

Television Out of Time: Watching Cult Shows On Download

Will Brooker

On 4 November, 2005, Keith, a fan of the TV show *Lost*, visited a gallery in Cleveland. He found a set of business cards lying innocently in small stacks, and picked one up to examine it. It looked like a lottery ticket, with a tropical resort vacation as the prize. Against a background of an Oceanic Airlines logo and a beach scene, the card read ‘Match your numbers at theislandiswaiting.com.’ and ‘The Island is waiting.’ He scratched the foil off with a fingertip and found a set of digits: 4. 8. 15. 16. 23. 42.



He recognised the numbers. To him, they weren't just numbers, but ‘The Numbers’, the recurring sequence from the first two seasons of *Lost*. He recognised the brand name, too. It was an Oceanic flight that crashed in the first episode, leaving the survivors stranded. Of course, he knew what the Island was. Keith went straight to

his computer, scanned the cards and uploaded them to his favourite discussion board, sharing them with a community of fellow fans he'd never met. The next episode of *Lost* wasn't scheduled to be broadcast for another six days, but for Keith and his online friends, the story and its fictional world could occupy their whole week, seeping into their everyday lives both on and off the computer. Following cult television is now a lifestyle experience.

This chapter focuses on the practice of watching cult series as video files on a personal computer. It suggests key ways in which this experience differs from the conventional viewing of broadcast television at the time scheduled by the network, usually in a shared living area, on a television set some distance from the viewer. My chapter is based on the premise that watching a television show as a digital file on a PC screen, with text and extratextual materials adjacent to each other as equivalent windows, is quite distinct from that of watching the show on one screen, as live TV, and the internet on another. Downloaded TV gives the viewer the ability to freeze the fiction and click just a millimetre to the left to travel down 'rabbit-holes' into ARG spin-offs and sim-sites, or minimise the show to check the current frame against an online reference, then grab the image, paste it into a discussion board and wait for the replies.

And while the forensic analysis permitted by downloads is also integral to DVD viewing, by the time a show like *Lost* reaches DVD, the season is complete, a finished text. The case is closed, the detection is over. Watching on download, by contrast, combines the ability to study each shot in close detail with the intensity and

immediacy of live TV – there is an urgency to the study, to the sharing of new information, the solving of puzzles and the opportunity for community kudos, before the next episode comes online for download in a week’s time.

My key case study is the cult US TV series *Lost* with contextual reference to the BBC TV series *Life on Mars* (2006-2007), the three most recent seasons of *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2005-2007) and the first season of NBC’s *Heroes* (NBC Universal Television, 2006-7). For examples of audience response, I draw mainly on the discussion board Barbelith, www.barbelith.com, whose ‘Film, TV and Theatre’ forum is one sub-section of a broad online community.

OVERFLOW

Watching a show on a PC, using a device like Windows Media Player, the TV ‘screen’ is just one window among others – internet sites both fan-based and commercial; music libraries and podcasts; chat programs like MSN. The TV ‘screen’ can be part of a larger collage, including webcams, iTunes, chatrooms, MySpace and YouTube. Though the show’s borders are protected from and isolated from other television, they are threatened by, even invaded by, these other distractions. Some of these surrounding windows may have the same effect as the interruptions on television as the viewer zaps channels or loses attention during a commercial break, creating what we might call an *interflow* – where the TV ‘screen’, a media player, is in competition with various other equally-demanding ‘screens’ within a larger screen, and the viewer’s attention shifts from one window to the other within the broader frame, perhaps pausing the TV text to answer a chat request or listen to a specific

track, then returning to the narrative. The viewer is creating his or her own audio-visual montage, and the television text becomes, potentially, even more choppy and fragmented than it would during conventional broadcast.

However, this collage of smaller screens within the PC frame can also intensify the viewer's involvement in the fiction, and enable a more active engagement with the text. This is the cross-platform convergence I called *overflow*¹, whereby dedicated internet sites (usually officially produced) extend the fictional world through simulation – for instance, a tourist site for the imaginary school, church and restaurants from *Dawson's Creek* (Outerbank Entertainment, 1998-2003) – and invite the viewer's deeper involvement through interaction with the text's location and characters – for instance, on a forum where participants could talk to the fictional website developers of BBC2's *Attachments* (World Productions, 2000).² Henry Jenkins dubs the phenomenon 'transmedia storytelling', taking *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) as a case study that 'unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole... a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comic; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction.'³ He dates the first transmedia story of this type back to *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick/Eduardo Sanchez) in 1999, and presents as another example the complex network of internet-based puzzles that launched as a cross-promotion for Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.* (2001) but, to the code-cracking community involved in it, became far more immersive and important than the movie

itself.⁴ *Donnie Darko*, directed by Richard Kelly in the same year, was backed up by a similar, albeit smaller, online labyrinth of cryptic challenges.

