

Regular Article

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How I Met Your Fans: A Comparative Textual Analysis of *How I Met Your Mother* and Its Reboots

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Abstract: Since *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM) ended in 2014 with its ninth season, there have been multiple attempts to create a new series based on a similar premise – one parent telling their kid(s) how they met their other parent. *How I Met Your Dad* (HIMYD), which was planned to begin in 2014 right after HIMYM's final, was not picked up by any network, while *How I Met Your Father* (HIMYF), which started airing in 2022, is continuing a successful [Upon its release, the show, whose premiere was watched in 420 K households, held the fifth place on the TV time charts and went on to stay on the list for four more weeks (The Entertainment Strategy Guy).] run, currently in its second season. This article compares the narrative and narration of the first episodes of these three series, including themes, recurring jokes, sound and visual effects, introductions of important characters and the “missing” parent, as well as the use of cameos. By doing this, it aims to delve into the reason behind why one of these reboot attempts was favoured over the other. The answer is provided as the difference between the amount of fan service in HIMYD and HIMYF, with the latter establishing more direct connections with HIMYM. In addition to becoming a rather common tendency by creatives, this article claims that fan service also seems to be used by networks and production companies as a way of ensuring audience engagement.

Keywords: reboots, fandom, fan service, cameos, audience engagement

Introduction

TV Reboots help re-establish or revive the connection with an older TV show that is beloved by audiences. This means that in order for a reboot to come into life, there are two integral factors – one is a commercially successful, older TV show, and the other is a group of devout fans, whose presence on the other side of the screen help define this success. One noteworthy idea in early audience research was the “direct effects” model (McQuail 18), which spoke about the creators of TV shows – or any media product – setting the rules and the audiences – or fans – following along without any interference. The message was disseminated unidirectionally, in a linear fashion. Later on, ideas such as the “encoding/decoding model” (Hall), which gave interpretations as much power and authority as messages themselves, were introduced. TV Reboots take these models that attribute a certain autonomy towards audiences one step further, shifting the dynamic completely in favour of fans.

In her article “American TV Series Revivals,” Looock writes about how reboots function, claiming that they “[...] rely on the televisual past to circulate new products through the crowded contemporary media landscape and [...] seek to negotiate the televisual heritage of original series and feelings of generational

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belonging, as well as notions of the past, present, and future in meaningful ways” (299). Therefore, the very fact that a reboot exists also suggests a negotiation of how the original series would be received, integrating the sense of nostalgia into the equation. However, this article will argue that in terms of content, some reboots steer this negotiation towards a more hegemonic reading (Hall) and idolise the original material.

Throughout the past decade, the mainstream cultural milieu has started to be dominated by a phenomenon referred to as “fan service.” Finding its roots in the Western love for Japanese *manga*, the phrase denotes creators of cultural products providing “narrative rewards” that cater to the fans’ desires (Beaty). Creators act sometimes as a response to tangible and specific demands by the fans from changing a character’s design (Power) to releasing the director’s cut of a global franchise (Dockterman), and other times on what they presume will be liked by the fans with “easter eggs,” on-screen hidden elements that require a certain investment in the narrative universe to notice (Beaty).

As for reboots, due to an inextricable link with the original content, every endeavour could be interpreted as fan service in one way or another – someone has to love something for it to come back, and reviving that very thing would be a service to those people. However, there are also examples where fans’ involvement is more noteworthy than others. One of them is the revival of *Veronica Mars*,¹ which was brought back as a feature film in 2014 through an effort of crowdfunding by the fans (Kelly)². Here, fans could be seen as partners or co-owners of the franchise, and their involvement in the content would have made sense from an economic point of view. However, as it dominates the way stories are told all around the current landscape, fan service also serves as a factor in the creation of reboots, arguably affecting content more than it ever has.

Even though reboots did not start in the early twenty-first century, the recent increase in numbers has attracted the attention of many critics, some labelling the trend as “entertainment Groundhog Day” (Scott, “Why Are There”), others associating this with 90s kids being one of the most nostalgic generations (Rivero) or claiming that it is easier to convince producers for reboots rather than for original content (Porter, “We May Not Want”). Scholars have tied the use of familiar characters with triggering memory and evoking nostalgia (Lizardi 39) and noted how this familiarity provided comfort for audiences (Loock, “Whatever Happened to Predictability” 368). Building up on these, this article is interested in exploring how reboots function within contemporary television, as well as how fan service has affected the content itself.

