were often recut and there was no way for audiences to know which episode would be aired in syndication at any given time. Viewers with a VCR could now record any broadcast for later viewing. However, the ability to record does not mean audiences were doing it. In "It's a Miserable Life" (season two, episode four), which aired on November 1st, 1986, the girls are planning a funeral for a neighbor. While making the arrangements, the funeral home's director suggests they schedule the services for a Thursday night. This suggestion is immediately met with protest from all four women and the funeral director immediately replies, "Oh, I forgot. *The Cosby Show*." It was late 1986 and the girls, like most of America, planned their schedules around their favorite programs so as to not miss an episode. Even though the technology existed to record for later viewing so the women could attend the funeral, they still considered it

more reasonable to change the funeral date rather than record the episode. The girls' mentality represented that of society at the time because the idea that television could be scheduled around a viewer's plans rather than the other way around did not immediately catch on with the majority of viewers.

During this same time, cable television was also making waves. Although cable had been around for decades by the time the first episode of *The Golden Girls* aired, it was not until the 1980s that it became a countrywide phenomenon. This is partially due to the inaccessibility of cable for large portions of the nation's population; however, between 1984 and 1992 "the industry spent more than \$15 billion on the wiring of America, and billions more on program development" (Calcable.org). *The Golden Girls* was on the air from September of 1985 until May of 1992, nearly bookending the "wiring of America." By the end of the 1980s there were fifty-three million households subscribing to cable, compared to sixteen million in 1980, and the number of networks had increased from twenty-eight in 1980 to seventy-nine by 1989 (Calcable.org). This is the time when the audience began to fracture. Instead of teenagers watching *The Cosby Show* with their parents, they could now watch MTV. The adoption of cable television and the subsequent and splintering of the American audience is reflected in the viewership of *The Golden Girls*. Figure 2.1 shows the average number of viewers for an episode in each season (TV Ratings). The second half of season four and the first half of season five aired in 1989 when fifty-three million households had more than seventy cable channels to choose from, not to mention the other networks. The wide adoption of cable is reflected in the dip in viewership. By the time the wiring of America was

completed in 1992, *The Golden Girls* was barely bringing in twelve million viewers an episode.

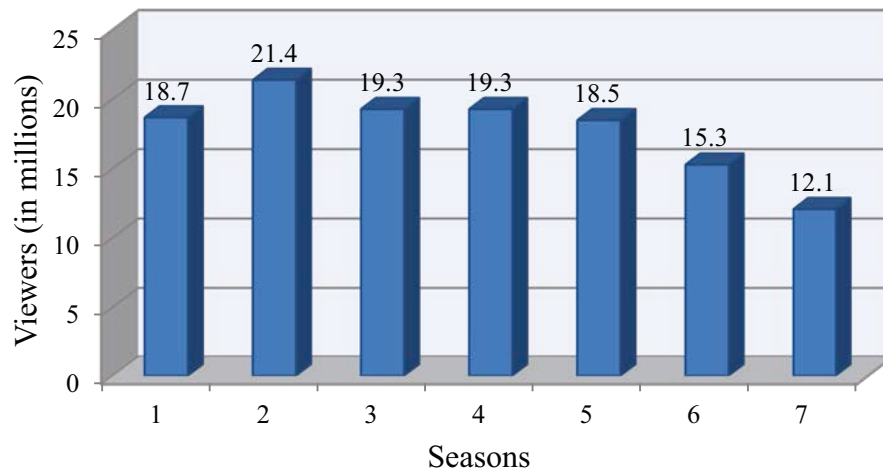


Figure 2.1. *The Golden Girls* Viewership.

The Golden Girls was not the only show to experience this kind of dip in viewership. According to Nielsen's ratings, *The Cosby Show* was ranked number one in the 1985–1986 season averaging nearly twenty-nine million viewers per episode. *The Cosby Show* held the number one spot until the 1990–1991 season. During its five-season reign as the number one show, the audience average peaked at thirty-and-a-half million viewers during the 1986–1987 and 1987–1988 seasons. By the next season, viewership dropped to twenty-three million and then to twenty-one million the following season. Despite its number one ranking, the show was being seen by fewer and fewer people. This trend is noticeable in all shows at this time. As Figure 2.2 illustrates, *The Golden Girls* received its highest ranking during its third season when it came in at number four;

however, the number of viewers is more than two million lower than season two when it was ranked fifth (Brooks and Marsh).

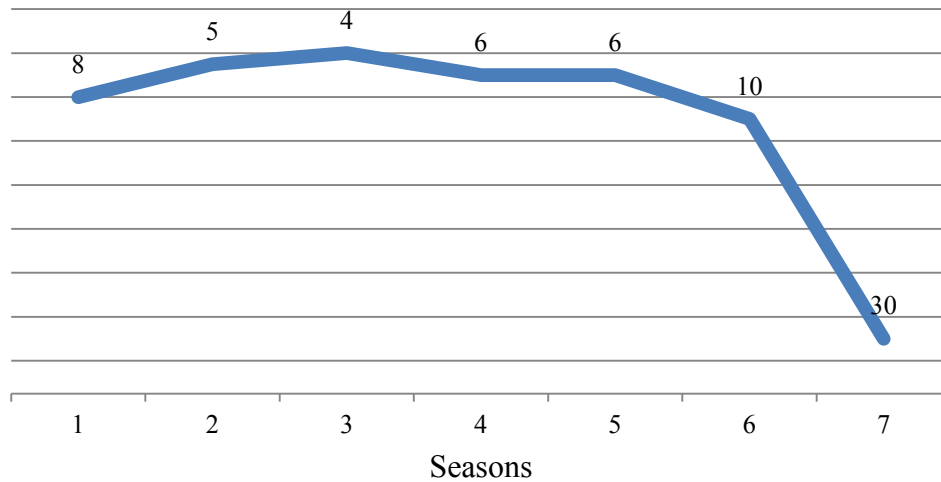


Figure 2.2. *The Golden Girls* Ratings.

Although viewership continued to decrease, the ratings did not significantly decrease until the seventh season when it came in thirtieth. The decline in viewership but consistency in ratings evident in not only *The Golden Girls*, but also other popular shows at the time, serves as evidence of the fracturing audience. Audiences still viewed television as mostly ephemeral, but now their attention was divided between the network programs, cable programs, and their VHS rentals. The changes in technology noticeably impacted not only *The Golden Girls*, but most, if not all, network programs at the time.

CHAPTER THREE

Will & Grace: The Evolving Sitcom

Will & Grace aired on NBC from September 1998 until May 2006 for a total of eight seasons and 184 episodes. The show won sixteen Emmys and was nominated for more than eighty. Eric McCormack, Debra Messing, Megan Mullally, and Sean Hays, the show's leading actors, each won at least one Emmy for his or her role. *Will & Grace*, along with *The Golden Girls*, is one of only three sitcoms to have all principle actors win an Emmy. The show's six-season steady viewership fell drastically in the last two seasons. The finale drew in more than eighteen million viewers, making it the most watched episode of season seven and eight as well as the thirty-sixth most watch series finale. Both *The Golden Girls* and *Will & Grace* experienced similar success on the same network, making them both ideal candidates for comparison when analyzing narrative structure in sitcoms.

The show concerns the lives of four adults living and working in Manhattan in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The characters, Will Truman (Eric McCormack), Grace Adler (Debra Messing), Karen Walker (Megan Mullally), and Jack McFarland (Sean Hays) span a variety of lifestyles, and each brings something unique to the show. Will is a reserved and charming corporate lawyer; Grace is an erratic and creative interior designer; Karen is a pill-popping and vodka-gulping socialite; and Jack is a flamboyant entertainer at heart who cycles through a variety of jobs while mooching off the others. Although the characters are strikingly different and do not all live in the same home, like

in *The Golden Girls*, the natural stasis of adult life makes for an ideal sitcom setting. The characters' lives see little development and growth in any way that would affect the show's natural stasis during the first four seasons. As will be addressed later in this chapter, roughly the first half of the show follows a more traditional sitcom framework, whereas the second half deals with an overarching and longform narrative. The shift from traditional sitcom framework to a different format makes *Will & Grace* a perfect case to examine when considering the development of narrative structure in sitcoms.

