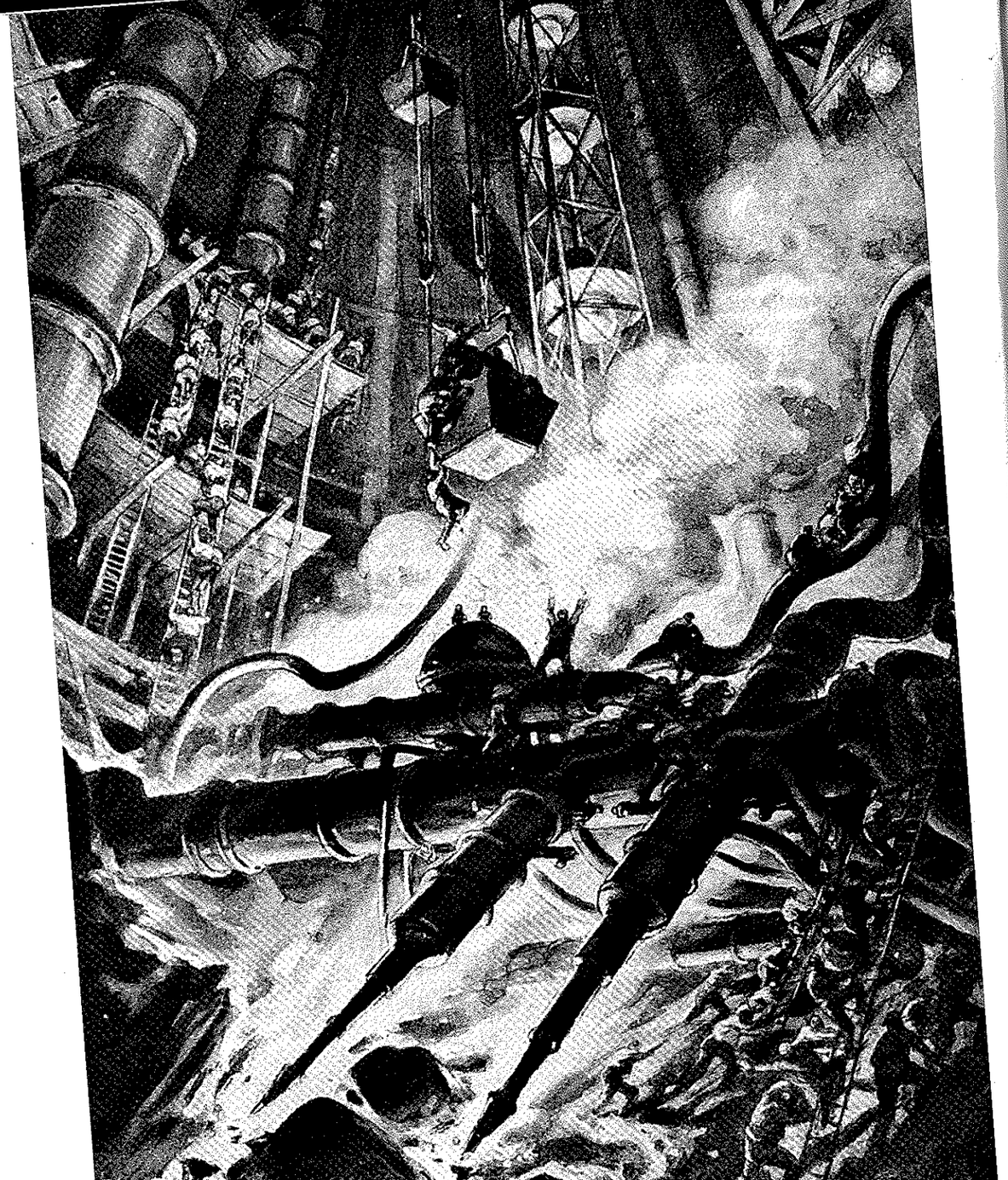

ThirdPerson

Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives

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All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic

Jason Mittell

The Wire (2002–2008) is paradigmatic of a critical darling—few people watch it (at least in the numbers typical of commercial television), but it generates adoration and evangelism by nearly all who do. Television critics have taken it on themselves to lobby their readers to give the show a chance, asking reluctant viewers to overlook its dark and cynical worldview to see the truth and beauty offered by its searing vision into the bleak heart of the U.S. city. Thankfully for us scattered fans, HBO has allowed the show to continue for five seasons, even without a clear sense that the show's dedicated fandom leads to overt profitability.[1]

What is most interesting to me about the critical praise deservedly lavished on *The Wire* is not how it may or may not yield an increase in viewership but how the critical consensus seems to situate the show distinctly within the frame of another medium. For many critics, bloggers, fans, and even creator David Simon himself, *The Wire* is best understood not as a television series but as a "visual novel." As a television scholar, this cross-media metaphor bristles—not because I don't like novels but because I love television. And I believe that television at its best shouldn't be understood simply as emulating another older and more culturally valued medium. *The Wire* is a masterpiece of television, not a novel that happens to be televised, and thus should be understood, analyzed, and celebrated on its own medium's terms.