To illustrate this point, this article will look at two reboots that have attempted to follow the steps of *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM),³ a popular and critically acclaimed series that aired for nearly a decade from the mid-noughties to mid-2010s: *How I Met Your Dad*⁴ (HIMYD) and *How I Met Your Father*⁵ (HIMYF). As opposed to developing a new season that simply saw a continuation of the same characters’ stories – which would be referred to as a “revival” – both series tried to design new characters and used a similar premise – a story of the past being told to kids from the future. With constant jumps between the narrative’s present – audiences’ future – and the past – audiences’ present – time itself is used as a narrative and comedic device, reflecting the cultural sphere of the time it is aired in through its depiction of the past.

The most notable difference between HIMYD and HIMYF is their relationship with the original material: HIMYD does not establish its ties with HIMYM as much and as directly as HIMYF, which, tying into the prominence of fan service in other cultural products as well, arguably is the reason why it never got picked up. As will be seen while comparing the three series, since HIMYF did more to evoke HIMYM, it was destined for success, while HIMYD did not feature enough fan service and was not given the chance to air.

It is notable that the creators of HIMYM, Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, are also involved in the production of HIMYD, with Emily Spivey and Greta Gerwig also contributing to the writing. On the other hand, HIMYF is created by Isaac Aptaker and Elizabeth Berger, and aside from a writing credit in the pilot

1 Originally aired for three seasons between 2004 and 2007 on UPN, and later on The CW.

2 A fourth season of the series also aired on Hulu in 2019.

3 The series ran from 2005 to 2014 and aired on CBS. It is currently streaming on Disney +.

4 The series was expected to debut in 2014 but the pilot was never picked up by CBS.

5 The series began in 2022 on Hulu.

episode – alongside Aptaker, Berger, and Spivey – Bays and Thomas do not seem to be that much involved in the creation of the series. This adds up to the fact that HIMYF works as a “fan letter” dedicated to HIMYM and legacy, while Carter and Bays’ previous attempt to revive the series, which saw them steer somewhat away from their original creation, was not given a chance by any network.

Method

In order to delve into the ideas around reboots and fan service, this article will use the first episode of each series: HIMYM’s “Pilot,” which aired on September 19, 2005, HIMYD’s pilot, which was shot in 2014, and HIMYF’s “Pilot,” which aired on January 18, 2022. To illustrate the emphasis on providing fans with what they supposedly want, embodied in the cameo of a beloved character from the original series, “Timing is Everything,” the first season finale of HIMYF, which aired on March 15, 2022, will also be included in the comparison.

In line with the related terminology around television studies, this article refers to HIMYD and HIMYF as “reboots,” rather than “spin-offs” or “revivals.” This is because as opposed to a spin-off, which features a new story centring an existing character, or a revival, where the main cast of a series is brought back after a number of years for a new run (Rothman), HIMYD and HIMYF have a familiar premise but new characters. Since they do not repeat the exact same storyline as HIMYM, this article also refrains from referring to them as “remakes.”

Textual analysis will be applied to focus on the narrative and narration of the series, including language, structure, patterns, and their relationship with the time in which they were released. In the context of a television series, this method refers to “an analysis of the text ... that simply attempts to uncover its potential meaning through detailed close readings” (Creeber 26). For this article’s purposes, this will take the shape of looking at how voiceovers are used, to whom the story is told, how characters are established, how certain sound and visual effects are used for transitions and comedic effects, how the cultural milieu of the time is reflected onto the narrative, and how a similar idea of “the one” is reinforced through different theories around love and relationships.

Going back to Creeber’s definition of textual analysis on television, with the rise of SVOD platforms, “television” has come to connote something larger than the device itself, implying a necessity for a shift in the area that studies it as well. This new paradigm has been referred to as TVIV, which took further the changes in terms of technological developments, audience behaviour, and industry, resulting in “an era of matrix media where viewing patterns, branding strategies, industrial structures, the way different media forms interact with each other or the various ways content is made available shift completely away from the television set” (Jenner 260). On the other hand, scholars have also pointed out the narrative differences between originals and reboots when the episodes of reboots’ seasons are all-in-one released, as opposed to the conventional model of weekly programming (Can 237).