Will & Grace also coincides with the second and third phases of television consumption in the home: DVDs and TiVo. The introduction and adoption of these technologies are reflected not only in the show's content, but also in its makeup, making it an excellent candidate for studying the impact of these technologies on the viewing habits of audiences and the sitcom's narrative structure. Although fracturing of the television audience was already well underway by the time *Will & Grace* hit the airwaves, it was on the air at a time when programming options were changing with the launch of reality television, which further the splintering effect.

Developing the Classical Format

In many ways, *Will & Grace* follows the traditional sitcom framework described in chapters one and two. It was filmed using the classic three-camera set-up in front of a live studio audience and sweetened with a laugh track. Like *The Golden Girls*, *Will & Grace* has its share of plot holes; however, they are less frequent, much more minor, and the majority of them occur within the first four seasons, unlike *The Golden Girls* where they happen steadily throughout the show. Writers continued to favor single episodes over seasons, but allowed minor storylines to carry over into other episodes and even

across seasons far more than was allowed in *The Golden Girls*. The habit of carrying over storylines becomes more prevalent in the last four seasons of the show. In the beginning, viewers could still watch a single episode every other week and keep up the plot, but their experience was enhanced with more regular viewing. I will discuss several examples of the “inconsistencies” made by writers before explaining why they were acceptable at the time and addressing the shift in narrative structure.

While the show features four main characters, it typically focuses on two in particular: Will (Eric McCormack), a homosexual lawyer, and Grace (Debra Messing), a straight interior decorator, both in their late twenties (and eventually thirties) living in New York City. While the show did not revolve around homosexuality, it did play a major part in the series. In “William, Tell” (season one, episode six) Grace casually mentions that Will came out to her during their senior year of college over Christmas break, which sets a precedent for his coming out story. However, in “Lows in the Mid-Eighties” (season three, episodes eight and nine), both Will and Grace flash back to their freshman year in college when Will spends Thanksgiving with Grace’s family. During this two-part flashback episode, Will proposes to Grace in a panic to avoid sleeping with her because he is in denial about his sexuality. Later in the episode, after Grace has announced their engagement to her overjoyed family, Will breaks it off by announcing that, although he loves her, it is only platonic because he is gay. The two spend a year apart following their break-up before they reunite as best friends. For such a dramatic situation and important time in both their lives, it is surprising that the story would change between seasons. Like in *The Golden Girls*, the story changed to fit the narrative of the episode; however, the change here is a relatively minor one.

Grace's birth order is also up for debate at the beginning of the series. In "Alley Cats" (season one, episode twenty-one), Will refers to Grace as the "baby of the family looking for daddy's approval." Contrarily, throughout the rest of the series, Grace is referred to as the middle child. Both her older and younger sisters, played by Geena Davis and Sara Rue respectively, make a single appearance confirming her status as a middle child.

Finally, much like the discrepancy in Rose's relationship with cats in *The Golden Girls*, Will's relationship with dogs shifts throughout the show. In "The Truth About Will & Dogs" (season one, episode ten) Will tells Grace that he has never been much of a dog person in an attempt to prevent her from adopting a puppy. This story changes in "Gypsies, Tramps, and Weed" (season three, episode seven) when Will discusses how much he loved his childhood dog, Daisy, who died while he was away at college. Later in the same season, "Mad Dogs and Average Men" (episode eighteen) features a storyline revolving around Will dating a man named Paul only because he is infatuated with Paul's dog Pepper. In this episode, the audience is able to see Will's love for dogs visually. Again, the story does not quite add up.

The difference between the plot holes in *Will & Grace* and those in *The Golden Girls* is that the majority of them occur in the early seasons and they decrease in number throughout the series. The character backstories that change all originate in season one, while the writers were still developing the characters and world of the show. After a season with these characters, the writers do change some of the facts established in the first twenty-two episodes, but these changes are maintained for the rest of the series. For

example, once Grace is recognized as a middle child, she remains one for the duration of the program. The same goes for Will's relationship with dogs.

As addressed earlier, one of the characteristics of the classic sitcom is the unchanging character. Originally, characters "had to remain the same from episode to episode ... so viewers saw familiar people acting the same whenever they came back" (Metcalf 2). For the first four seasons, *Will & Grace* generally followed this rule and the characters were always the same. Starting in season five, the writers began to change the characters and their lives with overarching narrative arcs and plot twists, such that viewers were no longer tuning in to watch familiar characters in the same environment as they were previously seen.

As a brief example, during the first four seasons of the show, Grace is portrayed as the ditzy girl with bad luck in relationships, and quite a bit of the show's humor derives from her relationship failures. In season four's finale she meets Leo Markus (Harry Connick Jr.), a charming doctor she later marries less than ten episodes into season five. For the remainder of the show she goes with him to Africa, returns alone, learns of his affair, divorces him, reunites with him once and becomes pregnant with his child, decides not to tell him about the baby because he is engaged to someone else, and finally reconciles with him at the end of the show. Regular viewing became necessary to follow the plot in the final four seasons of the show.

All of the characters saw similar dramatic arcs in these seasons, even minor characters. For instance, Stanley "Stan" Walker, Karen's husband and the most minor of minor characters (his only on screen appearances are the occasional hand or foot on the edge of the screen), goes through a variety of changes between seasons four and eight. I

choose to delve deeper into this character's arc rather than another because his relative unimportance compared to the four main characters and his strikingly dramatic storyline highlights the shift in the show from a single episode focus to a season or series focus. The fact that such an insignificant character sees such dramatic change shows how much the show had changed.

Between seasons one and three Stan is simply Karen's husband. Many of the characters make jokes about him or comments that are comical for the audience, but that is the extent of his involvement in the early seasons. Figure 3.1 shows Stan's trajectory throughout seasons four to eight.

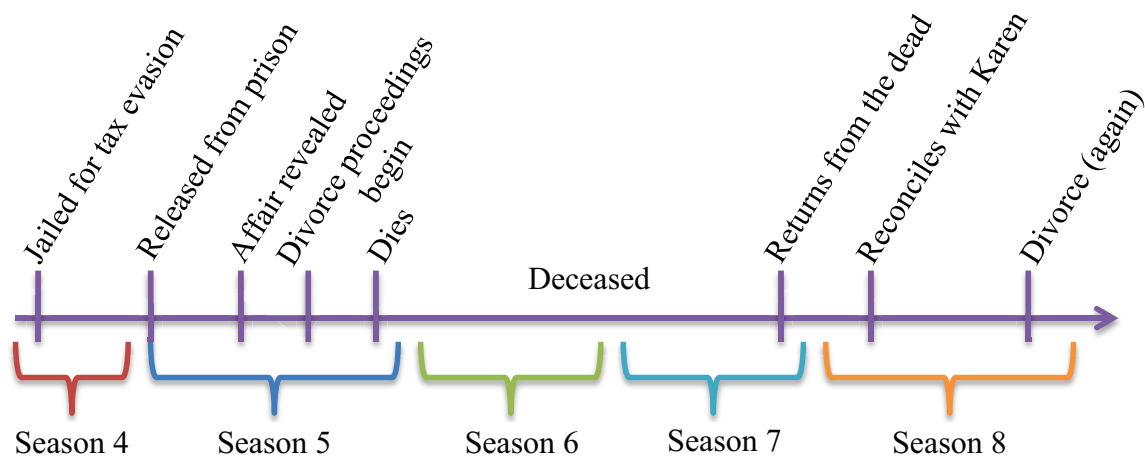


Figure 3.1. Stanley Walker Plot Development.

In “Prison Blues” (season four, episode four) Stan is jailed for tax evasion. Throughout this season, Will, his lawyer, works on the case and Karen spends the majority of the season dealing with the implications of her husband's imprisonment. Although he is never shown on screen, his activities affect the main characters. In

“...And the Horse He Rode in On” (season five, episode one) he is released from prison and Karen must adjust to life with her husband back at home after more than a year away. Just fourteen episodes later, his affair with a cafeteria worker in the prison is revealed, and two episodes later, he and Karen begin divorce proceedings. For the second half of the fifth season, Will works as Stan’s lawyer in the divorce, greatly affecting his relationship with Karen as she struggles through losing her husband to another woman. However, in “23” (season five, episode twenty-three), Stan dies before the divorce is finalized, and Karen, Jack, Will, and Grace spend the following episode out at sea to scatter his ashes. In just two seasons a character went to prison, had an affair, was released from his incarceration, is caught with his mistress, goes through a divorce, and dies. All of these events affect the other characters and, perhaps more significantly, the show’s stasis.

