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“I got a Sam!” *Supernatural* as the CW’s Tentpole Series

Erin Giannini

While brand identity has become an increasingly important concern for networks over the past 20 years (see, for example, Jaramillio 2002 and Johnson 2007), it is not limited to this time period. The NBC network, in both the 1980s and 1990s, pitched itself as the home for comedy, with its “Must-See TV” brand emerging in the early 1990s. On the negative side, CBS, initially dubbed the “Tiffany Network” due to the high-quality programming it offered during William S. Paley’s (1928-1946) tenure as the head of network, later became known as the “Country Broadcasting System” because of its reliance on rural-themed programming such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), and *Green Acres* (1965-1971). All of these were cancelled in the early 1970s to make way for what they considered more socially relevant series, such as *All in the Family* (1971-1979), marking another brand shift. That the “rural” series were generally the highest rated ones on the network was less important to the network than the fact that they did not attract the right demographics (younger or affluent viewers) and tarnished the image they wanted to project. Given that the weight of demographics over ratings was only starting to be applied to programming nearly a decade later (e.g., Thompson 1997, Feuer et al 1985), CBS was in that respect ahead of its time.

Currently, the CW, which airs *Supernatural* in the United States, has adopted the tagline “Dare to Defy” (Figure 1), and the promotional video the network released in September of 2019 emphasized the ways in which the network, in one respect, defied one of the issues plaguing its progenitors; that

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is, the primarily white casts of series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), and *Roswell* (1999-2002).¹ This promo featured the numerous series led by people of colour, including *Roswell, New Mexico* (2019-),



Figure 1: The CW's new logo and tagline

Charmed (2018-), *All-American* (2018-), and *Black Lightning* (2018-), and was tied in with the channel's earlier "We Defy" initiative, announced in March of 2019, to "reinforce the network's commitment to inclusion and representation," paired with videos featuring each series' stars ("We Defy," CW Network).

In terms of the channel's brand identity, however, the sheer volume of shows on the network based on DC properties and known collectively as the "Arrowverse" (*Arrow* [2012-2020], *The Flash* [2014-], *Legends of Tomorrow* [2016-], *Batwoman* [2019-], *Black Lightning*, and *Supergirl* [2015-]) as well as Archie comics-inspired series such as *Riverdale* (2017-) and *Katy Keene* (2020-), would suggest its overarching brand is comics related. (Even the recently ended *iZombie's* [2015-2020] source material was a comic from the now-defunct DC Vertigo line.) *Supernatural* (2005-2020), however, the last series still on air whose initial home was the WB network, doesn't quite fit either mould. Aside from the obvious fact that the series does not feature "super" heroes (i.e., its heroes are un-enhanced)², *Supernatural* also is neither adapted from other source material (as are the "comics" shows, as well as *Jane the Virgin* [2014-2019], loosely based on the

¹ Given its setting in New Mexico, *Roswell's* lack of any significant Latinx or Indigenous characters (a single episode "River Dog" [1.7] was set on a reservation) throughout its three seasons seems particularly egregious, given that Indigenous people represented more than 50% of the state's population as of the 2000 census ("Census 2000 Data").

² That being said, the season 15 episode "The Heroes Journey" (15.10) introduced the idea that the brothers' skill and ability to maneuver difficult (and sometimes deadly) situations was itself enhanced by Chuck (aka, God) as the prime author of their existences.

telenovela *Juana la Virgen* [2002]) or a reboot of an earlier series (*Dynasty* [2017-]; *Charmed*, *Roswell*, *New Mexico*).³