The overflow phenomenon has increased since I first wrote about it in 2001, and almost every mainstream TV show will now at least pay lip-service to internet immersion, offering some official online reference to its fictional world, while a few will develop into hugely complex cross-platform universes. For example, *Doctor Who*'s web presence offers downloadable trailers, behind the scenes footage and games (on a system of scrolling menus that creates further windows within the window, and invites an internal wander around the website's information and distractions, a microcosm of the broader pattern I suggested above). However, many of the weekly episodes were backed up with what we might call *sim sites*: web pages that, rather than being 'about' *Doctor Who* as a television programme, treated its mythos as fact and allowed an exploration of the corporation that created the Cybermen, the stately home Torchwood House, or the school that was overrun by Krillitane aliens. These sites went online as the relevant episode was broadcast, without fanfare or announcement, and could only be discovered by diligent viewers who typed names or locations from that week's show into a search engine.⁵ James Goss, who produces the BBC's cult television tie-in sites, described this complex network as 'the most ambitious online fictional world ever.'⁶

Lost, however, went even further, pushing the boundaries to create not just a world, but an alternate universe that overlapped and merged with our own. In April 2006, ABC announced 'The Lost Experience', a broadly cross-platform interactive

extension of the show's narrative world, described by its producers as a 'hybrid between content and marketing'⁷ and by its players as an ARG, or alternate reality game. Alternate reality gaming is also known as 'beasting', after the pioneering *A.I.* (Steven Spielberg, 2001) project (dubbed *The Beast* by its creators), and 'unfiction'. This latter term lends its name to an online community that serves as a central hub for ongoing puzzle-solving. Unfiction.com defines ARGs as

an interactive fusion of creative writing, puzzle-solving, and team-building, with a dose of role playing thrown in. It utilizes several forms of media in order to pass clues to the players, who solve puzzles in order to win pieces of the story being played out. Many times, the puzzles that must be solved cannot be solved alone. This genre of game almost requires participation in a group or community that works together to win past the more difficult hurdles.⁸

'The Lost Experience' was unusual even within ARG culture. It widened the scope of media overflow from internet puzzles (such as *The Hanso Foundation*, another simulation-site for a fictional organisation) to an astonishing range of cross-platform texts: TV advertisements sponsored by Sprite, Jeep and Verizon that linked to *Hanso/Lost*-themed websites and integrated the show's mythos and mysteries with the product's branding; telephone numbers with pre-recorded voicemail messages; advertisements in real-world newspapers advertising a novel (*Bad Twin*) by a fictional character (Gary Troup) within the show; fictional interviews with this author on the Amazon and Barnes & Noble websites; the novel itself, which became a bestseller; online memos from Hugh MacIntyre, the fictional head of the Hanso

Foundation, to the real-life president of Hyperion books, calling for the pulping of *Bad Twin*; an appearance from the fictional character Hugh MacIntyre, Hanso's Communications Director, on the real-life talk show *Jimmy Kimmel Live*; messages hidden in the source code of the Hanso Foundation site; and a stunt at the 22 July ComicCon convention in San Diego, where an actress interrupted a session with challenges about the Hanso Foundation and gave a website address before being escorted out. The website was Hansoexposed.com, and the actress was playing Rachel Blake, a fictional hacker and blogger who, within the alternate reality of 'The Lost Experience', was attempting to take down the Hanso Foundation and its president, Thomas Mittelwerk. Visitors to Hansoexposed.com were led into the final stage of the game, which involved finding seventy 'glyphs' – enigmatic, iconic images with accompanying codes – and entering them into the website to release seventy sections of video footage, out of its proper sequence.⁹ (For more on this see Derek Johnson, 'The Fictional Institutions of Lost,' in this volume). Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the puzzle is the way the glyphs were hidden; and, in turn, that they were found at all. The completed video has been uploaded by fans to Youtube: www.youtube.com/timdorr.

Rachel claims on Hansoexposed.com that she 'CAN'T TRUST THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA - CAN'T TRUST THE HANSO FOUNDATION DOESN'T HAVE ITS HOOKS IN EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM. SO I'M HIDING IT - EVERYWHERE ON THE WEB,' but in fact the glyphs were scattered not just on dedicated websites and specially-created blogs, but in various media locations – the armbands worn by the show's producers at ComicCon, a mug on the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* show, a

Channel 4 broadcast of *Lost* – and even in real life. Glyphs were discovered in Sydney shop and hotel windows, in London’s Greenwich Park, and in Times Square, New York. A final website address was provided on the wrappers of ‘Apollo’ chocolate bars – a brand created for and featured in the show – which were given out at key locations and specified times in the UK, US and Australia.

This overflow of the television fiction into geographical reality – to use the now-quaint 1990s terms, from ‘cyberspace’ into ‘meatspace’ – is still rare at the time of writing. The business cards Keith discovered, like the glyphs scattered in Sydney and Greenwich, are intriguing evidence of this more recent tendency for fiction to spill over into physical reality. Watching *Lost* on download, with the ‘TV screen’ adjacent to other internet windows (YouTube, Lostpedia, Unfiction) clearly assists this process of deep involvement and sustained detection over months at a time. The viewer – or we should perhaps use another word, such as player or participant – can delve like a hacker into the levels of the show’s intrigue, then return with a single click to the neighbouring window where the primary text, whether fan video, *Lost* episode, chat show or advertisement, is freeze-framed for analysis. Just as the viewer has become something else, so the show has also transformed, into something that resembles a PC game but goes beyond those boundaries too, as it crosses over into real life and erodes the boundaries between fact and fiction – a sign, perhaps, of the extreme overflow that will become increasingly more common with cult television in future.