As opposed to continuing the same series with a new season, HIMYM’s two reboots feature new characters but use the same premise, also sticking with the “how I met your” phrase to establish their ties with the original series. Additionally, even though HIMYF is currently being aired on Hulu, it does not feature an all-in-one release, therefore not constituting a difference in viewing patterns. While this may still serve a different viewing experience for some audiences due to the availability of former episodes on the platform – those who did not start watching the series as it was aired can still binge it – neither HIMYD nor HIMYF will thus be considered a part of TVIV, as they do not feature the fluidity associated with the term and rather offer viewing experiences and branding strategies that one might find in conventional TV.

HIMYM: “Kids, I’m going to tell you an incredible story”

The very first episode of HIMYM opens with a father declaring to his two kids that he would tell them a story. The year is established as 2030, the camera only shows the two kids sitting on a couch, and the father’s dialogues are only heard as a voiceover. In fact, throughout the series, this voiceover of the father from 2030 is used to provide exposition into the “past,” 2005, where the actual story takes place. The fact that the older father is voice-acted by Bob Saget, renowned for his role as the father in *Full House*, another beloved family comedy, is a self-reflexive and self-aware joke in and of itself, which requires from audiences to channel their extra-diegetic knowledge, much like how they would relate the content of a reboot to the original series. *Full House* was revived by Netflix as *Fuller House* in 2016 to evoke “the bygone days of TGIF-style programming of the 1980s and 1990s and reinvent family-friendly viewing in the present” (Loock, “American TV Series Revivals” 307), turning into a nostalgic throwback for an older generation who watched Saget in *Full House*, and for young adult viewers who listened to his voice in HIMYM. Here, the comforting effect of a familiar voice (Loock, “Whatever Happened to Predictability?” 371) in the form of a renowned actor is juxtaposed with the father being an unreliable narrator due to a variety of factors in different instances, including his failed memory, his reluctance to share certain details with his kids, and his willingness to tease them (Terry 7).

The father’s name is provided as Ted Mosby (Josh Radnor), and the audience sees 2005 Ted starting to feel sad that he has not figured out what to do with his life. This is especially instigated by the fact that his best friend Marshall (Jason Segel) decides to propose to his long-time girlfriend, Lily (Alyson Hannigan). The final member of their gang, Barney (Neil Patrick Harris), is introduced through his catch-phrases such as “suit up,” “wait for it,” and “legendary,” as well as his child-like obsession with laser tag. Another catchphrase and pastime activity of Barney’s also provides a gateway into the time’s cultural milieu. When Barney exclaims “This is going in my blog!,” one is reminded of a time where Internet blogs were a prominent form of communication – the number of blogs had risen from 50 in 1999 to around seventy million in 2007 (Mohammed).

Ted is portrayed as desperate to find “the one,” the woman with whom he will fall in love and start a lifetime of happiness together. As the whole story is structured around the quest to find the person he married and had children with, the identity of Ted’s “the one” is built up from the get-go. This ties into the words used while introducing Robin (Cobie Smulders), such as “and there she was” and “this was no ordinary girl.” Occasionally, the excitement born out of this quest to find love forces Ted to say things that seem out of place, an example being his overly premature “I think I’m in love with you,” to Robin right after their first date, something which shocks her on the spot, but also Ted’s friends when they hear about what happened later that night, as well as his kids, when the same story is told by Future Ted. After the initial scene of the episode, this is the first moment where the audience is reminded of – and equated with – Ted’s kids. While Future Ted may be an unreliable narrator, Favard argues that “It is this unreliability, the erratic nature of Future Ted’s storytelling, that ... enables both the kids and the viewer to catch proleptic glimpses of events to come” (Terry 7). Just like how the character learns from his own mistakes, Ted’s kids learn from the gaps or flaws in the narration, seeing through the framework of Ted’s story in the final episode, which Adeline Terry claims is the true cause of the narrator’s unreliability – this is not the story of how Ted met the kids’ mother, but of how he is “totally in love with Aunt Robin” (7).

As spouted in nearly every episode, mostly by Barney, the gang believes there are certain theories that apply to interpersonal relationships, and for “The Pilot,” it is “The Olive Theory.” We are told that Lily loves olives and Marshall hates them, and this balances their relationship, making them a perfect couple. The fact that this theory is debunked in the very same episode perhaps is a message to the audience that suggests theories may not always work and that one does not require theories to find their “the one.”