Yet despite *Supernatural's* seeming outlier status, several elements of the series combine to make *Supernatural* the “tentpole” series of the CW. While “tentpole” has generally referred to a series or film that, in essence, is popular and/or financially solvent enough to prop up lower-rated series, M. J. Clarke, in his analysis of transmedia television, defines them as “experimenting with alternative organization or/and creative forms...texts that expand entertainment properties across multiple platforms” (Clarke 2012: 1). *Supernatural*, and the way it plays with “traditional representations of time, space, and character” (Clarke 208), its longevity, the volume of ancillary materials it produces, and its profitability, fits well into both these definitions of a tentpole text. Further, although it is outside the comics-based programming that still comprises the largest share of the CW’s schedule, in terms of its tone, narrative, characterizations, and themes *Supernatural* embodies the overarching brand identity of the CW’s programming across series and genres; that is, it “defied” expectations about both its stories and character as well as expectations about the show’s survival. While it has never matched the gender and racial diversity of the other more recent series on the CW, this essay will show how *Supernatural's* stability and willingness to take chances with characterization and structure provided the resources and space for other shows, and the channel itself, to take chances and support off-beat stories and morally grey protagonists.

“They’re pretty obscure”: *Supernatural* as Network Tentpole

Created from the merging of Warner Brothers (known as the WB) and the United Paramount Network (UPN)—both mini-networks that struggled to find footholds in the limited US broadcast band and replicate Fox’s earlier success in challenging what was known as the “Big Three” (NBC, CBS, and ABC)—the CW solved at least one problem that plagued its progenitors: it no longer had to share channel space. For many of the smaller markets in the country, the limited band space meant that a single channel would carry WB and UPN programs on alternate nights, all but guaranteeing that neither could

³ *Supernatural* also still struggles with its portrayal of people of color, both in terms of characters and of presentation of legends, myths, and religions from other cultures. For analysis of these elements, see Leow 2016 and Coker 2020.

compete in terms of ratings.⁴ During the previous decade, the WB and UPN (owned by Viacom, which also owned CBS and other networks) also fought for the same viewing demographic (18-34 year-olds). By 2006, both Time Warner and Viacom agreed to merge, forming a single network (The CW) that would combine selected programming from both original networks (Carter 2006). *Supernatural* aired its first season on the WB, and was the only debut program from that year selected to make the transition. The more established series, such as *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007, 2016), *Seventh Heaven* (1996-2007), *Smallville* (2001-2011), *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012), and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007, 2019), either aired a final season on the newly established channel before being cancelled (*Veronica Mars*) elected to end (*Gilmore Girls*, *Seventh Heaven*) or were in the middle of (eventual) lengthy runs (*Smallville* ran for an additional five seasons on the CW; *One Tree Hill*, six seasons). Despite the advantages in terms of broadcast space, the combined studios, and the anchoring of established series and network on the schedule, both *Supernatural* and the CW struggled during their first years of existence.

For both network and series, the struggles of their first few years centred around establishing an identity. The CW committed to airing a combination of new programs (*Gossip Girl* [2007-2012], *The Vampire Diaries* [2009-2017]) and older holdovers from the WB (*One Tree Hill* [2003-2012], *Smallville* [2001-2011]); unfortunately, this meant that it lacked the brand coherence that the network currently enjoys. *Supernatural's* first three seasons offered a mix of a larger season-long story arc with stand-alone episodes, similar to its generic predecessors such as *Angel* (1999-2004). Its working class, Midwestern protagonists, depictions of violence and gore, and creator Eric Kripke's insistence on a classic rock soundtrack made it an uncomfortable fit with, for example, the Upper East Side denizens of *Gossip Girl*, or the small-town melodramas of *One Tree Hill* and *The Vampire Diaries*.⁵ Further, it wasn't until the

⁴ This could be used to a network's advantage; when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, cancelled by the WB over a fight with Fox regarding licensing fees, UPN met Fox's demands and gave the series a guaranteed two seasons. In what could be viewed as a retaliatory move, the WB promos for *Buffy's* fifth season finale (and final episode to air on the WB) called it a "series finale." For markets that aired WB programming on Tuesdays, it, in essence, was, as there were no venues at that time to watch the series except on broadcast.