But while *Lost* remains remarkable even now for its ambitious use of media other than the internet (newspapers, books, conventions, broadcast television), much of the

detection involved could have been carried out online, with patient investigation of various websites – and crucially, though some clues lay outside the internet, they were immediately filmed or photographed and uploaded to online discussion communities, where they could be shared. In part, glyphs discovered in real-life were rushed onto the internet so the finder could gain bragging rights and credit, but the challenge also required a global, group engagement rather than a solitary effort. Seventy clues hidden across multiple websites, in London, New York and Sydney, could not feasibly be tracked down by one person alone: ‘The Lost Experience’ overflowed offline, but solving the puzzle depended on the internet.

After the event, *Lostpedia.com* recorded all the resources and abilities needed to solve the ARG: among the diverse qualifications were ‘working knowledge of trigonometry’, ‘Korean language fluency’, ‘subscriptions to *People Magazine*’ and ‘Vigenère decoder’, but an online connection headed the list. It came with an important postscript: ‘These are the tools used by the “The Lost Experience” community to solve the puzzles. The expectation was not that one individual working alone could or would solve all the clues by themselves.’¹⁰ This is the phenomenon described by Jenkins (after Pierre Lévy) as ‘collective intelligence’ – ‘the ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members.’¹¹ This is the internet community as *hive mind*, pooling the abilities, knowledge and global resources of its members into a formidable problem-solving unit. Jenkins’ case study is the group of ‘spoilers’ who draw on their contacts with travel agents, government officials and satellite companies to work out what will happen on the CBS reality show *Survivor* (Mark Burnett Productions, 2000-) before broadcast, pitting their wits

against producer Mark Burnett.¹² The notion of a group mind, a pooling of resources, a sense of many-heads-better-than-one, permeates the internet – from review websites like *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic*, which offer a score for films and novels based on an average of all the available opinions, to *Wikipedia*, the free, open-source authority written and edited by thousands of volunteers.¹³ *Barbelith* itself runs through an “adhocracy”¹⁴ of ‘distributed moderation’, whereby no decision can be made without a general agreement from volunteer-administrators: a strategy aimed to ‘alleviate the possibilities of abuse and balance work-loads between [the community’s] citizenry.’¹⁵ As television narratives become increasingly transmedia, evolving into immersive worlds and challenges beyond the screen’s boundary, they increasingly become a matter for collective viewing and discussion, rather than individual engagement; but they also, as I’ll explore further below, start to blur the boundary between viewer and participant.

ONLINE COMMUNITY

The TV ‘screen’, as media player, sits alongside many other windows. One of those windows is often a community discussion board. A significant part of the cult television experience involves sharing theories, bouncing ideas off fellow fans, picking apart the last episode and guessing about those to come – and this has been the case since the early, pre-Web days of Usenet newsgroups in the late 1980s.¹⁶ With the TV show playing or freeze-framed on the computer screen, the discussion board is obviously in much closer proximity to the user/viewer than in the conventional set-up, with the TV and computer in separate rooms; and it holds the same textual status,

as a neighbouring window. Because of the discrepancies between broadcast schedules in different countries and on different channels, however, *Lost*'s online communities become fragmented; broken down into subcategories to avoid spoilers for those viewers who are watching earlier episodes in the same season. Those watching on download have to fit into one or other of these categories, depending on their own, self-governed, viewing schedule of the available episodes. If a show is being downloaded as it's broadcast, then the fan experiences no such disadvantage – he or she is watching the episode just after others have watched it on TV, or may even watch it conventionally on television, then download the text for more detailed study – but the *Lost* follower who downloads a season in bulk for 'binge' viewing may find him or herself isolated, out of time, with no obvious place within an online community that, perhaps quaintly, remains structured around traditional broadcast schedules and global geography.¹⁷

Barbelith, for instance, features *Lost* discussion threads for US viewers, UK viewers (on Channel 4, and the digital channel E4), Irish viewers, and those 'website viewers', or user/participants, who choose to explore the story through its overflow sites. Watching on download can put the lone viewer in an isolated position – Abercrombie and Longhurst's atomised 'fan' category – and to join the 'cultists' and 'enthusiasts', textually productive within a community network, he or she has to adapt.¹⁸ In other words, to be part of the collective intelligence, you have to pace yourself along with the majority.

The forums are often given to discussing the relative pros and cons of watching drip by drip, following the producers' intended rhythm of weekly episodes – which are, frustratingly, often broken by broadcast TV's idiosyncrasies – or in larger chunks, consuming *Lost* in marathon sessions on the PC. The former retains the intended pattern of suspense and cliffhangers, gives a sense of 'appointment television', with the traditional excitement of sitting down at a certain time, knowing that millions of others are doing exactly the same – offering a feeling of community even if the TV viewer is sitting alone.¹⁹ Following the scheduled broadcasts also keeps the viewer in sync with the carefully-scheduled cross-platform overflow such as Hanso commercials, chat-show appearances and newspaper advertisements. Despite predictions at the turn of the century that 'appointment television' would soon be 'a thing of the past'²⁰ keeping to the producers' intended timing has its benefits, and its followers. Resisting the producers' scheduling, though, brings its own advantages. One online fan, posting in February 2005, during the early months of Lost's first season, pitied anyone still tied to the traditional practice of weekly viewing. 'E-n: I can't imagine what having to wait weeks for each episode must be like. Watching them in a week long info burst is a fantastic way to catch all the little mysteries that pass by.'²¹ In October 2005, another viewer complained bitterly about being dependent on the scattergun, sporadic broadcast schedule. 'Yotsuba and Benjamin: Only three new episodes between now and January. I fucking hate you sometimes, Television.'²²

During February 2006, fans debated the relative advantages of both forms, at length:

Yawn: Watched the first 10 fuckers o season two t'other day. Excellent. Really excellent. The 'other 48 days' was harrowing man, fucking grim. Once a week never again.