Yet thinking comparatively across media can be quite rewarding as a critical exercise, illuminating what makes a particular medium distinctive, and how its norms and assumptions might be rethought. So before considering how the show operates televisually, what does thinking of *The Wire* as a novel teach us about the show? And might other cross-media metaphors yield other insights?

From the Literary to the Ludic

The Wire's novelistic qualities are most directly linked to its storytelling structure and ambitions. As Simon attests in frequent interviews and commentary tracks, he is looking to tell a large sweeping story that has traditionally been the purview of the novel, at least within the realm of culturally legitimate formats. He highlights how each season offers its own structural integrity, much like a specific book within a larger epic novel, and each episode stands as a distinct chapter in that book. The model, modestly left unspoken, might be *War and Peace*, a vast narrative containing fifteen "books," each subdivided into at least a dozen chapters and released serially over five years—Simon has less modestly mentioned *Moby-Dick* as another point of comparison, although that epic novel was neither serialized nor subdivided into books.

In *The Wire*, each season focuses on a particular facet of Baltimore and slowly builds into a cohesive whole. An episode typically does not follow the self-contained logic of most television programming, as story lines are introduced gradually and major characters might take weeks to appear. "Novelistic" is an apt term for describing this storytelling structure, as we rarely dive into a novel expecting the first chapter to typify the whole work as a television pilot is designed to do. Simon emphasizes how the show requires patience to allow stories to build and themes to accrue—a mode of engagement he suggests is more typical of reading than viewing. Enhancing the show's novelistic claims is the presence of well-regarded crime fiction writers like George Pelecanos, Richard Price, and Dennis Lehane on the staff, and Price's novel *Clockers* is surely an influence with its dual focus on a criminal and a cop in the urban drug war.

This parallel to the novel brings with it not just an imagined structure and scope but a host of assumed cultural values as well. While the novel's history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries featured numerous contestations over the form's aesthetic and cultural merits, by the time television emerged in the mid-twentieth century, the literary novel's cultural role was firmly ensconced

36.1 "I'm a free born man of the USA." The Baltimore police, including Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) sing along with The Pogues' "The Body of an American" at an officer's wake in the third season *Wire* episode "Dead Soldiers" (2004).

as one of the most elite and privileged storytelling formats. As the most popular and culturally influential form of storytelling, television has usurped the role that the early novel played as a lowbrow mass medium threatening to corrupt its readers and demean cultural standards.

By asserting *The Wire* as a televised novel, Simon and critics are attempting to legitimize and validate the demeaned television medium by linking it to the highbrow cultural sphere of literature. The phrase "televised novel" functions as an oxymoron in its assumed cultural values, much like the term "soap opera" juxtaposes the extremities of art and commerce into a cultural contradiction. For *The Wire*, especially in its context of HBO's slogan "It's Not TV, It's HBO," the link to the novel rescues the show from the stigmas of its televised form, raising it above the commercialized swamp of ephemera imagined by many as typical television. But I would contend that emphasizing the literary facets of *The Wire* obscures many of its virtues and qualities, setting it up to fail when measured by some of the aesthetic aims of the novel.

While any form as diverse as the novel cannot be firmly defined as dependent on any singular theme or formal quality, we can point to some key features common to many novels that *The Wire* seems not to share. Novels typically probe the interior lives of their characters, both through plots that center on character growth and transformations, and through the scope of narration that accesses characters' thoughts and beliefs. Even novels about a broad range of people and institutions often ground their vision of the world through the experiences of one or two central characters who transform through the narrative drive—for instance, a Charles Dickens novel like *Bleak House* examines institutions like the legal system, but does so primarily through the experiences and perspective of a central character. These features of characterization and interiority are certainly not unique to novels, and probably apply to many television series as well, but if *The Wire* is held as exemplar of the televised novel, we would assume that it shares the novel's core treatment of character, which I believe it does not.