⁵ Given Warner Brother's status as a record label as well as a studio, most of its series used Warner Brother's music, complete with a title card at the end of a broadcast episode indicating what music was featured and where to purchase it. Besides serving as cross-promotion, it also eliminated the lengthy rights process to procure music. Kripke, however, threatened to walk if he was forced to use their music, as he didn't feel that contemporary music was appropriate for their characterization (Bekakos 2008).

debut of its fourth season in 2008, which narratively brought together numerous series plot lines into an overarching arc around an apocalyptic battle between heaven and hell, that *Supernatural* landed on the same successful formula of eschatology and brotherly love/chosen family that not only informed the rest of the series, but had its genesis in earlier shows such as *Buffy* and *Angel*. These aspects, sometimes similarly combined, also had an effect on later shows on the CW itself. While it is easy to see *Supernatural*'s DNA in the dark storylines and vigilantism of *Arrow*, or the chosen family, grey morality, and semi-apocalyptic plots of *iZombie*, even a non-horror/action series such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* ((2015-2019) offers morally dubious characters and actions, a strong reliance on metatextual references and structures, and music to express characters' emotions. Indeed, it is one of the only CW series that puts music at the forefront as thoroughly as *Supernatural*.

From 2006-2011, however, the CW was either ranked fifth or sixth among broadcast viewers, with no series, including *Supernatural*, ever landing in the top tier of viewership. The 2007-2008 Writer's Strike resulted in network layoffs and the shuttering of their comedy development division (Hibberd 2008). While viewership continued to grow, particularly among women aged 18-34 years, there was continued talk that Warner Brothers and Viacom would terminate the network (Adalain 2008). Dawn Ostroff, brought over from UPN to serve as the network's president, shepherded the network through the transitional period (2006-2011), with Mark Pedowitz taking over in 2011. It was under Pedowitz's tenure that Greg Berlanti was brought in to develop *Arrow*, and later its numerous spin-offs, establishing a stable programming slate and identity.

Cancellation was also an ever-present threat for *Supernatural* during this same time period, although Kripke boldly ended seasons one, three and four on cliffhangers. (In two of these instances, its renewal was not guaranteed; season two wasn't renewed until May 18, 2006, and season four on March 4, 2008, long after production had shut down due to the strike.) While it did manage to make it to season five, Kripke announced on February 16, 2010 (the midpoint of season five) that he was electing not to renew his contract and would depart the series, which seemed to indicate that *Supernatural* would conclude with the aptly-named season finale, "Swan Song," which ends the battle between heaven and hell at the cost of Sam's life (5.22). Yet Kripke's announcement occurred simultaneously with the CW's decision to renew the series for a sixth season with new showrunner Sera Gamble (Ausiello 2010). By 2012 (end of season 7/start of season 8), the series consistently benefitted from an early renewal (in February instead May), meaning both cast and crew knew they'd be employed

going into pilot season, rather than having to scramble for work over the summer.

By the time of the series' end in 2020, it will consist of twice the number of seasons without its creator/showrunner as with him, suggesting its formula of family dynamics, apocalyptic storylines, and blend of stand-alone episodes feeding into a larger arc was already well enough established not to require Kripke's vision as a guide. It was only the second series on the CW to hit the former marker for syndication (100 episodes),⁶ going on to hit both 200 ("Fan Fiction" 10.4) and 300 ("Lebanon" 14.13) episodes in its tenth (2014) and fourteenth seasons (2018), respectively. Indeed, the start of its 11th season marked *Supernatural* as the longest-running prime-time genre series in US television history. While the CW gave the show opportunities to develop and grow; *Supernatural* did the same for the network itself. Its position as a stable entity on the schedule led to a greater stability for the network. In that respect, it suggests that *Supernatural* offers a new programming paradigm that extends beyond the traditional (ratings, advertising, etc.) used to judge a programme's success.