Although he dies at the close of season five, he only remains dead for season six and all but one episode of season seven. In the seventh season finale, “Kiss and Tell,” Will, who has been working for a mysterious man all season, finds out his boss is actually Stan, who had faked his own death two seasons prior. If an audience member were to miss this reveal, it would be quite confusing to find Stan back in season eight. In “Steams Like Old Times” (season eight, episode four) he reunites with Karen, but by episode twenty-one of the same season, “Partners ‘n’ Crime,” they have split up again and she files for divorce. If an audience member were to miss an episode during this time, he or she would likely be extremely confused by any of these dramatic developments. Even though he is an off-screen character with no dialogue, Stan’s story arc is complicated and keeping track of it is difficult.

Technological Developments and Viewing Habits

Now that the show's narrative structure has been described, it can now be examined in the context of technological developments, specifically DVDs and TiVo, and viewing habits at the time of production. The first episode of *Will & Grace* aired on September 21, 1998, which is nearly eighteen months after DVDs and DVD players were first introduced in the United States ("1990–1999: A History of Home Video and Video Game Retailing"). By December of 1998, there were 1.4 million DVD players in American homes, and by December of 2001 that number had grown to 25 million (Arnold). By 2003, during the show's fifth and sixth seasons, DVD sales and rental accounted for 52% of Hollywood's revenue (Frankel). *Will & Grace* was on the air as DVDs and DVD players took a hold of the market, effectively ending the reign of VHS that started more than two decades earlier.

This development is significant not only because it continued to enable viewers to re-watch episodes. Because a single disc could hold more data than a VHS tape, the audience was now able to watch seasons of television shows released in their entirety. Previously, there were some shows that would release a couple of episodes on VHS or even a season on multiple tapes, but it was rare. On May 9th, 2000, the release of the first season of *The X-Files* marked the first time an entire season of a television series had been released on DVD. Fans of *The X-Files* could now re-watch episodes that had been originally broadcast in 1993 and 1994 and had only been shown on television out of order in syndication since. In April 2003, FOX released the first two seasons of *Family Guy* on DVD, which sold "nearly 400,000 copies within a month" (Stack). *Family Guy*'s DVD release success pushed more networks to release their shows on DVD, and within a year

of its release, *Will & Grace* had two seasons out on DVD with the third scheduled to hit shelves in the fall of 2004.

The change in narrative structure and tendency toward overarching arcs coincides with the DVD box set movement. Small changes, like Stan going to prison, began in season four, which aired from 2001 to 2002, whereas larger and more dramatic changes started in season five when Grace suddenly gets married and Stan is released from prison and reunited with Karen only to dump her a few episodes later. On August 12, 2003, the first season was released on DVD, a little more than a month before season six premiered, and the first four seasons of the show were available for purchase before the series finale aired. The show, as seen on DVD, had become the authorized or true version of *Will & Grace* without commercial or broadcast interruption. Writers began toying with the sitcom formula in an effort to cater to new viewership patterns. Metcalf writes, “The recognition that all 12 or 22 episodes of a television show are not individual stories, with the expectations of independence or closure, but are 12 or 22 chapters of a single novel, with each chapter advancing the story, fundamentally changes how a series is written” (9).

The writers of *The Golden Girls* did not have to face this challenge because it was off the air long before the notion of box sets or binge-watching existed. However, *Will & Grace* writers suddenly had to balance the stand-alone episode with an overarching storyline to satisfy the variety of consumption concerning their show. Their experimentation with the format by changing the characters’ stasis and introducing long story arcs was not well received by audiences at the time, and some believe it led to the show’s cancellation: “Some fans of the show believe that the strange twists in the last

[years] resulted in the loss of a sense of realism that *Will & Grace* had brought to the small screen.... Critics claimed that the erratic and dramatic storylines that accompanied the final [seasons] somehow lessened its impact” (Gitlin 153). The drop in viewership can be seen in Figure 3.2 beginning in season five (Brooks and Marsh). As the changes became increasingly more dramatic, viewership continued to fall for the remainder of the series.

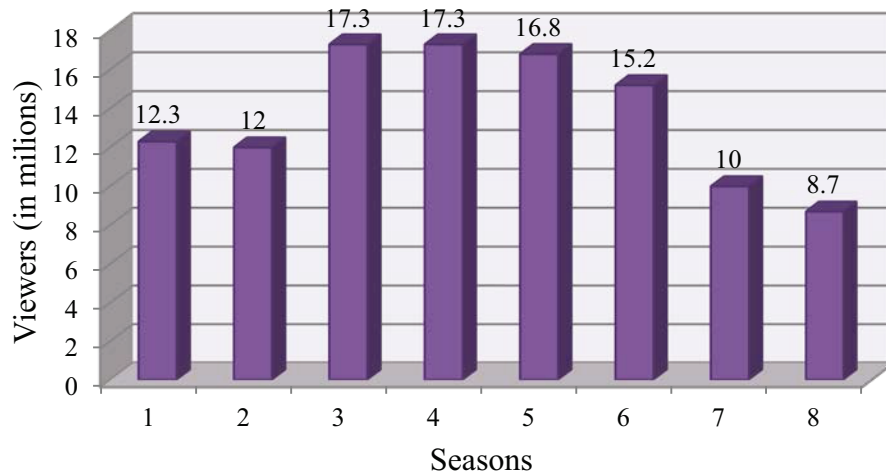


Figure 3.2. *Will & Grace* Viewership.

While the viewership dropped, so did its ranking (see Figure 3.3) (Brooks and Marsh). *Will & Grace* started off its first two seasons in the forties, but when viewership spiked in the third season, the ratings spiked as well. The drastic drop in viewership between seasons six and seven is also represented in an equally severe shift in the ratings: from sixteen to forty-four. Unlike *The Golden Girls*, which saw a drop in viewership without a significant drop in ratings for several seasons with the widespread adoption of cable, *Will & Grace* did not lose viewers and maintain their high ranking. This means that it was not simply fracturing of the audience that contributed to the decrease in

viewership and ratings, but rather a problem with the show itself. Had the splintering of the audience been the main factor here, the ratings would not have dropped by forty-five places in two seasons. It is important to note that, during this time, a new kind of programming evolved that was rapidly embraced by audiences: “reality-based” programming such as *American Idol* or *The Amazing Race*. This will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

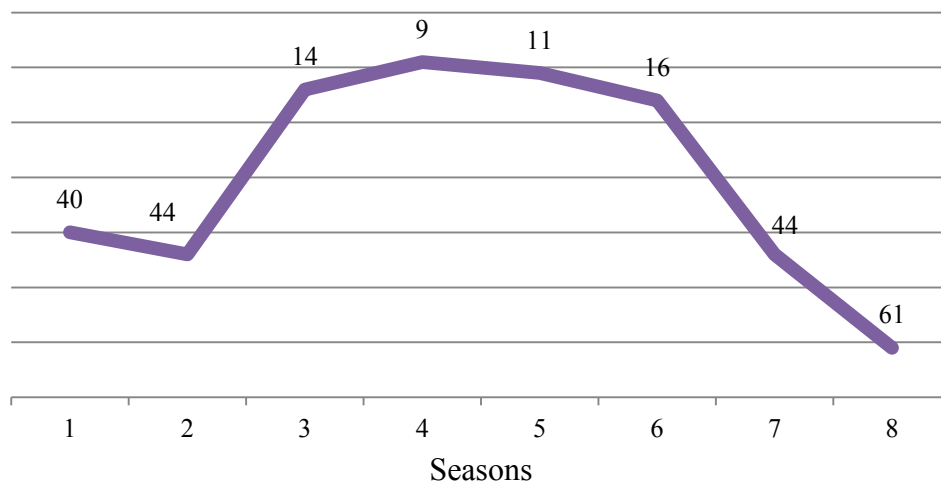


Figure 3.3. *Will & Grace* Ratings.

During this time, DVDs were not the only new technology influencing audiences and altering viewing patterns. In March of 1999, just as season one of *Will & Grace* was coming to a close, the first TiVo recorders (DVR) were shipped to retailers (Hartwig). Companies other than TiVo began making their own DVR systems; for example, Dish Network, with the help of Microsoft, released a Dish player equipped with DVR features and sold more than 200,000 units in 1999 (Digital Video Recorder). The adoption rate of this technology was initially slow as it only appeared in 1.2% of U.S. households in 2006, but that number had grown to 42.2% by February 2011. Although it was not widely

adopted during the time *Will & Grace* was on the air, it could have conceivably impacted the show because, for the first time, there was a device the entire purpose of which was to tailor the television schedule to the viewer's own. Previously, devices like the VCR allowed for this activity, but it was not their primary use. This new attitude toward television is reflected in the show narratively.