Much like Ted, who learns that he has to be patient to find his significant other, audiences have to wait until the last minute of the episode to learn Robin’s name, which happens when 2030 Ted claims “[...] and that’s how I met your Aunt Robin,” suggesting Robin’s not the mother. As her name comes at the end as a twist, one is also reminded of the several moments Robin does say her name but the camera cuts before the audience can hear. The most notable example is at the bar, when the gang is watching Robin report a news

segment. With the way Robin is introduced, both the audience and Ted's kids are content with having identified the mother. However, the sense of ease is quickly taken away by 2030 Ted, as he reminds everyone that this would be a long story. This choice also affects HIMYD and HIMYF, as both series attempt to slightly tweak the approach to when and how the other parent would be revealed.

HIMYD: “Dear cricket, a wise person once told me[...]”

HIMYD, which never came to life after its pilot episode, became accessible to the general public after a user named John Gillman posted the pilot episode on Vimeo (Tenreyro). While the series does follow the “parent tells kids the story of how they met their other parent” trope of HIMYM, there are creative choices where HIMYD takes a different direction than its predecessor, which, this article claims, has contributed to the fact that it was never picked up.

The very fact that the series uses new terminology, “dad” and “mom,” instead of “father” and “mother,” suggests a shift in approach. While there is not much indication of a more serious and strict relationship between Ted and his kids in HIMYM, the word “father” is conventionally associated with a sense of authority and discipline, as opposed to “dad,” which suggests a much more mild-mannered and easy-going parent (Mitchell and Sugar). The child in HIMYD is also referred to by a nickname, “cricket,” rather than “kids,” which does not necessarily imply a tighter relationship in and of itself, but does show that the creators have attached a certain importance to names. While investigating how stories are told in contemporary television, Mittell identifies poetics as a method, particularly attaching importance to the language used in the process of creation (4). Seeing how the children in HIMYD and HIMYM are equated with or used as surrogates for the people watching the shows, one can argue that opting for words that imply further warmth and closeness is also a new way for creators to approach audiences.

This time the story is told in 2044 from the perspective of a mom, Sally (Greta Gerwig), as the flashbacks take the audience to 2014. The voiceover narrates a letter written in a typewriter, which is referred to as an “ancient contraption” in order to establish that sense of future, while neither the 2044 mom – aside from a shot from her back – nor the child is seen on screen. This time the voiceover is done by Meg Ryan, an actor renowned for her roles in 90s’ romantic comedies who would be a figure beloved by audience members that are around the same age as the main character in 2014.

The title is written with the same font as HIMYM, though there are no title sequences to compare, presumably because the creators were waiting to hear about the pilot’s approval before editing a title sequence. However, HIMYD does use the same freeze effects as HIMYM for the parts where the voiceover provides exposition.

A notable difference with HIMYM comes when the voiceover gives a disclaimer for what she is about to tell, hence what the audience is about to see: “You’re going to learn a lot of weird stuff about your mom.” The fact that HIMYM does not have this arguably tells more about the creators’ idea of audience expectations, rather than those of the characters’ respective kids. It may be argued that the creators were worried about the possibility of that supposedly “wild life” being scrutinised by the audience, simply because it is a woman rather than a man doing all these, and the protagonist losing her lovable qualities. Future Sally does not suffer from unreliability as Future Ted does, instead claiming that she will opt for honesty even if it does her disservice, which also is another indication of the will to establish a stronger relationship between the parent and the child, as well as the show and the audiences.

In terms of representation and stylistic choices, there are some elements within HIMYD that tie it to other popular series of its time. One example is Sally’s brother, Andrew (Danny Javits), who falls within the stuffy and uptight gay stereotype (Scott, “Contested Kicks” 157). While both the cast and characters are much more diverse than the all-white and all-middle class HIMYM, there are also tropes these characters fall into, as illustrated by Andrew’s manners and physical qualities. The “running the tape back effect,” which sees the actual footage rolled back with a sound effect in order to compare what Andrew says with what Andrew actually wants to say is something previously unseen in the “how I met your” series, even

though it is a pretty standard convention used in many popular films and TV series. With this self-reflexive motion, sound is concretised and audiences are confronted with the fact that they are experiencing separate pieces of media – visual and aural – being brought together to create meaning (Kim-Cohen 224).