“He’s not a hunter, but he plays one on TV”: *Supernatural* as Embodiment of Programming Shifts

Despite its remarkable run, *Supernatural's* position on a low-rated network with its own programming issues, as well as the costs of special effects and night-shooting, meant that its longevity was not assured.⁷ Until Mark Pedowitz—a strong advocate for the series—took over as network president in 2011, *Supernatural* was not safe from the ever-present threat of cancellation. A self-professed fan of the series before his time at the CW, Pedowitz recognized both the importance of *Supernatural's* deal with Netflix driving new viewership and its fans' presence on social media (Prudom 2016). His decision to pair *Supernatural's* eighth season (the first with new showrunner Jeremy Carver) with the debut of *Arrow* (2012-2020), moving it out of the “Friday Night Death Slot”

⁶ The first was another WB series brought over to the CW during the merger, *One Tree Hill*, which aired its 100th episode in 2008, two years prior to *Supernatural's* “Point of No Return,” airing in 2010. Oddly enough, although dissimilar in genre and subject matter, both series focus on two brothers' relationship with one another.

⁷ The line quoted in this section's subheading is taken from “The French Mistake” (6.16).

it had occupied during Gamble's turn as showrunner, aided both series.⁸ Nor was this an anomaly; *Supernatural* had been paired with *The Vampire Diaries* for the latter's first season (2009; *Supernatural*'s fifth season). That combination was successful enough for Pedowitz to subsequently tie many of its debut shows to *Supernatural* (Prudom 2016), including the aforementioned *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *Legends of Tomorrow*, and *Legacies* (2018-).⁹ The use of *Supernatural* to prop up other series is suggestive of its status as a tentpole series for the network.

Like the other shows on the network, *Supernatural* has never been a ratings powerhouse (averaging 1 to 2 million viewers from season 9 onwards), and yet it is possible to examine how, since its debut in 2005, it both embodies and benefits from the significant production, distribution, and rating shifts that have occurred during its run. It was the first WB series to have its pilot air online before broadcast; it was one of the first CW series to be available for sale on iTunes the day after broadcast (Adalian and Fritz 2006), as well as to be made available on Netflix. It is also the only CW series (both ended and airing) in regular syndication, with daily three- to four-episode blocks on US cable network TNT, thereby mixing contemporary and traditional distribution methods and thus signalling its place as a marker of television's changes over its 15 seasons. Added to this are exclusive deals with Hasbro for *Supernatural*-themed board games and Funko for action figures, meaning the series offers significant monetary value to the network.¹⁰ The combination of TV and streaming syndication deals, as well as ancillary products allows the series to, in essence, "protect" other shows that are lower-rated but critically acclaimed, including recently ended *Jane the Virgin* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which hold the distinction of being the first Golden-Globe winning series for either the CW or WB/UPN.

⁸ *Arrow*'s parallel dark tone and focus on vigilantism and revenge offered a similar packaging as the show's pairing with *Nikita* (2010-2013).

⁹ *Legends of Tomorrow*, which also films in Vancouver, offered a metatextual tribute to *Supernatural* in its season 5 episode "Zari Not Zari" (5.8) when the characters interrupt the series' filming and come across Sam and Dean's Impala.

¹⁰ There are doubts around the actual figures: Warner Brothers Studio claimed that *Supernatural* operated at a deficit throughout its run, prompting Eric Kripke to file suit (Gardner 2017). Nor was Kripke alone in this; Fox Studio also claimed that *Bones* (2005-2017), which ran for 12 seasons on their network, also operated at a loss; executive producer Barry Josephson—along with series stars Emily Deschanel and David Boreanaz, and author Kathy Reichs—also sued. While Kripke's lawsuit is still pending, the *Bones* lawsuit was resolved in favor of Josephson, et al (Gardner 2019).