In "Hocus Pocus" (season four, episode twenty-four), which aired in May 2002, Will and Grace are arguing with a photographer who accuses them of not having lives outside of each other. Grace quickly responds to this accusation by saying, "Yes, we have lives. I just got TiVo," and Will chimes in, "And I am this close to learning how to use it." Even though adoption of this technology was slow at the time, both characters acknowledge it and use it as a symbol of having a life, which speaks to the status of TiVo in the early 2000s. On November 20, 2003, "Swimming From Cambodia" (season six, episode eight) aired. In this episode Will is anxiously awaiting Grace's two-day visit since she has been in Cambodia with her husband Leo for months. Will is overly excited, and Jack attempts to calm him down, to which Will tells him that he's just excited and sad she will only be in town for two days because they have "a lot of TiVo-ed *Dr. Phil's* to catch up on." This comment reflects a change in attitude towards television. Since Grace has been away for months, normally she would have missed out on any television programs that aired during that time. However, because of this new technology, Will was able to record and save the episodes to binge-watch together upon her return. Although the majority of American households did not have this technology in their homes in 2003, its role in this episode and many other programs at the time, may have helped to shift the longstanding view that the audience needed to work their schedule around the television

schedule. Unlike the episode of *The Golden Girls* discussed in chapter two, it was no longer reasonable to schedule a funeral around a television program because now it could be recorded and watched later. For the first time in history, audiences had real control over the television schedule.

CHAPTER FOUR

Arrested Development: A New Format

Arrested Development aired on FOX from November 2003 until February 2006 for a total of three seasons and fifty-three episodes. A fourth season, consisting of fifteen episodes, was produced by and released through Netflix on May 26, 2013. The show has won six Emmys and has had twenty-five total nominations. Four of the seven adult actors in the show have been nominated for an Emmy at least once, but none have taken home the award for their role. Although viewership never spiked high enough to earn it a top ten rating, it was well received by critics and has garnered a cult following. *Arrested Development* does not enjoy the same popularity, longevity, or number of awards as the shows already discussed; however, it does share one important person with *The Golden Girls*: Mitch Hurwitz, the creator behind *Arrested Development*, wrote and produced on the final season of *The Golden Girls* in the early 1990s. In an interview he did with the A.V. Club in 2005, Hurwitz was asked if his early work influenced his approach to *Arrested Development*, and he replied:

Oh, definitely. You know, *The Golden Girls* was a very unusual show to start on. I was young and it was a show about old people, and it was a very traditional show, but it was also an amazing training ground for a joke-writer. It forced me to learn those skills. Larry Gelbart once said, “Your style is formed by what you can’t do.” When I was doing that show, I didn’t think of myself as a hard joke writer, and that’s what the show did really well. As a result, my style became more intricate storylines, callbacks to references earlier in the script, tying things together in unusual ways, all covering up what, at the time, I thought was a deficit at writing hard jokes.

Although *Arrested Development* has a very different history from *The Golden Girls* and *Will & Grace*, it is important to note the direct influence early sitcoms had on Hurwitz and how his work led him to push the genre's conventions a decade later.

The show revolves around Michael Bluth, the middle son and “only sane member of an Orange County family that loses its real estate fortune in an Enron-type scandal” (Posner). As the show's narrator puts it during the opening sequence, “Now the story of a wealthy family who lost everything, and the one son who had no choice but to keep them all together. It's *Arrested Development*.” There is somewhat of a natural stasis to the show because it focuses on a family made up mostly of adults. However, as will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter, *Arrested Development* does not follow the traditional sitcom format and in many ways, deliberately subverts it.

When *Arrested Development* first aired, the sitcom was in crisis: “The early 2000s were dark days for television comedy, with no breakout hits emerging after *Everybody Loves Raymond*'s debut in 1996.... Each year the number of comedies rating among the top ten and twenty programs dwindled. Even using a proven comedic formula no longer provided hits” (Lotz 231). Networks like FOX began to toy with the formula that no longer seemed to be working. *Arrested Development* “trades the laugh track, multiple cameras, and over-lighted stage sets ... for the hand-held single camera, natural light, heavily scored soundtrack, and voice-over narration of a pseudo-documentary.... It's very much a post-reality show sitcom, capitalizing on the influence of the fledgling genre and transplanting its conventions to a new kind of comedy” (Posner). The show also deviated from a single-episode focus typical of a classical sitcom and opted to have overarching narratives as well as multi-layered and long-running jokes instead, which

will be discussed later in the chapter. The alteration of the dominant sitcom style makes it an important show to examine when considering the narrative development of the sitcom format.

Arrested Development also coincides with three of the four phases of television consumption in the home discussed in chapter one: DVDs, TiVo, and digital streaming. It is a special case because the first three seasons aired on one of the Big Four networks (ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC) at a time when TiVo was becoming more widely used and DVDs had been long established. The DVD box set was also a recognized trend by the time the first episode aired. Reality television also exploded at the time the first three seasons of the show were on the air. In fact, during its entire tenure, only half of the top ten ranked shows each year were narrative programs and *American Idol* held two spots in the top five each year (Brooks and Marsh 1697). Some critics believe the show's new format led to its low ratings and ultimate cancellation, despite critical acclaim, which will be addressed later in this chapter. However, between its status as a cult hit and the willingness of the actors and writers to continue it, Netflix brought it back from the dead in 2013 when they released a fourth season. *Arrested Development* is a unique case, and the fact that the same show exists in two separate forms makes it ideal when considering the effect new technologies, like digital streaming, and new consumption habits, like binge-watching, have on the development of sitcoms.

The FOX Era

Arrested Development challenged the conventional sitcom format by adopting a new production model and a complex narrative. As previously mentioned, the three-camera set-up and studio sets were traded for a single-camera approach shot on locations

with natural lighting, rather than complicated light set-ups. The organic approach to shooting saved time, which accommodated the series' fast-paced production schedule and ultimately made it cheaper to produce. The show was such an undertaking—it was shot in multiple locations with a sprawling cast and intricate scripts that were all created by the writers as a group—that, during the first season's production, Hurwitz and his senior staff worked weekends from January to April without a day off (Posner).

One important change made to the traditional sitcom model in *Arrested Development* was the lack of a laugh track. The addition of a laugh track helped create a sense of community among audiences and indicated the appropriate moments to laugh. Before DVDs, TiVo, and Internet viewing, people could watch shows alone or with their families, but everyone was watching at the same time and could gather around the water cooler to discuss the next day. After these technologies were introduced and viewing patterns changed, it became “increasingly antisocial to discuss a show because those who will watch it later don't want ‘SPOILERS.’ Water cooler moments [have] been replaced by water bottles and spoiler alerts” (Metcalf 127). Before the early 1990s, the concept that a television show could be “spoiled” by revealing any plot elements was unheard of because all audiences watched shows together, and those who missed the broadcast simply missed out. However, once television programming became available on DVD and TiVo allowed audiences to record and watch later, suddenly viewers were able to watch the same shows as their friends and coworkers, but at their own pace. According to Metcalf, “The loss of a laugh track is an acknowledgement of the transition to an isolated rather than social experience of television comedy” (127). The changes made to the

traditional sitcom format in *Arrested Development* signaled a change in the audience's relationship to television.