The definitive features of characters appearing on screen in writing – as seen with words such as “Ken doll hair” and “obsessive need to constantly tell me what I was doing wrong 24 hours a day” that describe the physical and mental traits of Gavin (Anders Holm), Sally’s soon-to-be-ex fiancé – also evokes the visual techniques employed by *Sherlock*, another popular series of the time, which rely on the titular character’s deductions based on people’s appearances and behaviours. This narration technique, which is used in *Sherlock* in order to allow audiences’ access into the character’s mind (Burt), serves a similar purpose here, this time used for comedic purposes. The use of “me” as an object pronoun reminds audiences that this is still Sally’s story told with first-person narration, even when flashbacks are involved.

Throughout the narrative, there are also a number of themes that resemble HIMYM. The most notable example would be the inciting incident that makes Sally concerned about her own life. While Ted’s desire to meet and talk to Robin is fuelled by Marshall’s proposal to Lily, Sally starts wondering about her own life after Andrew and his partner decide to adopt a child. Additionally, much like Marshall and Lily’s engagement celebration, popping a bottle of champagne is seen as a metaphorical initiation into adulthood. Finally, the series also introduces its own theory of “the one,” calling it “being the same tree.” This is elaborated as a metaphor for two people with differing interests – two separate trees – happily sharing a life – growing together as if they are the same tree. This narrative seems to attach more importance to this theory than HIMYM does to “The Olive Theory,” as “We are not the same tree,” becomes Sally’s reason to break up with Gavin.

A big reveal at the end of the episode points out in a different direction than HIMYM, as Frank (Nicholas D’Agosto), who is randomly introduced to Sally by her best friend, turns out to be cricket’s dad. What creates that suspense and leaves audiences wondering as to how they ended up having a kid in the end is the episode’s version of 2014 ending when Sally and Frank decide to be only friends. Since the show got cancelled, the answer to this question is never revealed.

HIMYF S01E01: “Hi sweetie, you look tired.”

As soon as HIMYF’s pilot episode begins, one comes across a number of examples that tie the series’ conformity and allegiance to HIMYM. The first example is the decision to refer to the parent in question as “father,” rather than “dad.” The second is the theme song, which is essentially a cover version of the music that audiences have associated with HIMYM’s title sequence. So, from the first few moments of the series, ties are established with an ancestor, and the series openly acknowledges its status as a reboot.

The mother appears in 2050 this time and tells the story to her son. However, as opposed to HIMYM’s voiceover that only shows the kids or HIMYD’s voiceover that shows a person typing from the back, the audience only sees the mother and not the kid, suggesting a shift of perspective. This further reinforces an identification between the kid listening to the story and the audiences watching the show; in addition to the amount of knowledge they possess, they are also visually equalised – both are not present on the screen and the narrator is looking at both. This can also be interpreted as a subtle message to the audience in terms of the narrator’s reliability – this time they are right there in front of the screen and hence can be trusted. The fact that the 2050 mother is portrayed by Kim Cattrall, arguably one of the two most famous actors of the show⁶ with Hilary Duff, adds another layer to the fact that she is not presented merely through a voiceover, while the way she is presented resembles a theatre actor making an appearance on stage.

⁶ *Sex and the City*, the late 90s and early 2000s phenomenon with which Cattrall rose to fame, was also revived in 2021 with the name *And Just Like That...*, but Cattrall herself was not among the cast members that re-joined the series.

While the story is told from 2050, the story told takes place in 2022, and there are more examples that provide one with an idea of the cultural milieu than both HIMYM and HIMYD. The 2050 mother complains about the voice command system which “still does not work in 2050,” which is an obvious nod to the paradigms of the day and age audiences of 2022 are living in. Other examples include Tinder dates, using Uber to get around town, a person going viral and achieving a semi-famous state with the video of a failed marriage proposal, which all indicate specificity for 2020s. The fact that the series features quite a diverse cast – also seen in HIMYD – indicates that in addition to content, the cultural paradigms and conjuncture (Grossberg 4) of the times affect choices in production as well.

While there are also some elements that separate HIMYF from its predecessors, the show mostly adheres to the rules established by HIMYM. An example of the former might be the references to pre-2022 that are used for comedic effect throughout the episodes. While these are also seen in HIMYM and HIMYD, HIMYF lacks the distinct sound effect that the other two series use for flashbacks. Tying into Kim-Cohen’s claim that it is used to force the audience into confrontation (224), the fact that there is no effect here is the creators’ way of implying that there is also no room for confrontation in this show – it is solely for comfort viewing.