Boboss: I like the weekly format because of what the spaces in between episodes make possible: the speculation and the anticipation, coming to communities like this and chatting about last week's cliffhanger, going through frame by frame trying to spot Easter eggs. People think they want the answers now, and getting a slew of answers would be very pleasurable, but only momentarily.

Keith Hypnopompia: Totally agree, Boboss. It's more like taking leisurely time with a good book, which is the main thing I enjoy about plot/arc driven television these days.

Boboss: The book analogy holds, but I was working on a post earlier that compared enjoying Lost to delaying orgasm...

Yawn: I'm usually with you on this - but gorging on ten episodes in two blocks of five was really fucking enjoyable. I'm thinking it'd be cool to wait till the rest of the series is done and then do another binge.

Sleazeration: I'm with Yawn on this one - If I hadn't seen the first 12 episodes back to back I probably wouldn't still be watching this...²³

By March, some of the contributors who had previously defended the intended structure of weekly broadcasts were starting to change their minds, frustrated by the American television practice of annual 'sweeps'.

sleazeration: Isn't it going to be three weeks till the next episode? Will you even remember that your interest in the show has been rekindled in a month or so time...

Robert B: 3 weeks? What's going on with this season? I watched the first on DVD so, was it like this as well? Sporadic...

Boboss: American network television is what's going on with this show.

I think the problem effectively comes down to the Sweeps (a key feature of the US ratings system), the results of which have a significant knock on effect for the network's advertising revenue. In order to attract high viewing figures over the Sweeps periods (February, May, July and November) the networks pull out the stops and air their most popular shows - or shows that are predicted to be very popular. Hence the fact that Lost gets spread out weirdly across the year. Personally I think this kind of programming does shows no favours whatsoever in that it could well damage them over the long term.²⁴

Downloading, then, has the disadvantage of placing the fan outside of the scheduled structure and therefore outside an obvious community – obliging him or her to catch up with or slow down to join existing discussions, which are still dominated by weekly episodes. The comments above suggest, though, that this focus on the broadcast text may be undergoing a gradual shift, as viewers realise that a loyalty to

the network schedule often results in frustrating waits between episodes. If the networks fail to keep to the narrative's intended rhythm, then fans will have to find that rhythm for themselves, opting, according to their own tastes, between immersive 'binge' sessions and more leisurely, weekly doses that respect, and try accurately to reproduce, the producers' intended cliffhangers and paced arcs. In some cases, the fan is even obliged to re-order the episodes to retain the intended narrative. Joss Whedon's Firefly (Twentieth Century Fox Television, 2002) was originally broadcast in the wrong order and cancelled before its completion; re-viewing the series on download enabled the show's followers to shape the story in the way Whedon originally planned it. We should remember though, that this is not a case of having to choose one form or the other, whether download or broadcast. Boboss' stated preference for weekly episodes, with the space between each instalment filled by discussion and 'going through frame by frame trying to spot Easter eggs,' highlights the fact that the traditional 'appointment' with a television show, as part of a broader community all watching at the same time, can be combined with – can be the overture and prelude to – a slower and more careful study of the same episode on downloaded video during the week, as part of a more specialised online community group.

FORENSIC DETECTION

I suggested that the nature of the download TV 'screen' as one feature of a broader interface (alongside search windows and sim-sites) encourages, or at least enables, entry through those multiple *windows* – which in this case become portals, or in ARG

terminology, ‘rabbit-holes’ – into a complex, semi-fictional world that transforms a ‘show’ (something we sit back and watch) into an experience (something we participate in; something we live with, like a journey or a vacation).

The nature of the downloaded text, with immediate, crystal-clear freeze-frame, and the proximity of the viewer to the screen – a matter of inches, rather than the full space of a domestic living area between the TV set and the sofa – also encourages and invites close analysis and forensic detection. DVD technology has already enabled this frame-by-frame study, complete with rewind and slow motion. Prior to DVD and download culture, dedicated fans managed close analysis of cult texts from video and even from broadcast TV as it was screened, scribbling frantic notes on yellow pads and, as Henry Jenkins’ study of Twin Peaks followers suggested in 1995, ‘making the rest of us feel stupid’²⁵ Like *overflow*, then, the forensic detective analysis of cult TV can be dated back at least to the early 1990s. Jenkins notes that

Hill Street Blues (1981-1987) was the first major success story of the videotape era... *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) was one of the first new cult television series to develop an important internet following. These series, with their ever-more elaborate use of story arcs and program history, rewarded a viewer who carefully scrutinized the images using the freeze-frame function, who watched and rewatched the episodes on video tape, and who used the internet as a vehicle for discussion with a larger interpretive community and the Web as a means of annotation.²⁶

Watching the TV text as a downloaded video clip simply facilitates this approach, arguably making forensic analysis a wider practice, not just confined to what Jenkins' Twin Peaks study suggests was an obsessive minority even among newsgroup users from 1990.