As briefly discussed earlier, *Arrested Development* features a complex narrative structure with layered jokes. Much like the later seasons of *Will & Grace*, viewers needed to watch regularly to keep up with the many storylines. There are nine principal characters in the show, and each of which has his or her own storylines that often intersect, making the narrative even more complicated. Because there are so many unique storylines over the three original seasons, I will only address certain plots when discussing the seasons. "Pilot," the show's first episode, ends with the family throwing a retirement boat party for the patriarch, George Sr. (Jeffrey Tambor). Michael, who has been living in the attic of one of the company's model homes with his teenage son George Michael (Michael Cera), is expecting to take over as The Bluth Company's CEO after having worked under his father for ten years without recognition or appreciation. He is surprised when his mother, Lucille (Jessica Walter), is given the job during the party. Before he has time to react, Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) boats raid the ship and arrest George Sr. for defrauding investors and allowing his family to use company funds as their own personal piggy bank. After the SEC freezes the company's accounts, the family begs Michael to take over and help them, which he begrudgingly does. His twin sister Lindsay (Portia de Rossi), her husband Tobias (David Cross), and their daughter Maeby (Alia Shawkat) move into the model home after they are forced to leave The Four Seasons when they lose access to the company's money. Throughout the first season, while George Sr. is in jail, each of the Bluth children lives at the model home at some point. Michael works with the family's lawyer to get his father out of jail

throughout the first season. As the case against him grows, it is revealed that George Sr. is accused of “light treason” after evidence surfaces that he built homes for Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Facing serious charges, George Sr. fakes a heart attack and escapes from jail in “Let ’Em Eat Cake” (season one, episode twenty-two). That description is an over-simplified and generalized version of the events in season one, but depicts the overarching nature of the show. Each episode builds on events of the previous ones instead of following the classic format, which requires an episode to be resolved at the end of twenty-two minutes.

Season two picks up where season one ended: George Sr. has escaped from prison and Michael is set on tracking him down. After faking his death in Mexico, George Sr. hides out in the attic of the model home with the help of George Michael. When Michael finds out, he and his father fake another escape so the family, particularly George Michael, will not find themselves lying to police if questioned about George Sr.’s whereabouts. Meanwhile, Michael’s older brother G.O.B. (Will Arnett) is put in charge of the company and remains the figurehead even though Michael, who is suspected of participating in his father’s illegal activities, actually runs the company. During George Sr.’s absence, Lucille begins an affair with his twin brother Oscar (also played by Jeffrey Tambor) and he moves into her apartment, which only makes George Sr. jealous and eventually forces him to come out of hiding at the end of the season. Again, this is an over-simplification of a much more complex narrative.

In the third season Michael has to once again track down his runaway father and, after doing so, arranges for him to be put under house arrest. The case against him from the first season continues through season two and three. He claims he was framed for the

“light treason” and is actually innocent. After a series of unbelievable events, such as Michael nearly marrying a British “mentally challenged” woman after he misreads her quirks and unusual behavior for charm and a unique personality, the three Bluth brothers end up in Iraq. The youngest, Buster (Tony Hale), and Michael first go to Iraq to rescue G.O.B. after he is detained and all three stay to uncover the truth about their father’s activities. In the end, they find out the CIA was behind the building of homes in Iraq so they could plant Weapons of Mass Destruction and then reasonably start a war. Michael uses this information to have all of the charges against his father dropped. In the season’s final episode, “Development Arrested” (episode thirteen), the family throws another boat party celebrating George Sr.’s freedom. Once again, the party prematurely ends when police arrive, but this time they are after Lucille for her involvement defrauding investors and misuse of company funds. Instead of staying to help the family, Michael and George Michael take G.O.B.’s yacht and make their escape. Season three ends in nearly the same place season one began, coming full circle.

The long-running storylines are not the only part of the complex narrative; there are more than 150 running jokes and gags throughout the show (Bowers et al.). In her 2007 book *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Amanda D. Lotz addresses the running jokes in *Arrested Development*:

Fast-paced, the show also offered jokes that were neither obvious nor particularly complicated... but that rewarded regular viewers, whose familiarity with the characters and their back-stories added a layer of meaning from which much of the comedy evolved. This self-referentiality and use of in-jokes evolved over multiple episodes; old jokes returned unexpectedly and passed by quickly in a manner that added to the pleasure of longtime viewers but made it difficult to begin watching the series after the first season. The show demanded close attention of viewers, but also compensated them—perhaps making its cult fandom the least surprising aspect of its story. (233)

The concept of rewarding viewers will be addressed later in this chapter. I will now discuss two examples of the long-running jokes and how the different ways they unfold impacts the audience's enjoyment.

There are two kinds of jokes in *Arrested Development*: one that viewers will only understand through viewing the origin episode and the other of which can be understood even when episodes are missed because it is dealt with narratively. An example of the first kind of joke is the chicken dance. As depicted in Figure 4.1, this joke appears in eight episodes over the course of three seasons. It first occurs in "Staff Infection" (season one, episode fifteen) when G.O.B. dances and clucks like a chicken, the family's way of mocking others, in order to challenge his brother Buster, shouting "Ca Ca-Ca Ca Ca-Ca!" This is the joke's establishing episode and it gives meaning to the dance. The next time it occurs in the show is in "¡Amigos!" (season two, episode three), where it occurs both during a flashback and in the present. Without seeing G.O.B. use the dance to mock Buster in the earlier episode, the joke has little meaning here because both times G.O.B. does it, there is very little set-up. The comedy lies in its use nine episodes earlier. G.O.B. does the chicken dance again in "Switch Hitter" (season two, episode seven) and "Burning Love" (season two, episode nine). Finally, in "Ready, Aim, Marry Me" (season two, episode ten), another member of the Bluth family does the dance. Lindsay teases Michael with her own version, clucking "Chaw! Chee-chaw! Chee-chaw!" If a viewer had not seen previous episodes to absorb the context of the joke, its only humor would lie in the physical hilarity of her dance. In "Sword of Destiny" (season two, episode fifteen) the joke appears not through someone physically doing the chicken dance, but in a background reference. A newspaper article about a magician, which is briefly displayed

on screen, references G.O.B., a fellow magician, and his dance, “Despite oohs and ahs of the audience there was one disgruntled ex-magician who was seen doing some sort of chicken-type dance at fevered pitch.” Again, those who were not regularly watching or catching details would have missed this quick joke. In “Spring Breakout” (season two, episode seventeen) Lucille drunkenly performs her first on-screen chicken dance. Her version is perhaps the closest to sounding like a real chicken: “A-coodle-doodle-do! A-coodle-doodle-do!” Later, in “For British Eyes Only,” the family does a group chicken dance to mock Michael, and he does his own chicken impression while on the phone with Lindsay. This joke builds over the course of three seasons, and by watching each character’s interpretation of the chicken dance, the humor only grows.

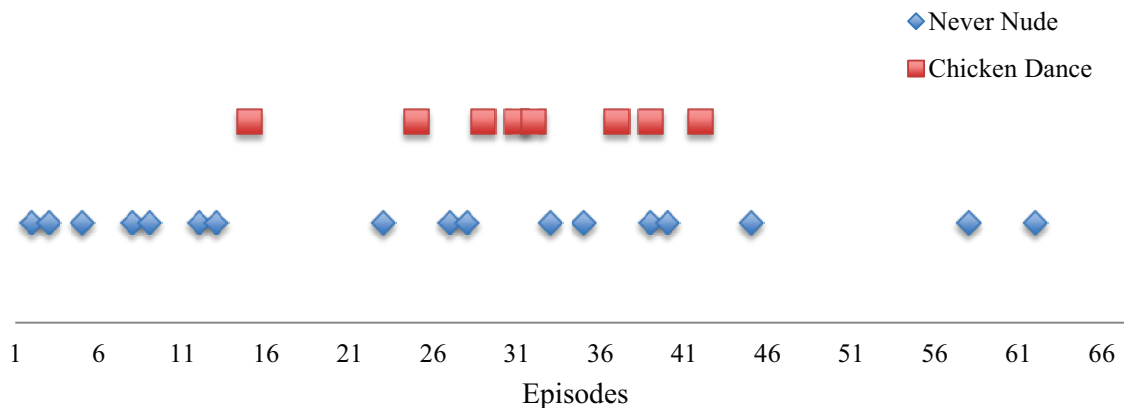


Figure 4.1. Running Jokes in *Arrested Development*.