Similarities to HIMYM, on the other hand, are much more common and easily identifiable. For instance, there is a lingering first kiss between Sophie (Hilary Duff) and Ian (Daniel Augustin), which recall the interaction between Ted and Robin after their first date. The “best friend gets their life together while protagonist wonders about their life” moment comes when Valentina (Francia Raisa) starts a long-term relationship with Charlie (Tom Ainsley), who is essentially a larger-than-life representation of a posh Londoner (“Smart People”; “Quintessential British Gentleman”). Finally, the soulmate theory of this series is established as “The Brooklyn Bridge Person” – someone worthy to walk across the Brooklyn Bridge with.

The pilot’s biggest nod to HIMYM comes when one of the characters leases a redecorated version of Marshall and Lily’s – and formerly Ted’s – original flat. There is an additional hook for the audience when Wesleyan University, the school Ted, Marshall, and Lily went to, is namedropped to explain how HIMYF’s characters were made aware of the house’s availability. It is also noteworthy that in this scene, the focal point of the characters and the most important object in the eyes of the audience is a prop from a TV series that ended around 10 years ago, a set of swords used by Ted and Marshall in HIMYM.

HIMYF’s pilot ends with a reveal that one of the four male characters introduced in the story – Ian, Jesse (Chris Lowell), Sid (Suraj Sharma), or Charlie – is the father, which suggests a different approach than both HIMYM, which does not reveal the mother until its final season, and HIMYD, which discloses the identity of the father right away. However, all three sitcoms rely on a similar type of relationship between comedy and disclosure – suspension based on knowledge and insight (Goodine 5). Goodine suggests that “laughter is frequently dependent upon fore-knowledge. ... pleasure is not derived from surprise, but from the fulfillment of our expectations” (5). The audiences of these three shows have varying degrees of knowledge but what does not change is the fact that only the respective narrators know the full story. Additionally, while HIMYF’s choice to insinuate who the father might be demonstrates an attempt to balance new content with nostalgia, possibly as a way of attracting both old and new audiences (Loock, “American TV Series Revivals” 306), when examples of both are compared in terms of quantity and gravity, fan service outweighs additions.

HIMYF S01E10: “You have got to stop with this random rich couple”

Episode 10, which marks the final episode of the first season, features a few cameos from HIMYM characters. Conventionally, cameos use “celebrity images to reward fans eager to demonstrate their knowledge of favourite celebrities, allowing them to actively assume a role for themselves within mass culture” (Andersen 1). However, when reboots are concerned, the characters of the initial series are approached as celebrities in their own rights, which is based on an assumption that whoever’s watching the reboot is also familiar with the narrative of the former series and would take joy in seeing these characters make an appearance. Throughout nine seasons, there have been a number of celebrity cameos on HIMYM, including

Jennifer Lopez and Britney Spears. Then again, the cameos on HIMYF's episode 10 are from four characters of HIMYM, the first one being George Van Smoot, or "The Captain" (Kyle MacLachlan) and Becky (Laura Bell Bundy), Robin's former co-worker.⁷ Briefly appearing in the opening and closing sequences of the episode, The Captain and Becky eventually serve as the instigator of an inciting incident that see two lovers reunite.

Since the episode abruptly begins with a mediation session between The Captain and Becky without any context or explanation – which is something also acknowledged by the 2050 mother following an objection from her kid – the audience is trusted to remember them and their subtle nods to certain incidents that took place within HIMYM. Here, one can observe the difference between Future Sophie's kid and the show's audience, as this is not a "random rich couple" for the latter. This also breaks down the conventional hierarchy between narrative events, as a *satellite* – a minor plot event – is treated as a *kernel* – a major plot event – (Chatman 53, 54) due to the fact that it recalls the events of another narrative. For instance, The Captain references "The Pineapple Incident" by reminiscing how he never found out who stole his pineapple. This is something that took place in episode 10 of season 1 of HIMYM, where the audience watched Ted wake up with a pineapple on his side and tried to trace where it came from. The incident's ties to The Captain are never confirmed in HIMYM, aside from a deleted scene from the ninth season. So, in a way, this reference in HIMYF also serves to confirm and "legitimise" the pineapple's ties to The Captain, integrating this fact into the narrative universe. Another example of the duo's references is Becky dramatically exclaiming she is after The Captain's boats, which requires the audience the recall "The Boats Boats Boats Girl," Becky's nickname in HIMYM, something she earns after a commercial that sees her rise to fame.