This close analysis – what Laura Mulvey²⁷ calls “interactive spectatorship”, reconfiguring the viewer into an *editor* – is frequently invited, even necessitated by scenes in recent cult television, which involve fast-moving montages of subliminal images and background details that require freeze-frame and enhancement. Viewers, in some cases, have to use this method of textual detection to piece together clues to narrative and character – suggesting in turn that cult television shows may now be shot and edited with an eye to this specific mode of viewing, just as feature films, according to Aaron Barlow, are currently made for the DVD experience (close analysis, rewind, directors' commentaries) rather than for the less profitable market, and very different aesthetic, of conventional cinema viewing.²⁸

Jenkins writes along similar lines about 1990s television:

The character of American television has been fundamentally altered as television producers have begun to incorporate a more sophisticated understanding of the active audience into their production decisions. The result has been the conscious production of cult-friendly programs like *The X-Files*, *The Simpsons*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Xena*, and *Babylon 5*, among many, many others. These series build in opportunities for audience participation and elaboration, recognizing our pleasure in backstory, in-jokes, foreshadowing, and

encrypted information; adding fuel to our Net discussions; providing rationales for rereading; offering raw materials for our cultural production; and using the online world to provide unprecedented access to the behind-the-scenes creative decisions shaping the series' development.²⁹

As Jenkins suggests, rereading and decrypting information, the process of close analysis, and the investigation of dedicated internet sites are closely related, bound together in this kind of fan engagement with cult television. Like the surrounding intertexts of 'The Lost Experience', and to a lesser extent the *Doctor Who* fictional online world, the sequences that require freeze-framed analysis are built in to the text, part of the puzzle constructed by producers for the viewers to solve; part of the enjoyable game between creator and fan. Frequently, the two processes overlap, again suggesting the importance of having internet and TV screen on adjacent windows – a freeze-frame can be grabbed, pasted into a graphics program, uploaded to a discussion board and analysed by other fans, or decoded with the help of further search windows and websites.

'Live Together, Die Alone' (2:23), for instance, briefly showed hieroglyphics on the countdown timer in an underground bunker. The image was swiftly posted online for analysis³⁰, linked to a translation³¹ and analysed on several other discussion forums, including Barbelith:

Buttergun: those ARE Egyptian Hieroglyphs. I'm getting my PhD translating them. The true meaning of the message also depends on the placement of the glyphs, and their order. It can only mean "cause to die" or "death" if there is a

glyph of a man lying down. And since the feather of Maat (justice, truth, balance) was revealed, it could not have any meaning related to death.³²

The same process of freeze-framing, online research, analysis and discussion, combining individual study and group sharing of ideas, recurred for many sequences within *Lost* – such as the appearance of the Dharma Initiative logos (Shark, Arrow, Swan) in the background or fleetingly within shots, glimpses of *The Others*, the CGI smoke, backwards or distorted speech. The ‘Blast Doors’ provided particularly rich material: featured for only a few seconds in ‘Lockdown’ (2:17), when a map was revealed under temporary black light, they were pored over, reworked and cleaned up, with the handwritten scrawl deciphered and the Latin captions translated.³³

On occasion, some fans complained sardonically about the show’s increasing reliance on off-air puzzle-solving:

All over is squiggly writing and arrows and such. Great. Something else I won’t be able to fully appreciate because I won’t buy a television that costs more than my first car, and I don’t have Adobe Photoshop at home.³⁴

At other times, the enthusiasm for spotting ‘Easter eggs’ or half-hidden visual clues led community members to search, self-parodically, for meaning in continuity errors:

Boboss: Anyone notice a gloved hand poking into frame during the final horse scene? An animal trainer perhaps?

Keith Hypnopompia: haha, i didn't notice that. i'll have to check it out again.
unless... OMG! TEH OTHERS SET TEH HORSE LOOSE TO MESS WITH
KATE!!!@@#!!!³⁵

Lost's third season continued this dynamic, with online communities rapidly spotting every possible clue, however briefly glimpsed. Some viewers were happy to store the knowledge away, trusting it would be relevant later, while others, frustrated by season two's unsolved mysteries, declared that they had been pushed too far: although this didn't seem to stop them watching, or contributing to the discussion.

Buttergun: The big 'clue' this week was the photo of the old lady from the previous Desmond-centered episode. She was seen briefly in a photo on the head monk's desk, standing beside the head monk himself.

I'm sure this is causing much 'holy shit!!!' among *Lost*-freaks, but to me...I think it's yet another example of the producers giving bullshit 'clues' which will ultimately lead nowhere.

The thing is, it would be fine if *Lost* had been around for years and years and had a solid track record, ie the *Simpsons* – clever little jokes like this would be fine. But what with its disastrous second season and early third, with its slipping ratings, with its frustrating resistance to answer anything—combined with its easy reliance on spinning new threads – it just hasn't earned the right to be so clever.³⁶

Other fans, on other communities, retained their trust in the producers.

MelissaAndria, on *Television Without Pity*, logged the same background detail³⁷ and assumed without question that even the image's bad quality was intentional, without needing a reason.

Oh, rest assured. We were supposed to see it and and we were supposed to notice how badly it was photoshopped. Why? I haven't a clue.³⁸

While the producers had tested some viewers' patience too far, apparently planting clues with no payoff, some of the briefly-revealed details repaid close attention – enough to justify this painstaking forensic approach. *Lostpedia.com*'s entry on 'Satellite Phone' noted, of the episode 'Catch-22' (3:17):

They comment that the battery seems to be dead, but a closer examination of the screen shows the alert, 'Internal Error'... The phone was receiving a signal strength of 'three bars'.³⁹

The episode, 'The Brig' (3:19), confirmed that the phone worked after all: the TWOP posters had proved themselves one step ahead of Desmond, Charlie, Hurley and Jin, able to examine a key prop more carefully than the people on the island itself.