Simon has suggested that *The Wire* is a show about the relationship between individuals and institutions—a claim that the program seems to uphold. But I would argue that the point of emphasis is much more clearly on institutions rather than individuals, as within each of the social systems that the show explores—the police, the drug trade, the docks, city government, and the educational system—the institution is brought into focus through the lens of numerous characters. Certainly Jimmy McNulty is a central point of access to understand police bureaucracy and functions nominally as the show's main character, but by season four he is in the margins while characters like Cedric Daniels, "Bunny" Colvin, and Bunk Moreland provide alternate entry points to explore the police system. Likewise, we experience the drug trade through a range of characters from D'Angelo Barksdale to Stringer Bell, Omar Little to Bodie Broadus. While all of these characters have depth and complexity, we rarely see much of their existence beyond how they fit into their institutional roles. Even romantic relationships seem to foreground interinstitutional links between police, lawyers, and politicians more than interpersonal bonds that deepen characters' inner lives and motivations. The chronic alcoholism and infidelity of *The Wire*'s police officers offers a portrait less of flawed personalities than of a flawed institution; for instance, the police show the systematic discipline and coordination of Barksdale's

crew, which is distinctly lacking in the Baltimore Police Department.

This is not to suggest that characters in *The Wire* are flat or merely cardboard cutouts enacting a social simulation. One of the show's most masterful features is its ability to create achingly human characters out of the tiniest moments and subtle gestures, such as Lester Freamon silently sanding doll furniture, Barksdale D'Angelo picking out his clothes, or Bubbles walking through "Hamsterdam" in a daze trying to find himself. But the way *The Wire* portrays its characters seems distinctly not novelistic: we get no internal monologues or speeches articulating characters' deep thoughts, and few senses of deep character goals or transformations motivating the dramatic actions. Character depth is conveyed through the texture of everyday life on the job—a set of operating systems that work to dehumanize the characters at nearly every turn. As Simon notes,

> *The Wire* has . . . resisted the idea that, in this post-modern America, individuals triumph over institutions. The institution is always bigger. It doesn't tolerate that degree of individuality on any level for any length of time. These moments of epic characterization are inherently false. They're all rooted in, like, old Westerns or something. Guy rides into town, cleans up the town, rides out of town. There's no cleaning it up anymore. There's no riding in, there's no riding out. The town is what it is. (Quoted in Mills 2007)

In the show's character logic, the institution is the defining element in a character's life, externalized through practices, behaviors, and choices that deny individuality and agency—a storytelling structure that seems contrary to principles typical of most literary novels.

There are clearly aspects of the novel that have inspired *The Wire*—the sweeping storytelling scope, the attention to details of systems and characters, and the social issue probing of works like *The Jungle*. Additionally, literary developments in recent decades have opened up the formal and stylistic possibilities of the genre, and thus there are certainly fictional trends that *The Wire* taps into. Ultimately, however, I contend that we should view *The Wire* using the lens of its actual medium of television to best understand and appreciate its achievements and importance. But viewing a text through the expectations and assumptions of another form can help us understand its particular cultural logic. Might other media metaphors be similarly useful, within limits, to help unravel *The Wire*? Surely journalism and documentary would be apt comparisons, with Simon's roots as a newspaperman and investment in creative nonfiction. Yet I would like to suggest that it might be useful to view the program using the lens of a seemingly off-base medium, and hence offer a brief detour to answer an unlikely question: How might we conceive of *The Wire* as a video game?

Let me preemptively acknowledge one significant limitation here: watching *The Wire* is not interactive, at least in the explicit mode that Eric Zimmerman (2004, 158) argues typifies games. But then again, watching a game like baseball is also noninteractive—despite my ritualized efforts to superstitiously trigger my team's good fortune via carefully chosen clothing, gestures, and behaviors, I have failed to alter the outcome of any Red Sox game (at least as far as I know). In thinking about a filmed series like *The Wire* as a game, we need to think of the ludic elements within the show's diegesis, not the interactive play that we expect when booting up a video game. Thus *The Wire* might be thought of as a spectatorial game, being played on-screen for the benefit of an audience.