"Timing is Everything" also features a number of narrative beats that remind the audience of HIMYM's plots. Jesse's premature "I love you," to Sophie is something that makes her worry about the seriousness and future of their relationship, while other couples argue over a range of topics that include costs of marriage, long-distance relationships, and wanting or not wanting children. The popular culture references that serve as a hook to the audience in 2022 continue with "Tiger King," the figure who reached worldwide fame with the Netflix documentary series of the same name, being namedropped as a joke.

The second cameo of the episode comes as Sophie goes to McLaren's, the bar frequented by the HIMYM gang, and sees Carl the Bartender (Joe Nieves), who also is a recurring character in HIMYM. Since it is right under the flat HIMYF's characters move into on episode 1, the bar's rather late appearance in the series is addressed in another meta-joke by Sophie, when she says "Weird we never come in here," to herself upon entering. In fact, the narrative audience (Phelan 135), Sophie's kid, would not understand this joke, as it is rather targeted for the implied audience (Chatman 102), those who are fans of HIMYM and can recognise McLaren's. On the other hand, this scene is mostly set up to prepare the audience for what is to come in a minute, which is an appearance by Robin.

The way Robin is presented in this scene is as if her very presence is a dramatic beat – she makes a passing comment at Sophie, the camera cuts to her, the music rises, and the screen cuts to black. Here, the tension possibly comes from the acknowledgement that cameos can have a twofold effect: "If audiences greet the return of beloved characters with enthusiasm and excitement, there is usually also a sense of unease that cherished memories of the past might be overwritten by the new media texts" (Loock, "American TV Series Revivals" 305). This is initially designed as a cameo by Robin, the beloved HIMYM character, and at first, she is seemingly there as a celebrity only known to the audience from another series they have watched. However, HIMYF adds another layer to this cameo as Sophie also recognises Robin as Robin Scherbatsky, the news anchor, further underlining how the two narratives are connected. In fact, up until the final episode of the first season, the narrative world that ties HIMYM and HIMYF is established in a way that resembles cinematic universes, attempting to provide a "depth of experience that motivates more consumption" (Jenkins 95, 96). For instance, in episode 9, one of HIMYF's characters goes to a job interview at Goliath Corporation, which presumably is the company that owns Goliath National Bank, where Barney,

⁷ Both characters also make a brief cameo on episode 9 of the series, "Jay Street," but their appearance is not contextualised until episode 10.

Marshall, and Ted all worked at one point in their lives. It is safe to assume that these nods to HIMYM's narrative universe will continue in HIMYF's following seasons.⁸

From the moment she is seen in HIMYF, Robin is established as a character who has her life in order. She has a successful career, seems to be in a good place overall, and provides some advice to Sophie that turn out to be the defining theme of the whole episode. She starts off by telling Sophie that she would very much like to hear about her love life, using the line "Back in the day, my friends and I wasted years in this very bar." While the line itself refers to HIMYM in its entirety, the camera also cuts to the booth Robin and her friends used to sit in, invoking a sense of belonging and nostalgia within the audience.

As Sophie explains the premature "I love you," she received, Robin takes Sophie through her own experience with Ted, using the line "I had a guy say 'I love you' on our first date." Sophie believes this guy she is hearing of sounds like "a real piece of work," but Robin clarifies that he is "a good piece of work" and laughs, reminding to the audience of the "will they won't they" dynamic between Ted and Robin that goes on for multiple seasons, and hinting to the possibility that they are still together. She does not provide details of their relationship with Ted, because this is something the audience, who by that time have started to reminisce what went on between Robin and Ted in the span of nine seasons, already knows about. On the other hand, as she gives Sophie advice, it is apparent to those who know HIMYM's storyline that she is also in a way summarising what she experienced herself, the line "Do not make decisions out of fear," being a direct confirmation of this tie between what she is saying to Sophie and the decisions she made in HIMYM. In the end, another piece of advice by Robin, "Timing is everything," turns into the main idea – and title – of the episode – as well as the whole season – as Sophie fails to make things work with Jessie but sees Ian return from his research trip in Australia.