Such protection has become increasingly vital in the current television climate. Starting with the passage of the Telecommunications Act in 1996, which relaxed the financial incentive and syndication rules—known colloquially as fin-syn—networks had less incentive to air programs not produced by their own studio. By producing and airing series produced in-house instead they would not have to negotiate or pay significant licensing fees to other studios. (Witness, for example, the fight between Twentieth Century Fox studios and Warner Brothers over the payment of licensing fees for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which led to its cancellation on the WB network [Goodman 2001].) With the exception of three current programs (*The Outpost* [2018-], *Pandora* [2019-], and *Burden of Proof* [2018-]), all of the CW's series over the past 5 years have been produced (or co-produced) by its parent companies CBS and/or Warner Brothers Studios. Foregoing both major licensing and pilot development costs, the CW renewed its entire slate of programming for the past 3 years, anchored by the now-expected renewal of *Supernatural*.¹¹

The stability of *Supernatural* on the schedule was echoed in the series' eighth season with the addition of a permanent “residence” for the characters. Unlike the earlier seasons, which more prominently featured the Impala, various hotel rooms, the Roadhouse (season 2) and Bobby Singer's [Jim Beaver] house (up to season 7), the addition of the Men of Letters' bunker added a stable set that did not require re-dressing from episode to episode (“Everybody Hates Hitler”, 8.13). On a network level, a series as established as *Supernatural* allowed the network to take risks with other programs such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which spent four seasons not only deconstructing romantic comedy tropes but offered a nuanced portrayal of borderline personality disorder set to musical theatre-inspired songs nearly every episode, was unlike anything else on the network and frequently dived into taboo subjects (on US television), such as abortion (“When Will Josh and His Friend Leave Me Alone?” 2.4).

Conclusion: “What the hell is a Padalecki?” *Supernatural* as Narrative Tentpole

In these respects, *Supernatural* offered both an identity for the CW and the space for the network to take chances with content. The CW's “Dare to Defy” tagline

¹¹ Filming a drama pilot often has a base cost of at least \$5 million, although others can be significantly higher (eg, *Lost*'s [2004-2010] pilot episode cost between \$10 and 14 million [Ming 2018]).

is equally apt for a series that no one expected to last much beyond its first season; creator Kripke himself finds its unprecedented longevity “surreal” (McGinnis 2019). Indeed, for a series with such a relatively small ensemble, *Supernatural* has proven itself remarkably flexible in terms of character beats and plots, including “remixing” earlier stories (such as Dean’s decision to not serve as a vessel for the archangel Michael in season five (“Point of No Return” 5.18) with a different outcome. Yet on a narrative level, it also meets M.J. Clarke’s definition of a tentpole text, in that it was “streamable ... available for exploitation in other media, and modular ... composed of disintegrative narrative parts disconnected with regards to traditional representations of time, space, and character” (Clarke 208). As indicated above, it not only produces significant ancillary material (an anime version of the first season (2011), the web series “Ghostfacers” (April 15-May 13, 2010) and board games/action figures, but also quickly adapted to the aforementioned production and distribution shifts. Indeed, it continues to gain new viewership through its availability on streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon in the United Kingdom.



Figure 2: Dean’s reaction to the “Jared” and “Jensen” magazine cover.

Further, while the series followed a similar narrative trajectory to other contemporary or near-contemporary genre series (season and series-long arcs, character development, and narrative memory), *Supernatural* has frequently upended its own premise with a series of metafictional episodes. A significant

example of this is “The French Mistake” (6.15) in which Sam and Dean are thrust into an alternate reality in which they are the actors Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, who only “play” brothers Sam and Dean Winchester on a television show called *Supernatural* (Figure 2). While the series “reality” was re-established at the end of the episode, “The French Mistake” unspooled the “traditional” narrative more so than the other “meta” episodes by leaning into its basic unreality. It is a testament to the series’ importance to the network that it has so consistently managed to exist simultaneously as a “traditional” series—both narratively and from a production standpoint—and a text that consistently questions its own constructed nature, ancillary existence, and fandom. In this way, it embodies that disconnect by serving as a stable entity (like an older sibling) that allows the series around it to develop in their own ways. *Supernatural*’s stable position on the schedule while simultaneously taking risks with both its characters and narrative structure allows it to serve as a bulwark for other series and the channel itself to take chances with content and characterization.

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