Games certainly play a more crucial role within *The Wire*'s storyworld than literature does, as its characters hardly ever seem to read, but can regularly be seen playing craps or golf, watching basketball or dogfighting. More centrally, nearly every episode has at least one reference to "the game," a slang term for the urban drug trade that extends to all of the show's institutional settings. Within the show's portrait of Baltimore, the game is played in all venues—the corners, City Hall, the police station, and the union hall—and by a range of players—street-level junkies looking to score, corrupt politicians filling campaign coffers, cops bucking for promotion, stevedores trying to maintain the docks. "The game" is the overarching metaphor for urban struggle, as everyone must play or get played—as Marla Daniels tries to warn her husband, Cedric, "The game

is rigged—you can't lose if you don't play" (episode 1.2). Sometimes characters are playing the same game, as the chase between the cops and Barksdale's crew develops into a series of moves and countermoves, but some institutions engage in a different game altogether—in season one, the cops go to the FBI for help busting Barksdale's drug and money-laundering system, but the feds are only playing the terrorism and political corruption game. Ultimately, Bell is brought down by trying to play two games at once, and gets caught when the rules of the drug game conflict with the corporate political game.

Simon has suggested that the show's goal is to "portray systems and institutions and be honest with ourselves and viewers about how complex these problems are" (quoted in Zurawik 2006). While Simon imagines that the televised novel is the form best suited to accomplish such goals, in today's media environment, video games are the go-to medium for portraying complex systems. As Janet Murray writes, "The more we see life in terms of systems, the more we need a system-modeling medium to represent it—and the less we can dismiss such organized rule systems as mere games" (quoted in Moulthrop 2004, 64). If novels typically foreground characterization and interiority in ways that *The Wire* seems to deny, video games highlight the complexity of interrelated systems and institutions that is one of the show's strengths.

Many video games are predicated on the logic of simulating complex systems, modeling an interrelated set of practices and protocols to explore how one choice ripples through an immersive world. Ian Bogost (2006, 98) defines a simulation as "a representation of a source system via a less complex system that informs the user's understanding of the source system in a subjective way"—a formulation that certainly captures the essence of *The Wire* as a dramatic distillation of Baltimore's institutional systems viewed through the critical perspective of Simon and his cowriters. We might imagine the show as a televisual adaptation of Will Wright's landmark game *SimCity* (1989): an array of systems are dramatized, each with changing variables that ripple across the larger simulation model in unpredictable and often counterintuitive ways. *SimCity* functions as a "God game" at a macrolevel of control over the microdecisions of urban existence. But *The Wire* dramatizes its institutions more through the actions of characters in relation to the institution, blending the urban scope of *SimCity* with the personal focus typifying *The Sims* (2000), Wright's most popular iteration of the simulation game genre. Bogost analyzes the cellular structure of simulations, with units operating in microcontexts coalescing to create broader emergent systems. Such is often the case in *The Wire*'s Baltimore; in the first episode, for instance, a chance violent encounter between Johnny Weeks and Bodie leads Bubbles to seek revenge on Barksdale's organization, a small-scale unit operation that leads to major institutional transformations for both the police and drug dealers. Such small occurrences and changes at the levels of both character and institution are followed throughout the series to model how institutions operate and infiltrate the lives of their employees and members—a mode of representation blending the logics of *SimCity* and *The Sims*.

One of the central elements of games, especially those centered on simulations, is replayability; for a game to be embraced by its players, it typically must allow enough experiential variation to invite multiple passes through its ludic journey. Instead of viewing each of *The Wire*'s seasons as a singular book within an epic novel, we could view them as one play through its simulation game. In the first season, we walk through the police's attempt to take down Barksdale's drug operation, concluding seemingly in a "checkmate" scene where Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell yield to the police's final moves (1.12). Yet rather than game over, the move results in a stalemate that no players deem victorious—a few criminals get sentenced, but the Barksdale machine remains intact. Season three offers a replay with some changed variables and strategies for all sides: What if drugs are decriminalized? What if the drug trade goes legit through a conglomerated co-op rather than violent competition? What if a former soldier repents and tries to give back to his community? Given the show's cynical vision of corrupt institutions, reform typically produces various forms of failure, as the parameters of the system are too locked in to truly produce social change or allow for an imagined solution to systemic problems, as Prezbylewski notes in a later episode, referencing football but also

his own life's work, "No one wins—one side just loses more slowly" (4.4). Yet the ludic joy of the third season is the ability to replay the first season's narrative through the imagination of new rules and ways to play the game—a mode of engagement offered with less imaginative vision and more amoral brutality in season four's replay of the drug game under the leadership of Marlo Stanfield.