One could argue that storytelling is a way to reboot time itself because fiction offers endless possibilities. For instance, one could write a story in 2022 and include a character from 2050, who tells a story that takes place again in 2022. In fact, HIMYM, HIMYD, and HIMYF all use this feature of storytelling, both for comedic – the references to the cultural milieu – and dramatic – building up suspense before revealing who the parent is or how a certain character ended up as the parent – effect. The final episode of HIMYF's first season also sees the idea of "timing is everything" permeating into the choice of editing, since it ties The Captain and Becky's seemingly out-of-context marital dispute to Ian's return. While the father is still not confirmed at the time of writing this article, it can be presumed that season 2 will see Sophie start a new relationship with Ian. When the time comes, every element in the story serves its purpose.

Conclusion

This article began with an inquiry on the very existence of reboots and intends to end on a question that is equally broad and difficult to answer: How do networks⁹ decide which TV shows to pick up? There are a number of factors at play here and most would go beyond the scope of this discussion. Perhaps, timing really is everything and that is what led to networks favouring HIMYF over HIMYD – 2014 was simply too soon for a HIMYM reboot. Perhaps, HIMYD would have been embraced by HIMYM's audience had it been given a chance beyond its pilot episode. Then again, if one is to compare the choices HIMYM, HIMYD, and HIMYF make in narrative and narration, they can arrive at the conclusion that the two reboots' respective networks have preferred more direct connections with and references to the original content, which serve as fan service and are used to get audiences further engaged with the new series.

With audience studies acknowledging the importance of interpretation and engagement, fans have gained more power than they ever had in the past. Ensuring their satisfaction became so important for creators that acts of fan service, featuring direct connections with something else the fans are familiar with,

⁸ The season two premiere, which aired on 24 January 2023, also featured a cameo by Barney.

⁹ The word "network" is used interchangeably as the channels or streaming platforms that air these series.

became a cultural phenomenon, dominating the creative scene in both film and television. After carrying out a textual analysis of the pilot episode of three series, as well as the final episode of the first season of HIMYF, it can be seen that HIMYF is more invested in fan service than HIMYD and establishes more direct ties with HIMYM, much to the satisfaction of its network and fans.

It should be noted that many elements within both HIMYD and HIMYF invoke HIMYM in one way or another. A number of examples can be given here, from the fact that they use the phrase “how I met your,” to their premise that features a parent telling their kids the story of how they met their significant other, or from how certain effects are used for transitions to how the cultural milieu can be deduced from the content, and to how an idea of “finding the one” is promoted by resorting to different metaphors. HIMYF takes these similarities a step further, placing its characters inside the same spaces once inhabited by HIMYM’s gang – the flat, Wesleyan University, the bar –, referring to objects that are central to HIMYM’s plots – a set of swords and a pineapple – and featuring cameos by HIMYM’s characters. Even though the audience has to wait for ten episodes for some of these to happen, which could have also been the case for HIMYD had it been picked up, the clear difference in approach to the original content and fans between HIMYD and HIMYF can also be seen in their respective pilot episodes.

Not long after the first episode aired, HIMYF was renewed for a second season, which will be twice as long as the first, comprising 20 episodes (Porter, “‘How I Met Your Father’ Earns”). This suggests that both the network and fans are satisfied with it, which is also confirmed by Jordan Helman, head of scripted content for Hulu Originals, who has suggested that the show “has proven to be true appointment viewing that fans cannot get enough of week to week” (Porter). Critics with self-established ties to HIMYM have praised both the show’s pilot episode – “I realized that perhaps for the first time I am *specifically* the target audience of something” (Radulovic) – and the season finale – “Writers ... took the opportunity to deliver a heavy dose of nostalgia by including a perfectly-timed mix of *HIMYM* cameos and callbacks” (Gallucci).

As one of the managers in an SVOD platform, the fact that Helman refers to “appointment viewing,” which is typically associated with conventional TV and one-time TV programs such as sporting events (Conlin et al. 151), is quite noteworthy. Allocations – and manipulations – of time, discussed in the context of this article as a storytelling strategy employed by the creators and characters, are once again at play here, this time in terms of production and scheduling. While one would need a separate article to breakdown each ramification of this approach, it may be argued that streaming services are after varying levels of audience engagement: one that favours the *amount* of time spent on the platform, as seen in practices of binge-watching for all-in-one releases, and another that favours the *quality* of time spent on the platform, which shows a recurring commitment, as seen in the re-establishment of audience ties with the – original and rebooted – content for weekly releases.

Abbreviations

HIMYD	How I Met Your Dad
HIMYF	How I Met Your Father
HIMYM	How I Met Your Mother

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Ethical statement: The conducted research is not related to either human or animal use.

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