Again, the idea of the TV text as puzzle is not new – *Twin Peaks* is a celebrated example, but Dennis Potter's BBC drama *The Singing Detective* (1986) used very similar techniques of layered dream sequences, fantasies and flashbacks. What

distinguishes these more recent cult TV shows, apart from their central position in a broader network of pan-media, cross-platform texts, is the speed of the cutting, which in many cases requires analysis of extremely brief, almost subliminal shots, and the producers' awareness that many of the viewers have access to a discussion forum to pool ideas and engage in the enjoyable process of community puzzle-solving.⁴⁰

The technique of building themes or clues across a wider arc – *Lost*'s mysterious 'numbers' and Dharma logos, like *Doctor Who*'s seeding of *Bad Wolf*, *Torchwood* and *Mr Saxon* 'arc-words' across the 2006-2007 seasons, and the recurring, almost subliminal flashbacks in the 2006 season of *Life On Mars*– was also built, on an even grander scale of five seasons, into *Babylon 5* (Babylonian Productions, 1993-1998). Creator Michael Straczynski called this concept 'holographic storytelling':

Not side-by-side images, but *overlapping* images, like old fashioned photographic plates stacked up one on top of the other. Each has a piece of the whole picture. When you line them all up, one behind the other, and look through them all at once, you realize what the picture is. It's three-dimensional storytelling.⁴¹

Again, the concept itself is not new to 21st century television, or even 1990s television. What's notable is that this form of storytelling is becoming far more common. Just as 'overflow' and simulation sites were considered an experimental concept in 2000, and have now developed to the point where all shows extend the show beyond the primary text to some degree, and a few have extended into vastly complex, pan-media phenomena, so techniques that were considered auteurist

exceptions in 1986 (Dennis Potter), 1990 (David Lynch) and 1993 (Michael Straczynski) are now becoming integral to the most mainstream, popular, commercially-successful and long-running shows on British and American television.

The dedicated site for the commercial and critical hit show *Heroes* (Tailwind Productions, 2006-)⁴² includes an online graphic novel that expands on the events of last week's show, and a blog by one of its key characters, Hiro Nakamura, encouraging visitors' participation in the fiction. The comments treat Hiro as a real individual, and in turn place the fans at least part-way within the world of *Heroes*, positioning them as one of a vast crowd of minor characters within the extended story-world.

Nakamura-san,

I think I am a little bit like you, but opposite.

I have an office job and love Japan and Japanese popular culture.

Why do you love Star Trek when Yamato is so much better? ~_^

I am silly. Please forgive me! It is probably because Star Trek is different—in the same way you've always wanted to be different. To like Yamato is to be different here. Only a few people know about it.⁴³

Visitors can download desktop images and icons, and click on hidden points in the site's illustrations to read documents from the fictional universe. The most remarkable aspect of this site is that it's no longer remarkable – this is the bottom

level, the expected baseline of online presence for a mainstream television show, especially one with science fiction trappings and cult potential.

At a further remove, Claire Bennet (like Martha Jones from the 2007 season of *Doctor Who*) has a MySpace profile where visitors respond to her as a real friend and contact, again entering into the fiction and casting themselves as secondary-characters.

Oh my gosh your in the hospital! Get well soon.

Hi Claire. I am an associate of your father. Keep up the good work with your grades and cheerleading!

When you crashed with Brody into that wall I was inside the building and the collision knocked my monitor over and into my lap and I was electrocuted after my monitor exploded. Thanks jerk.⁴⁴

Barbelith's *Heroes*' fans, in the first month of broadcast, were already cross-referencing the TV text against their shared knowledge of comic book mythos (explaining the characters' powers through comparison to the DC and Marvel heroes Wolverine, Rogue and Amazo), screengrabbing and enhancing shadowy images of 'Future Hiro' to examine whether he was carrying a katana, and identifying the mysterious, iconic images – nicknamed the Helix and the Eclipse – that, like the Numbers and Bad Wolf, recur throughout the show's mise-en-scene. From January 19 2007, the show was supplemented with its own ARG, 'The Heroes 360 Experience', constructed from a new network of simulation sites – a viewer-

participant could now jump directly from Mr Saxon's election propaganda to Nathan Petrelli's congressional campaign webpages.⁴⁵

In the final week of May 2007, when both *Lost* and *Heroes* wrapped up their season finales, some online fans clearly felt that their forensic examination of freeze-framed images and digitally-enhanced screengrabs had paid off. The careful study of *Lost*'s satellite phone was fully rewarded when the working device played a key role in the season three finale; and by extension, this careful method of viewing also seemed fully validated: these were puzzles deliberately planted by the producers, rather than continuity errors or incidental details of prop and set design. However, there were still voices of dissent, with the forensic study method greeted by some discussion-board contributors with impatience or contempt. A week after *Lost* fansites slowed and froze the brief glimpses of a new character, Jacob ('The Man Behind the Curtain', [3:20]), running footage at half-speed and photoshopping the shadowy images of Jacob's profile with shots of John Locke (Terry O'Quinn)⁴⁶, *Heroes* discussion-threads attempted the same analytic comparison on a blink-and-miss-it shot of George Takei's eyes.