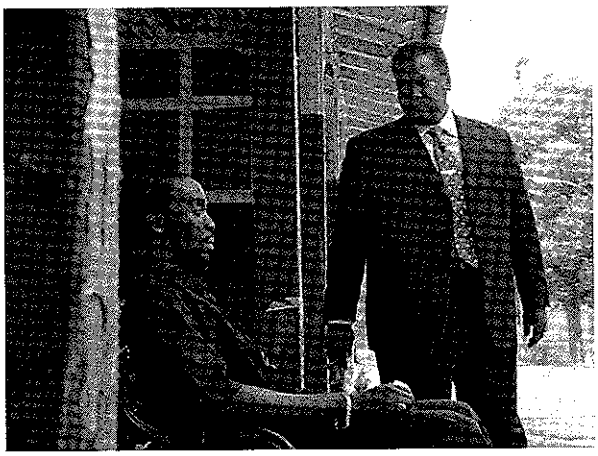
The characters in *The Wire*, while quite human and multidimensional, are as narrowly defined in their possibilities as typical video game avatars. They each do what they do because that is the way the game is played—Bubbles can't get clean, McNulty can't follow orders, Avon can't stop fighting for his corners, and Frank Sobotka can't let go of the glory days of the docks. The characters with both the will and opportunity to change, like Bell, D'Angelo, or Colvin, find the systems too resistant, the "boss levels" too difficult, to overcome the status quo. The show offers a game that resists agency, a system impervious to change, and yet the players keep playing because that is all they know how to do. The opening scene in the series shows McNulty interviewing a witness to a murder, killed after trying to rob a craps game; even though the victim tried to "snatch and run" every Friday night, the witness says that they had to let him play, because "it's America, man" (1.1). The game must be played, no matter the cost. Throughout the series, the moments of greatest conflict are where a player steps over the line and breaks the unwritten rules of his or her institution—shooting Omar on Sunday morning, Carver leaking information about Daniels, Nick Sobotka going beyond smuggling to enter the drug trade. In the show's representation of Baltimore, the game is more than a metaphor; it is the social contract that just barely holds the world together.

Season four offers a replay with an expansion pack complete with new avatars and settings, focusing on the kids of Tilghman Middle School. The introduction of this new system triggers emotional distress—the rules of *The Wire*'s simulation logic all but ensure that most of the children will end up broken and damaged, as that's the way the game is played. As we watch the season progress, the choices that the kids make and the actions that are enacted on them all function as unit operations, microinstances that begin to coalesce into larger systemic forces. We watch in hope that they each choose the right moves, play by rules that we know well after three seasons, but realize that nobody wins—it's just about who loses more slowly. It is a tribute to the efficacy of the show's logic of emergent systems that the end result of each child's fate is both entirely unpredictable from the outset and completely inevitable given the way each played—and was played by—the game. As viewers, we also play along in rooting for particular players, tracking the near misses that could have changed each of their lives along the way, and learning the lessons of the show's simulation rhetoric. As Bogost (2006) observes, simulations make arguments and reinforce ideologies through their underlying rules and assumptions; *The Wire* serves as a prototype of a persuasive game, making arguments about the inefficacy of the drug war, the class politics of urban America, and the failure of U.S. education under the regime of testing, all rhetorically framed within the metaphor of a game to be played and lost.

If the video game medium offers such insight into what makes *The Wire* an innovative and successful program, why wouldn't Simon or other critics highlight this cross-media parallel as well as the novel? One answer is obvious: it helps legitimize the show by comparing it to the highbrow, respectable literary form rather than the more derided and marginalized medium. And of course, I do believe that Simon and his cowriters do conceive of their practices as fitting with their conceptions of what the novel can do, with "the game" serving as mostly a metaphor for the desolate lives of their characters and institutions. But through my own little game here, reading *The Wire* for the anthology *Third Person* through the analytic lens of its previous game studies iteration of *First Person*, we can see both the possibilities and limitations of analyzing a text through the framework of what it is not. Ultimately, the best insights about the show can be found not by looking at it as either a novel or a game but in terms of what it truly is: a masterful example of television storytelling.

The Serialized Procedural

Placing *The Wire* in the context of television storytelling helps us understand why Simon felt compelled to frame his



36.2 "Makes me sick, motherfucker, how far we done fell." Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce) has a heart-to-heart with stickup artist Omar Little (Michael K. Williams), in *The Wire* episode "Homecoming" (2004).

series as atypical of television beyond the implied cultural hierarchies. On the show's debut in 2002, television was in the midst of a distinctive shift in its storytelling strategies and possibilities, exploring a mode of narrative complexity that I have analyzed elsewhere (Mittell 2006). Simon's previous work in television was primarily on the NBC series *Homicide: Life on the Street*, which was based on his journalistic book; *Homicide*'s producers were constantly battling network requests to make plots more conclusive and uplifting, adding hopeful resolution to its bleak vision of urban murder. But in the decade between *Homicide*'s 1993 premiere and *The Wire*'s debut, many programs offered innovations in complex long-form television storytelling, including *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The West Wing*, *Alias*, *24*, and most important for Simon's own program, HBO's critically acclaimed offerings of *Oz*, *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), and *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) as well as his own miniseries *The Corner*. Thus, while Simon frames his series primarily in novelistic terms in opposition to his frustrations working on *Homicide*, there were many key televised precedents for long-form gradual storytelling for him to draw on.