The second type of joke in *Arrested Development* is one that can be understood if it is not caught early on because it is dealt with narratively. Tobias’s “never nude” syndrome is an example of this kind of joke. A person who suffers from the “never nude” syndrome cannot be fully naked, even when alone, and these people wear jean cutoffs underneath their clothing. According to Tobias, there are “dozens” of people who suffer

from it. As seen in Figure 4.1, this joke appears in seventeen episodes throughout four seasons. In many episodes it occurs in the background and is not dealt with narratively. It is also one of the many jokes that is foreshadowed; it is an example of “what Mr. Hurwitz calls his ‘Call Forward’: apparent non-sequiturs which only make sense later in the season” (Posner). In both “Top Banana” (season one, episode two) and “Bringing Up Buster” (season one, episode three) the joke is foreshadowed when Tobias is seen showering and the jean cutoffs are visible. At this point in the show, however, it is not narratively mentioned, it is only seen. The first time his condition is acknowledged is in “Visiting Ours” (season one, episode five) when his wife Lindsay tears off the towel wrapped around his waist, fully revealing the jean cutoffs. The disorder is first named and described in “In God We Trust” (season one, episode eight) when Tobias assumes George Michael is also a “never nude” because he refuses to take off an Adam costume. In reality, George Michael insists on wearing the Adam costume because he believes it makes him look more muscular. Tobias, who is often obtuse, tries to get George Michael to accept his status as a “never nude.” Although Tobias can be seen either wearing or holding a pair of cutoffs in two separate episodes after “In God We Trust,” it is not narratively addressed again until “Beef Consommé” (season one, episode thirteen). In this episode, he and Lindsay argue about his condition, and she ends up helping him overcome it, which leads to him overcompensating by walking around the model home completely naked. This is the final reference to the joke during season one. In “Sad Sack” (season two, episode five), Tobias relapses and returns to the cutoffs after a photograph of his testicles are shown on the news. Later in the season, the family’s story is featured on a fictional show called *Scandalmakers*, and the actor playing Tobias questions the

veracity of the “never nude” condition in “Motherboy XXX” (episode thirteen). If viewers had not seen earlier episodes of the show that narratively dealt with this condition, they still would have been able to understand and appreciate the joke; however, as Lotz described, the enjoyment of the joke only grows the more it is seen. In “Spring Breakout” (season two, episode seventeen), Phillip Litt (Zach Braff), a director of a series of fictional adult DVDs titled *Girls With Low Self-Esteem*, is shockingly revealed to be a “never nude” himself. This is the first time a character other than Tobias is shown to suffer from the affliction, which somewhat confirms his claims that there are “dozens” of them. Again, there are several episodes throughout seasons two and three that only show Tobias wearing or holding a pair of cutoffs. The joke resurfaces narratively in “A New Start” (season four, episode five) when Tobias is seen wearing them while in the hospital and says, “Some people battle addiction, other people are incapable of being nude.” The last time he is seen wearing the cutoffs is in “Smashed” (season four, episode nine) while he is preparing for his role in a musical. This joke grows over the four seasons, but is able to be enjoyed by both those who have loyally watched every episode and those who have not. However, in episodes where the cutoffs and “never nude” syndrome are only referenced in the background action, the joke would be lost on those who had no knowledge of it from previous episodes. The layering of the joke makes it funnier for those who have seen it from the beginning, but allows others to enjoy it, as well.

This kind of complex storytelling and layering of jokes made the show unwatchable for some viewers while simultaneously attracting others: “While certainly many of these cult shows have demanding narratives that may seem inaccessible to a

mass audience, the striking popularity of some complex programs suggests that a mass audience can engage with and enjoy quite challenging and intricate storytelling” (Mittell 38). As Lotz mentioned, the long-running jokes and overarching storylines kept regular viewers coming back because each time they tuned in they were “rewarded” with another joke that built on their knowledge of the show. At the time, audiences could watch the show as it aired, digitally record it for later viewing, or wait for the season to be released on DVD. Whether an audience member took it one episode at a time or binge-watched several in a single day, the writers used flashbacks to remind viewers of previous events. Some flashbacks actually feature a scene that had not been shown to audiences before. Instead, the writers and producers gave viewers a glimpse of something new inside the story world that added to their understanding of a character or joke. These scenes indicated that any particular episode only captures part of the story world. The show’s complex style effectively kept a fairly steady audience base, but also alienated potential new viewers, which resulted in the show’s low ratings.

Figure 4.2 shows the viewership over the first three seasons (Posner; Goodman; Slezak). The numbers are strikingly different from those seen even in the lowest rated seasons of *The Golden Girls* and *Will & Grace*. There are a number of contributing factors, including the complexity of the show. As previously discussed, by the time *Arrested Development* began, the television audience had been significantly fractured. Between 2002 and 2004, the number of cable channels available across the country had risen to nearly three hundred, and more than 3.5 million people were using TiVo by 2006 (Hartwig).

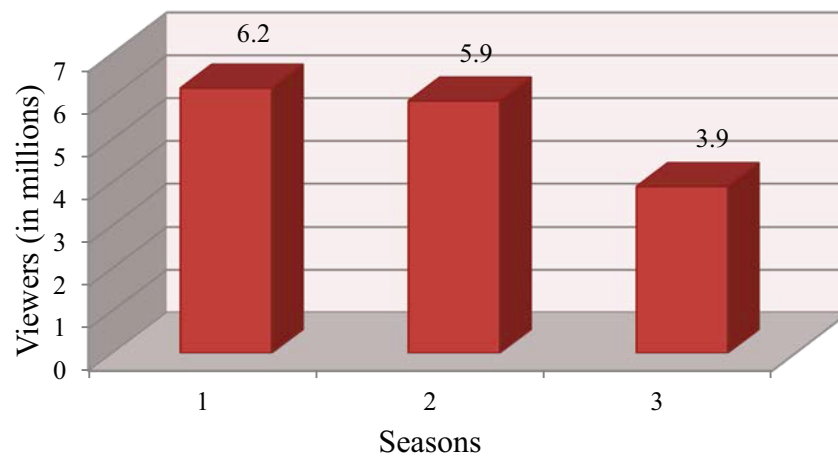


Figure 4.2. *Arrested Development* Viewership.

At the time Nielsen only used those who watched a program live to calculate the viewership numbers and ranking. Although the number of people potentially digitally recording an episode of *Arrested Development* for later viewing would not have brought it to a top ten ranked program, it should be noted that the numbers Nielsen provided may be artificially low. *Arrested Development* only broke in to the top one hundred ranked shows during season two, as show in Figure 4.3 (Posner; Brooks and Marsh).

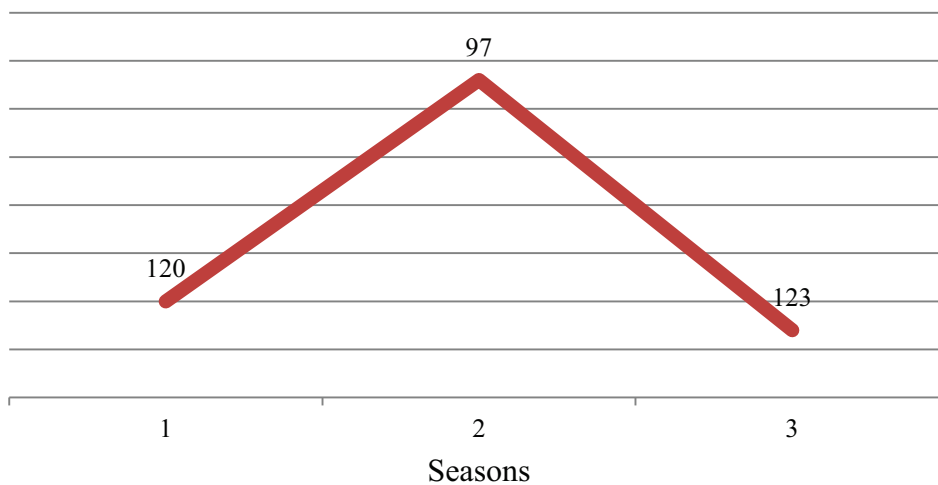


Figure 4.3. *Arrested Development* Ratings.