'There are some odd distortions from the surface of the blade that could be taken to be clues,' the author of this post offered. 'So here's something to fuel more speculation.'⁴⁷ 'For fuck's sake,' another fan snapped, clearly losing patience with not just this specific comparison, but the whole approach. '*Lost* and the internet have a lot to answer for.'⁴⁸

And on a broader note, acknowledging wearily that television has become far more than just the primary, 45 minute text, one contributor complained “Man, this makes watching a TV show *so much work*”.⁴⁹ This ‘work’, though, for those who chose to undertake it, is driven by the pleasures of detection and community – and increasingly, based around the crossing of the boundaries between fiction and the real world. As ARG clues spill over into physical space, so online visitors to characters’ websites now construct themselves as part of the story-world, and the primary texts are beginning to play with this dynamic.

Lost’s third season introduced teasing nods in dialogue that treated the viewer as a confidante – lines pre-empting or echoing fan discourse, such as an incredulous ‘who are you?’ when a previously-unseen character suddenly took centre stage, or ‘are you two arguing about your favorite Other?’, both delivered with a slight wink by the series’ charming con-man, Sawyer (Josh Holloway), subtly softened the boundary between the fiction and its viewers, flattering fans with another little in-joke, and drew them a little further into the story-world.⁵⁰ *Heroes*, similarly, tipped its hat knowingly to discussion-board etiquette by having one of its characters, comic-book artist Isaac Mendez, warn a fan not to post up any spoiler threads, and the ‘Blink’ (3:10) episode of *Doctor Who* offered another playful nod: a video-store owner discovers the Doctor in a series of DVD Easter Eggs and obsessively discusses the minutiae of the footage with his internet community.

Watching television on demand plays an important part in allowing us to enter the spaces of cult fiction, inviting us to join the community of characters as well as pooling our information and detective skills with a community of fans. As we click from a 'TV screen' to a fictional blog, interacting with the show's protagonist and our fellow viewers, participating in the narrative and solving the producers' puzzles, we can all be heroes. A note of caution, though, in conclusion. So far, none of the clues so carefully examined by these fan communities, whether selected from primary texts or discovered in secondary sources – translated maps, grabbed and enhanced flash-frames, supplementary websites, half-hidden arc-words or online graphic novels – have provided any information *fundamentally necessary* to understanding the plot or characters. They enable pleasurable puzzle-solving and community bonding, and allow dedicated fans to work out narrative developments in advance, but the information is invariably offered more directly, albeit some time later, to viewers who choose to watch more conventionally – that is, without recourse to screengrabs, sim-sites or discussion forums. The *Doctor Who* arc-words tease an alert observer and lead to online pockets of privileged information, but the series inevitably reveals all these secrets and more in the final two episodes of each season. *Life On Mars*' subliminal images extended the viewing experience by setting fans who chose to freeze-frame each flashback an enjoyable challenge each week, but they proved to be decorative rather than integral to the narrative arc, and this storytelling device was largely abandoned in the second series. 'The Lost Experience' filled in some historical gaps about the Hanso Organisation, but while this provided participants with a richer level of background detail and depth to the third season, understanding

that the Numbers were also called the Valenzetti Equation was entirely superfluous to the show's primary narrative: as the bunker imploded in season two's finale, translating the countdown's hieroglyphs also turned out to be an ultimately-pointless exercise. *Heroes* offered a teasing recurrence of its own icons, the Helix and the Eclipse, in the final minutes of its last episode ('How to Stop an Exploding Man'[1:23]) but its closing voiceover implied, with another knowing nod to fans, that the true reward in this puzzle-solving was community bonding:

The answer to this quest, this need to solve life's mysteries finally shows itself... so much struggle for meaning, for purpose. And in the end, we find it only in each other. Our shared experience of the fantastic and the mundane.

As watching on PC becomes more commonplace – NBC already offers streaming of *Heroes* to US website visitors, while in the UK Channel 4 began its *4 On Demand* service at the end of 2006, with both the BBC and ITV following suit in 2007 – we can predict that a TV show's hidden clues and supplementary material will become more integral to understanding the primary text. We are not yet at that stage, and TV's online overflow is still a bonus feature, an Easter Egg that offers the dedicated fan a treat on the side, rather than the meat of the narrative. Keith may have been thrilled to find the Numbers in his local gallery but so far they haven't added up to anything.

¹ Will Brooker, 'Living on *Dawson's Creek*: teen viewers, cultural convergence and television overflow,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4:4 (2001):456-472; see also Henry Jenkins, 'The poachers and the stormtroopers: cultural convergence in the digital age', <http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/pub/stormtroopers.htm>, (1998) reprinted in Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). For the ways in which DVDs have reconfigured television viewing see Matt Hills, Matt, 'From the Box in the Corner to the Box Set on the Shelf: 'TVIII' and the Cultural/Textual Valorisations of DVD,' in *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 5:1 (2007): 41-60 and Derek Kompare, 'Publishing flow: DVD box sets and the reception of television,' *Television and New Media* 7:4 (2006): 335-360.

² See Will Brooker, 'Overflow and audience,' in W. Brooker and D. Jermyn, eds., *The Audience Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 322-334

³ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 96-7

⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, pp. 123-5

⁵ The concept had already been trialled through the BBC's 'Jamie Kane' online game, which went live in August 2005 and was later linked to *Doctor Who*'s Deffry Vale school website. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/jamiekane/index.shtml>

⁶ *Doctor Who Magazine* #367: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Who_tie-in_websites

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_Experience

⁸ <http://www.unfiction.com/history/>

⁹ The phenomenon has echoes of William Gibson's 2003 science fiction novel *Pattern Recognition*, in which a cult following has emerged around footage fragments.