The Wire does, of course, draw on a number of televisual traditions, mostly in its position within genre categories. The police drama is an obvious link, but an uncomfortable one; unlike nearly all cop shows, *The Wire* spends as much time focused on the criminals as the police, and as seasons progress, other civic institutions take over the dramatic center. The show belongs more to a nonexistent category of "urban drama," documenting a city's systemic decay; thematically, police dramas are nearly always about fighting the tide of decay, rather than contributing to its demise. In spirit, if not in execution, *The Wire* harks back to the critically hailed yet little seen social issue dramas of the early 1960s, like *East Side/West Side* and *The Defenders*, but given the new industrial framework of premium cable television, *The Wire* can survive (if only barely) as a bleak social statement without reaching a mass audience—a luxury that its 1960s' network counterparts could not afford.

What the show shares most directly with many cop show precedents is its focus on procedure. *Dragnet* (1951–1970) pioneered the television cop show in the 1950s, inventing both the formal and cultural vocabulary of the police procedural. Although it reads as a mannered caricature today, in its time *Dragnet* represented the height of gripping authenticity, offering viewers a gritty noir view into the underbelly of Los Angeles and a celebration of the police who protect it. The show's narrative scope focused on the functional machinery of the police world, presenting a form of "systemic realism" that sublimated character depth to institutional logic (Mittell 2004, 137). While *Dragnet* did distill the larger institution into the perspective of Detective Joe Friday and his assorted partners, creator/producer/star Jack Webb designed the show for Friday to be viewed as "just one little cog in a great enforcement machine" (quoted in ibid., 126), and downplayed the character to generate a level of emotional engagement appropriate for a cog, redirecting viewer focus on to the minute details of police procedures. The legacy of *Dragnet*'s procedural tone lives on in the long-running *Law and Order* and *CSI* franchises, each of which offer just enough emotional investment in their institutional workers to engage viewers, but hook them with twisty mysteries each week to be solved by effective forensic detection or prosecution.

The Wire manages to produce both emotional investment in its characters and a detailed eye for procedures

The opening credits of each season typify the show's focus. The characters are obscured and abstracted into a series of mill operations: close-ups of body parts, machinery, gestures, and icons of city life. What matters in the credits, and arguably the series as a whole, is less who is doing the actions, but more the practices of institutional urban life themselves: the policing, drug slinging, political bribing, and bureaucratic buck-passing that comprise the essence of the show's portrait of Baltimore in decay. *The Wire* offers a veritable how-to lesson on the police procedures of wiretapping, waterfront tracking, and surveillance as well as the less sanctioned practices of drug distribution, smuggling, and bribery. A real New York drug ring even modeled their strategy of dumping cell phones after the practices of Barksdale's crew—a connection that police learned about while listening to dealers recap the previous episode via a wiretap (Rashbaum 2005). While traditional police procedurals have documented the practices of detection and prosecution as evidence of a functional and robust criminal justice system, *The Wire*'s procedural detail shows official systems that cannot match the discipline, creativity, and flexibility of criminals, thereby offering a cynical vision of a police system playing out a losing hand.

The show's formal style supports its claims to authenticity. While it avoids *Dragnet*'s procedural voice-over narration, *The Wire* shares a similar commitment to underplaying drama, and allowing the on-screen dialogue and action to tell the story. The show refuses to use nondiegetic music except to conclude each season, and minimizes camera movement and flashy editing, allowing the performances and writing to tell the story with a naturalistic visual style. Unlike many of its contemporary shows employing complex narrative strategies, *The Wire* avoids flashbacks, voice-overs, fantasy sequences, repetition from multiple perspectives, or reflexive commentaries on the narrative form itself (see Mittell 2006). In terms of how the show stylistically tells its story, *The Wire* appears more akin to conventional procedurals like *Law and Order* than contemporary innovators like *The Sopranos* or *24*, sharing a commitment to authenticity and realism typified by a minimized documentary-style aesthetic that Simon (2006) summarizes: "Less is more. Explaining everything to the slowest or laziest member of the audience destroys verisimilitude and reveals the movie itself, rather than the reality that the movie is trying to convey."