Another contributing factor to the show's low ratings is the explosion of reality television in the early 2000s. As mentioned earlier, between 2003 and 2006, while *Arrested Development* was on the air, half of the top ten ranked programs were reality shows. The Oxford Dictionary defines reality shows as "a television program in which ordinary people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative." Reality shows have been around since the beginning of television with programs like *Nightwatch*, which transferred from radio in 1951. However, the genre grew as cable did and became wildly popular among all audiences in the early 2000s. *The Real World*, the show credited with tipping off this trend, actually began on MTV in 1992. It was an instant hit among young audiences and was so cheap to produce and distribute that it quickly became popular with networks, as well. In 2000, *Survivor*, a show that puts a group of adults in a secluded location where they are, as the title indicates, forced to survive together, started a competition-based reality show trend that led to programs like *Fear Factor* and *American Idol*. While these shows vary wildly in content, the concept is quite similar: pit adults against each other with the promise of a prize and/or success and tape it for America's viewing pleasure. The success of these shows is reflected in the increase in the number of programs and their ratings. By the 2005—2006 television season, *American Idol*, which aired two nights a week, held the number one and two spots (Brooks and Marsh). It should be noted that some of these reality shows were taped and edited before they aired while others aired episodes live. Programs like *American Idol*, which featured many live episodes, may have seen higher ratings because of the way they were watched by audiences and how Nielsen tabulated viewership and ratings. *American Idol*, for example, utilized audience-participation as

part of the competition, which made it necessary for viewers to watch at the time of broadcast so they could participate within the given window of time. As mentioned above, Nielsen was only counting live views when calculating viewership numbers. Because of the nature of reality shows, audiences would watch them live in lieu of narrative programs. When cable became accessible after the “wiring of America” in the mid-1980s, the television audience had more options of what to watch. The explosion of reality television offered a similar widening of options because viewers now had the choice between a narrative-based program like *Arrested Development*, which required focus and attention, or a variety of reality shows, like *Survivor* and *American Idol*, which required less of viewers. The growth and societal acceptance of reality television can be seen in the Emmys recognizing hosts of reality shows for the first time in September of 2008 (Barovick).

Arrested Development’s lack of viewership and low ratings ultimately led to its cancellation by FOX in 2006. The network originally ordered a twenty-two episode season, but later cut it down to thirteen (Goodman). Although the show did not see traditional success while on FOX, it did receive critical acclaim, and between its original airing and the DVD box set releases, it gathered a cult following. In his article on the show’s premature demise, Tim Goodman addresses the cancellation as less of a reflection on the show and more of a reflection on audiences: “It was a brilliant run of finely crafted hilarity. The writing was the best that television has seen and ... the cast clearly believed in the material and had a blast delivering it to the masses. Well, a part of the masses anyway. And let’s make this clear: Genius has no relationship whatsoever to popularity.”

Netflix and The Fourth Season

After its cancellation in 2006, *Arrested Development* continued to attract audiences through the DVD box sets. In a 2005 article for the *Chicago Tribune*, Maureen Ryan writes, “FOX won’t release sales totals, but executives at the company’s home-video division say *Arrested [Development]* ... has sold very well on DVD.... [The] commercial success, along with critical praise, a shelf-full of industry awards and a ferociously supportive Internet fan base, has helped keep the show alive.” The show remained popular among fans after the final episode aired in February of 2006. Many hoped the show would make a comeback and they waited seven years for the fourth season. During those seven years, technology rapidly developed, as did the audience’s viewing habits. These changes not only made the fourth season possible, but also shaped its structure.

Netflix launched as the first online DVD rental service in the spring of 1998, and within the next year the company offered a subscription service for customers interested in renting a larger number of DVDs. In 2007, with 4.2 million subscribers, Netflix introduced their streaming service, which allowed members to instantly stream shows and movies to their computers (Hartwig). The following year, they partnered with consumer electronics companies to stream on devices such as the Xbox 360, Blu-ray disc players, and TV set-top boxes. For the first time, viewers could stream content directly to their televisions through Internet-ready devices preloaded with Netflix.

DVRs were also more widely used at the time, and in the 2009—2010 season, sitcoms accounted for the second most time-shifted genre, after science fiction programs. In 2011 38% of households had a DVR, and by 2012, “Nielsen says 44% of homes now

have DVRs ... [and] those who have the devices are using them more often. Just 47% of viewing by young-adult DVR users was live, down from 61% four years earlier” (Levin, “DVRs”). As the concept of time-shifting television programs to fit the viewer’s schedule began to take off, so did Netflix.

For the first time in history, in 2012, Americans watched more movies legally through the Internet, with services like Netflix, than on any physical format like DVD or Blu-Ray (Leonard). By 2013, 38% of Americans either used or subscribed to Netflix, a 7% increase from the previous year, and those using Netflix “reported watching three or more episodes of a TV show in a single day” (Levin, “Netflix”). Netflix also began releasing original programming in 2013 and became the first Internet television network to be nominated for and win multiple Emmys for *House of Cards* (Hartwig). In the 2013 Emmys, Netflix originals were nominated for fourteen awards and took home three, a historical moment for the company (Hernandez). The numbers only increased for the 2014 Emmys when the original shows were nominated for thirty-one awards and took home seven (Begley). By the end of 2014, Netflix reported more than 50 million members globally.

The first season of Netflix’s breakout original program, *House of Cards*, was released in its entirety on February 1, 2013. The BBC mini-series remake, starring Kevin Spacey and directed by David Fincher, relied on name recognition, existing fans of the mini-series, press, and most importantly the all-important algorithm Netflix uses to recommend shows to members. Based on previous interests and views, Netflix is able to make specific recommendations for shows or movies a customer might be interested in watching, and they report 75% of their subscribers are influenced by these

recommendations (Leonard). Netflix released all thirteen episodes of season one at the same time, which makes *House of Cards* the first show to be released in such a way. In an article for *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, scholar Mario Klarer writes:

What is noteworthy about putting the entire first season online and thus eliminating the viewer's wait for a weekly release of the subsequent episodes ... is that Netflix took into consideration the new viewing habits of their customers. Already DVD releases of older series as seasonal packages, TiVo recordings, and illegal streaming from the Internet have considerably altered viewing behavior over the last decade. Viewers no longer necessarily watch episodes as weekly installments, but rather consume them en bloc by lumping together several episodes into one screening.... Netflix not only bowed to these new viewing habits of their customers, but also acknowledged, which seems even more important, that the series format has completely emancipated itself from its roots in television with its piecemeal release pattern. (205)

Subscribers, as well as non-subscribers, were introduced to the concept of Netflix originals, shows created specifically to be binge-watched, in early 2013. Previously, any binge-watching by viewers was of shows that had already aired through the traditional broadcast model. The changes Netflix made to that model and their success with the first season of *House of Cards* helped pave the way for the narratively demanding fourth season of *Arrested Development*.

The show's creator, Mitch Hurwitz, believes Netflix was the right choice to produce the fourth season of the show: "One of the reasons *Arrested* wasn't embraced at the time was it wasn't easy to get your head around it.... I wanted to create a show that had surprises. But that's what they want to do [at Netflix]. They want to take risks. They encouraged the complexity that had been discouraged before" (Levin, "Netflix"). What originally made *Arrested Development* challenging for audiences in the early 2000s was suddenly what they were wanting to watch. Netflix responded to "a new generation of fans who discovered the show online and lapped up 53 episodes with the oddball Bluths"

by partnering with the show's creator and original cast to create a new season in order to satisfy the demands of their customers. Hurwitz's desire for complexity is not the only reason the fourth season is more narratively challenging. *Arrested Development* helped launch careers for many of the cast members and reassembling the group seven years later was a particular challenge since many of them had new projects that resulted in endless scheduling conflicts. The unavailability of the cast resulted in a version of the show that looks very different from previous seasons because it was "assembled as a 'very, very complex puzzle' from scenes shot out of sequence over many months" (Levin, "Netflix").

The narrative structure of the Netflix season is strikingly different from previous ones, precisely because it was produced by Netflix and released in a single day for fans to binge-watch. In the first three seasons, the focus of any particular episode shifts between multiple characters and time moves forward narratively with each new episode. Season four is much more complex; it follows a single character per episode, and each episode takes place over the same time period as the others. The story picks up where season three left off, with the family having a falling out and having all gone their separate ways, "As each episode tracks one member of the hyper-dysfunctional Bluth family over roughly the same stretch of time, the story constantly circles back on itself, and information is rationed like methadone in the rehab center.... Principal scenes play out over and over, becoming incrementally more clear" (Hale). Jason Bateman, who plays Michael Bluth, the character responsible for keeping the family together, is the only cast member to appear in every episode, effectively holding the narrative together throughout the season. Other characters appear in smaller roles in episodes that do not necessarily

focus around them, but the story consistently follows one character per episode. The complicated narrative almost forces audiences to binge-watch in order to keep up with the storyline. The fourth season would not have worked had it been released through the traditional broadcast model; “The true flavor ‘slowly reveals itself, as the moment you saw in one [episode] will reappear in another [episode] from a different character’s perspective,’ Hurwitz says. ‘If people watch it all at once, it will seem like a giant *Arrested Development*. It’s really tailored for Netflix” (Levin, “Netflix”) The complex narrative played well through Netflix because it was created for that specific medium.