¹⁰ http://www.lostpedia.com/wiki/The_Lost_Experience#Necessary_tools

¹¹ See Pierre Lévy (trans. Robert Bononno), *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (New York: Plenum Press, 1997), pp. 13-19; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, pp. 26-7

¹² See also Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell, 'Speculation on spoilers: *Lost* fandom, narrative consumption and rethinking textuality,' *Particip@tions* 4:1(2007)

¹³ Similarly, The Straight Dope website provides answers to submitted questions, its information supplied by a community nicknamed 'The Teeming Millions'. Digg.com bookmarks, highlights and logs other internet sites of interest, based on a non-hierarchical, democratic voting system, while the slogan for collective Q & A site Metafilter.org is 'querying the hive mind'. And when the Beast was finally completed, the creators pulled back the curtain to reveal not a single wizard or gamesmaster but a team, the Puppetmasters: the puzzle-setters, as well as the solvers, were a collective. An ARG that constructs and plays out across a fictional universe requires one hive-mind pitted against another.

¹⁴ See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 251

¹⁵ http://www.barbelith.com/faq/index.php/Main_Page

¹⁶ See Henry Jenkins, 'Do you enjoy making the rest of us feel stupid?: alt.tv.twinpeaks, the trickster author, and viewer mastery,' in David Lavery, ed., *Full of Secrets* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 51, and Susan J. Clerc, 'DDEB, GATB, MPPB, and Ratboy: *The X-*

Files' media fandom, online and off,' in D. Lavery, A. Hague and M. Cartwright, eds., *Deny All Knowledge* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 36

¹⁷ See also Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 141

¹⁸ Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences* (London: Sage Publications: London, 1998)

¹⁹ See Roger Aden, *Popular Stories and Promised Lands* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), p. 80

²⁰ See Phillip Swann, *TV.Com: How Television is Shaping Our Future* (New York: TV Books, 2000), quoted in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 75

²¹ Barbelith: Lost (US) thread <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/19064/from/105>

²² Barbelith: Lost (US) thread <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/19064/from/385>

²³ Barbelith: Lost (US) thread <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/19064/from/735>

²⁴ Barbelith: Lost (US) thread <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/19064/from/875>

²⁵ Jenkins, 'Do you enjoy making the rest of us feel stupid: alt.tv.twinpeaks, the trickster author, and viewer mastery,' p. 59

²⁶ Henry Jenkins, 'Foreword' in K. Lancaster, Interacting with Babylon 5 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. xvi

²⁷ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 26

²⁸ See Aaron Barlow, *The DVD Revolution* (Westport, Ct: Praeger Publishers, 2005), p. 9

²⁹ Jenkins, "Foreword," p. xvii

³⁰ See Flight 815, http://flight815.blogspot.com/2006_02_01_flight815_archive.html

³¹ See <http://815.lemon-red.org/glyphsdie.jpg>

³² Barbelith: Lost (US) thread, <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/19064/from/805>

³³ See Lostpedia.com, http://www.lostpedia.com/wiki/Blast_Door_Map

³⁴ Daniel, recap of ‘Lockdown’ episode,

<http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/articles/content/a910/index-8.html>

³⁵ Barbelith: Lost (US) thread <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/19064/from/630>

³⁶ Barbelith: Lost (US) thread <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/19064/from/1505>

³⁷ See http://www.lostpedia.com/wiki/Image:3x17_Ms_Hawking_Picture.jpg

³⁸ Television without Pity: Lost General Gabbery

<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?s=537c62f33577d827aecc277f2208aa98&showtopic=3153226>

³⁹ Lostpedia.com: http://www.lostpedia.com/wiki/Satellite_phone

⁴⁰ Jenkins states that producers monitor *Television Without Pity*’s boards to gauge the reaction to plot twists. *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, p. 2

⁴¹ Straczynski, cited in Kurt Lancaster, *Interacting with Babylon 5* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 15

⁴² The show proved a surprise hit within its first month. *Variety* declared that it was ‘dominating its broadcast competition...the highest regular-slot score [among 18-49 year-olds] for a first-year drama in the past two seasons.’ (Rick Kissell, ‘*Heroes* Hot For Peacock,’ 24 October, 2006, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117952515.html?categoryid=14&cs=1>) By May 2007 it had won a host of awards and honours, including a place in the American Film Institute’s top ten shows of the year, and its cast members were celebrated among *Time* magazine’s ‘People Who

Mattered,' (12 December, 2006:

<http://www.time.com/time/personoftheyear/2006/people/16.html>)

⁴³ Cavin, post on *Heroes* official site, <http://www.nbc.com/Heroes/>

⁴⁴ Comments at <http://www.myspace.com/clairebennet>

⁴⁵ See <http://www.votepetrelli.com/>

⁴⁶ <http://losteastereggs.blogspot.com/2007/05/11-frames-of-jacob.html>

⁴⁷ <http://forum.rpg.net/showpost.php?p=7303501&postcount=361>

⁴⁸ Barbelith: Heroes thread <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/25100/from/735>

⁴⁹ Barbelith: Heroes thread <http://www.barbelith.com/topic/25100/from/35>