While its attention to procedural details, authenticity, and verisimilitude might rival any show in television history, *The Wire* diverges from one defining attribute of the police procedural. Typically procedurals, whether focusing on police precincts, medical practices, or private detectives, are devoutly episodic in structure—each week, one or more cases gets discovered, processed, and resolved, rarely to reappear or even be remembered in subsequent episodes. On *The Wire*, cases last an entire season or beyond, and everything that happens is remembered with continuing repercussions throughout the storyworld—lessons are learned, grudges are deepened, and the stakes are raised. The show demands audiences to invest in their diegetic memories by rewarding detailed consumption with narrative payoffs; for instance, a first season bust of an aide to Senator Clay Davis adds little to that season's arc, but it sets up a major plotline of seasons three and four. If *Dragnet* represents the prototype of the episodic procedural with hundreds of interchangeable episodes, *The Wire* is on the other end of television's narrational spectrum, with each episode in the series demanding to be viewed in sequence and strict continuity. Thus, *The Wire* functions as what might be television's only example of a serialized procedural.[2]

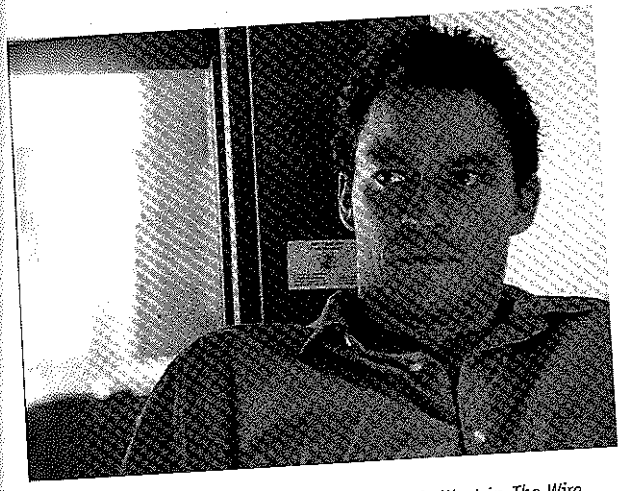
How does *The Wire* structure its balance between serial and episodic story lines? In many examples of television's contemporary narrative complexity, individual episodes maintain a coherent and steady structure, even when they primarily function as part of a larger storytelling arc (Mittell 2006; Newman 2006). Individual episodes typically offer one self-contained plotline to be resolved while others function primarily within larger season arcs; for example, each episode of *Veronica Mars* typically introduces and resolves one new mystery, while longer character and investigative arcs proceed alongside that week's self-contained plot. Other shows use structural devices to identify distinct episodes, such as *Lost*'s designation of a specific character's flashbacks each week or *Six Feet Under*'s "death-of-the-week" structure. *The Wire* offers little episodic unity. Although each episode

is certainly structured to deliver narrative engagement and payoffs in specific beats and threads, it is hard to isolate any identifying characteristics of a single episode in the way that a show like *The Sopranos* has particular markers, such as "the college trip" or "the Russian in the woods." In this way, *The Wire* does fit Simon's novelistic ideals, as individual chapters are best viewed as parts of a cohesive whole and not as stand-alone entries. *The Wire* is therefore at once one of television's most serialized programs, yet also uniquely focused more on institutional procedures and actions than character relationships and emotional struggles that typify most serialized dramas.

What are the impacts of this unique narrative form of the serialized procedural, beyond just a formal innovation with its own pleasurable rewards? *Dragnet* and subsequent police procedurals represent law enforcement as an efficient machine—a perspective that the narrative form reinforces; by offering a weekly glimpse of how cases are solved and justice is served, the genre supports an underlying ideology of support for the status quo to reassure viewers about a functional state system able to protect and serve. Even *Homicide*'s cynical and downbeat vision of law enforcement offers resolution, if not reassurance, through its closed narrative structures.[3] On *The Wire*, the ongoing investigations rarely close and never resolve with any ideological certainties or reassurances, heroic victories or emotional releases. When McNulty allows his pride to swell in recognition that their detail is made up of elite "natural police," Freamon knocks him down, pointing out that even if they do close a big case, there will be no "parade, a gold watch, a shining Jimmy McNulty Day moment" (3.9). Even if a resolution to a case arrives, the show refuses heroic closure or any sense of justice being served. By refusing ideological closure or easy answers to solving the complex systemic problems documented in *The Wire*, the show reminds us that in the end, it's all just a game with another hand waiting to be played.