Netflix does not release data about viewership, and Nielsen currently does not keep track of Netflix originals, which makes it difficult to compare the relative success of season four and the first three seasons. Critics and fans appeared divided on the fourth season, but that is not based on hard data. What cannot be said about the fourth season’s success can be said about its impact on the future of television. Through creating their own originals, Netflix has broken away from the traditional broadcast model to create a model all their own. With the rapidly changing television landscape and the splintering of the already fractured audiences, what once measured a successful television show no longer does. In an interview leading up to its release, David Cross, who plays Tobias Fünke, said, “This last, fourth season, what Mitch [Hurwitz] did and how he’s able to tell the story through the Netflix model—I think it’s going to redefine what television can be and stories can be and how they’re presented. And I really think it’s gonna be historic in a sense; that we’re gonna look back on it ... and it will be a very important thing that Mitch and Netflix have done” (Lee).

Originally, Netflix executives and Hurwitz stated they would only produce a fourth season together and perhaps a movie later. In 2014, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings announced they were open to creating another season if Hurwitz could get the cast together. Regardless of popular opinion, the fact that Netflix is interested in doing another season means they were satisfied with the response to the fourth season. Hurwitz said he is working on editing the fourth season, with new narration from Ron Howard, so the story can be told chronologically (Dornbush). There is still chatter of a potential movie and, in fact, the finale of season four hinted at one when the Bluths announce the need for a family reunion. Whatever the future holds for *Arrested Development*, it will surely continue to adapt as new technologies develop and audience viewing habits shift, just as it has done from the beginning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The Golden Girls followed the traditional sitcom format from the first episode of season one to the final episode of season seven. Each episode was shot with three cameras on a sound stage and in front of a live studio audience. Episodes were sweetened with a laugh track to both cue audiences when to laugh and help them feel as if they were part of a larger group. The series held a single-episode focus, rather than a series or season focus. The episodic narratives led to what audiences today would call plot holes, but at the time were understood as a necessary part of tailoring the story to a single episode. Audiences did not consistently tune in, and although technology was available to record and watch a broadcast at a later time, audiences did not regularly do so until the idea that television was no longer ephemeral caught on in the early 2000s.

When the show began in the late 1980s, VHS was already in the marketplace and widespread access to cable television was near completion as the industry wired America. As the show progressed through the years, the television audience fractured as their programming options expanded. Audiences had more choices than ever before with VHS rentals and cable programs, which led to fewer and fewer viewers tuning in to many popular shows at the time, including *The Golden Girls* in its later seasons. All seven seasons are available on DVD today and air in syndication on The Hallmark Channel, which allows for old fans to re-watch and new fans to find and fall in love with the show nearly fifteen years after it left the air. Although it was not specifically intended to be binge-watched, it can now be viewed in that way thanks to technological developments.

The ability to watch the show in a new way can change the way it is experienced: “Watching daily episodes of a situation comedy, even if the series has no intended longform story, engages the same pattern recognition behavior. It becomes natural that viewers connect similar moments in different episodes and construct meaning from—or for—them” (Metcalf 130). In the same sense that viewers of *Arrested Development* are rewarded by layered jokes, bingers of *The Golden Girls* are rewarded by the reliability and consistency of the characters, which provides viewers with a sense of familiarity and comfort.

Will & Grace began by following the traditional sitcom format, much like *The Golden Girls*. For the most part, the show worked from the classic sitcom format for all eight seasons. Episodes were taped in front of live audiences on sound stages, with the exception of a few live broadcasts in the later seasons, and sweetened with a laugh track. The series kept a mostly episodic focus in the early seasons and even had plot holes that sprouted from season one and were quickly resolved later in the series. However, as technology like DVDs and TiVo developed and became more widely used, the audience’s viewing habits began to evolve. The final four seasons of *Will & Grace* reflect these changes. The introduction of DVD box sets gave audiences the ability to binge-watch multiple episodes or even entire seasons in a single viewing. TiVo was the first device created exclusively to allow audiences to record programs for later viewing, effectively tailoring the broadcast schedule to their own. The concept of binge-watching and recording episodes for later viewing became widely accepted while *Will & Grace* was on the air. Although this was technically possible before, the idea did not catch on until the early 2000s. As the early seasons became available for purchase on DVD, the

narrative in *Will & Grace* shifted from an episodic focus to a season and series focus. Audiences had to tune in each week to keep up with the increasingly erratic storylines of even the most minor characters, much like a soap opera. What was once easy to follow and put little to no demand on the audience suddenly had a new level of narrative complexity that required more attention and commitment. While this shift did not go well for the show, as many critics believe it led to the loss of viewers and ultimately its cancellation, it does mark the beginning of a new trend in the sitcom narrative and possibility for a new kind of program.

When *Arrested Development* started in 2003, DVDs and TiVo were already well-established technologies and the concepts of binge-watching and recording broadcasts for later viewing had entered the public consciousness. The show's creator, writers, and producers acknowledged these changes, as well as the significantly fractured audience and cast a small, highly stylized net in order to capture a small, but loyal audience. The recognition that a single show could no longer demand a large audience in a time of cable, reality television, and DVDs gave them the freedom to write a show for a specific audience that would tune in each week. The complex narrative kept audiences interested, and the recurring layered jokes rewarded them with more laughs the more they watched. The show featured an overarching narrative that ran throughout an entire season and then series, but also had enough of a single-episode focus that viewers could watch piecemeal or binge-watch. The overarching narrative and long-running jokes both serve as examples of the evolving sitcom format. The show also abandoned other characteristics of the traditional sitcom format. Rather than shoot on a set in front of a live studio audience, they opted to shoot on location with natural lighting and no laugh track. The decision to

move away from the classical format shows the development of the sitcom as audiences continued to fracture. After the show was cancelled in 2006, the fan base continued to grow as new fans discovered the show on DVD or through online streaming.

In 2013 Netflix brought *Arrested Development* back from the dead with a fourth season released entirely in one day. The single-day release not only gave viewers the option to binge-watch, but encouraged them to do so. David Fincher, director of the Netflix original *House of Cards*, spoke about the effect of bingeing an entire season: “It’s like a book. Its like you reading a chapter, set it down. Go get some Thai food, come back, fire it up again. It works in a different way. The pace of consumption in some way informs a kind of relationship that you have with the characters, which is very different from destination television.... Those days are gone; that’s done” (Klarer). Netflix’s version of *Arrested Development* is even more narratively complex, and the structure differs noticeably from previous seasons. Many fans, critics, and even the show’s creator, Mitch Hurwitz, believe the complexity of the fourth season would not have been possible without the Netflix model. Scholar Mareike Jenner writes, “If television is defined less through the technology used and more through formats ... and we can schedule it ourselves, then the way to ask for our attention changes significantly. In other words, increasingly complex narrative structures demand our attention in a way scheduled television rarely can” (13).

Technological developments have created new ways for audiences to consume television, and in doing so they have left many questions about the future of television. In 2013 Nielsen announced that the number of American households with television sets had been dropping since 2011 (Levin, “Netflix”). The number of zero-TV households

was only two million in 2007 and increased to five million by 2013. Netflix has responded to the changes in technology and the audience's viewing habits by taking the traditional broadcast model and turning it on its head. For the first time, the traditional sitcom format is no longer evolving because Netflix has created a format entirely independent from broadcast altogether. A show no longer has to be popular enough to satisfy advertisers, audiences do not have to choose between fast-forwarding through the commercials of DVR'ed programs and watching them on DVD months after broadcast, and writers have the freedom to tell complex stories without fear of losing audiences and facing cancellation. Netflix is leading the charge away from the broadcast model, which is slowly dying. As traditional broadcasts and cable become unnecessary to consume television, a trend known as "cord-cutting" has taken off, with many people watching programs exclusively online through services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime (Levin, "Netflix"). The major networks also offer viewers the opportunity to stream many of their shows through their websites; however, the majority of episodes are only current and available for a limited time period before they are removed from the site.

With new the new Netflix television model, a variety of modes to facilitate viewing, evolving audience viewing habits, and increasingly complex narratives, the future of television is unclear. However, though the way audiences consume television is rapidly changing, they are consuming more of it every year (Levin, "Netflix"). Unquestionably evolving, both the sitcom and television, in whatever form it takes, are here to stay.

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