The Wire's game logic returns to the fore here. Many of television's complex narratives employ a puzzle structure to motivate viewer interest, inspiring fans to watch shows like *Lost*, *Veronica Mars*, and *Heroes* with a forensic eye for details to piece together the mysteries and enigmas encoded within their serial structures. Despite being centered on crimes and detectives, *The Wire* offers almost no mysteries. We typically know who the criminals are and what they did. Even though the second season begins with an unsolved murder of a shipping container full of Eastern European prostitutes, the whodunit is downplayed in the narrative drive, with the final revelation becoming almost an afterthought as the focus is shifted to the larger systems of corruption, smuggling, and the disintegration of labor—the only closure offered by discovering the name of the already-dead murderer is the ability to remove the "red names" from the board in the homicide squad room. Instead of mysteries, the show's narrative is focused on the game between competing systems, with suspense and tension generated through anticipation of what procedures will pay off for each side, and how the various sides will end up before the next round is played. In season four, we watch in anticipation of the twists and turns it will take before the police discover the bodies entombed by Chris and Snoop as potential leads and connections are missed until chance encounters point Freamon toward the significance of a nailed-up board. The payoff is not justice being served, as the case remains unsolved at the season's end, but the procedural journey toward the discovery. The cultural logic of traditional mysteries is based on a belief in functional institutions of justice being able to solve and punish crime; in *The Wire*'s cynical vision, mysteries are only obstacles to improving clearance rates for homicide detectives or disruptions in the functioning machinery of a criminal operation.

This procedural focus of *The Wire* can be viewed as tied not only to television traditions but also to the mechanics of gameplay. Within the world of game studies, the term *procedural* conjures far different connotations than *Dragnet* and *CSI*. Some game scholars see procedural authorship as the essence of coding gameplay or "procedural narrative," outlining the unit operations that render the storyworld and enable player agency (Mateas and Stern 2007). For Murray (1997, 274), the procedural nature of games and digital narrative is unique in "its ability to capture experience as systems of interrelated actions"—a description seemingly capturing *The Wire*'s narrative mode. Bogost (2006, 46) builds on Murray's model to extend a critical



36.3 No Jimmy McNulty Day moment (Dominic West in *The Wire* episode "Slapstick" [2004]).

eye to "both technology-based and non-technologically based works from the single perspective of their shared procedurality." Although *The Wire*'s procedural language is not written in binary, each Baltimore institution has an underlying code, from the rules of the drug game's parlay to the racial rotation in electing union leaders. The series frequently highlights what happens when conflicting codes overlap, as with Bell's attempt to bring Robert's Rules of Order to the meetings of drug dealers, or Colvin's détente in the drug war to create Hamsterdam; such procedural conflicts trigger the complex social simulation needed to represent the urban environment as "systems of interrelated actions." In both *The Wire* and the realm of digital games, procedures are the essential building blocks of narrative, character, and rhetoric, the actions that are undertaken within the parameters of the simulation, the rules of the game.

Ultimately it is through its focus on procedure, at the levels of action, play, and code, that *The Wire* generates its verisimilitude, creating a ludic engagement with the *SimCity* of twenty-first-century Baltimore. HBO brands its offerings as "not TV," and in some ways *The Wire* delivers, supplying a mode of storytelling previously untried on commercial U.S. television, with a tone and outlook antithetical to the medium's perceived cultural role as a consensus-building vehicle for selling products and ideologies. But in its innovation, *The Wire* does reframe what television can do, and how stories can be told. Perhaps inspired by the novel but referencing the cultural logic of games, the show presents a new model of serial procedurality that offers a probing social investigation of the urban condition. And as the players remind us, "it's all in the game."

Notes

1. This chapter was composed in the interim between seasons four and five, and thus only refers to the show's first four seasons. The author would like to thank the readers of his blog, Just TV, for the thoughtful feedback posted about a draft of this chapter as well as the comments by this volume's editors.

2. Also debuting in 2002, *The Shield* blends the procedural with the serial by mixing ongoing conflicts into its focus on the workings of a corrupt branch of the Los Angeles Police Department. *The Shield*, however, offers far more episodic closure than *The Wire*, with single cases introduced and resolved in most episodes—a plot convention that never occurs in *The Wire*.

3. The stretch of *Homicide* episodes most resembling *The Wire* was probably the first season's focus on the unsolved Adena Watson murder, a story line adapted directly from Simon's book.

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