

# **Transmedia Storytelling in Television 2.0**

## **Strategies for Developing Television Narratives Across Media Platforms**

### **Abstract**

In the era of convergence, television producers are developing transmedia narratives to cater to consumers who are willing to follow their favorite shows across multiple media channels. At the same time, there still remains a need to preserve an internally coherent television show for more traditional viewers. This thesis offers a model for how transmedia storytelling can coexist with and enhance a television narrative, using *Lost* as a case study. By building a world to be discovered, creating a hierarchy of strategic gaps, focusing on the unique capabilities of each extension, and using the “validation effect” to reward fans for their cross-media traversals, television/transmedia producers can provide a satisfying experience for hard-core and casual fans alike.

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## Introduction

The episode “Two for the Road” appeared to be just like any other *Lost* episode. There was a showdown between Jack and Sawyer, a tense moment with a member of the mysterious ‘Others,’ and a shocking twist ending – the death of two prominent characters. Yet for many devoted fans, “Two for the Road” delivered another level of excitement. The last commercial break featured a 15-second spot for the Hanso Foundation, a fictional institution from *Lost*, which encouraged viewers to call 1-800-HANSORG. The advertisement launched a five-month, interactive “multimedia treasure hunt,” complete with e-mails, phone-calls, newspaper ads, physical events and web sites, allowing participants to investigate the Hanso Foundation as if it were real.<sup>1</sup> The episode “Two for the Road” thus propelled *Lost* into a multiplatform narrative, with the producers telling fans: “you can TiVo it, but don’t skip the commercials.”<sup>2</sup>

As I write this thesis, television is changing significantly. No longer is it realistic for networks to deliver programming at a fixed time and expect mass audiences to passively consume it. Instead, television executives must cater to a new audience—one that has fragmented into niche communities and one that is not satisfied in merely consuming, but also producing, sharing, and interacting as well. These are the audiences that mark the era of ‘Television 2.0’ and to engage them, television executives have begun designing stories that extend across multiple media platforms, far beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, Lia. “To Counter the Doldrums During Summer Reruns, ‘Lost’ Fans Can Get Lost in a Game Online.” *The New York Times*. 24 April 2006.

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/24/business/media/24lost.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin&page\\_wanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/24/business/media/24lost.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&page_wanted=print)>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

television set. These interconnected cross-media stories, such as the aforementioned *Lost* example, are a new form of entertainment known as transmedia storytelling.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of transmedia storytelling is so new to television that neither a concrete economic nor artistic model exists yet. Television executives realize they must change how their business operates, but they are not willing to embrace Television 2.0 audiences at the expense of traditional television viewers.<sup>4</sup> John Boland, an executive at PBS observes, "We're going through what's going to be an extended period of time with one foot in 20th century, and one in the 21st century."<sup>5</sup> As the gap continues to widen between consumers who expect a quality television show and consumers who expect a quality multiplatform experience, television producers struggle to satisfy both sets of demands.

Thus, this thesis tackles the question, how can television producers create a transmedia narrative? And more specifically, how can television producers develop transmedia content that is optional to consume, but also contributes "distinct and valuable" narrative information to the TV show? After analyzing how many 'cult' television shows experiment with transmedia storytelling, I propose a model for crafting television narratives across media platforms. My goal is not to provide the solution to television's identity crisis or to pinpoint what makes a successful transmedia story. Rather, I'm interested in potential techniques for designing multiplatform stories that can be deeply engaging for hard-core fans, but optional for casual fans.

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as cross-media storytelling or multiplatform storytelling.

<sup>4</sup> Arango, Tim. "Broadcast TV Faces Struggle to Stay Viable." *The New York Times*. 27 February 2009.

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/28/business/media/28network.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/28/business/media/28network.html?_r=3)>

<sup>5</sup> Borland, John. "The TV Is Dead. Long Live the TV." *Wired*. 6 April, 2007.

<[http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/news/2007/04/tvhistory\\_0406](http://www.wired.com/entertainment/hollywood/news/2007/04/tvhistory_0406)>

Chapter 1 discusses the three types of convergences – economic, technological, and cultural – that create an environment for transmedia stories to thrive. In particular, transmedia storytelling creates multiple points of entry into a franchise, develops new modes of engagement, and increases fan involvement. Now more than ever, transmedia storytelling is becoming a viable and attractive form of entertainment.

Chapter 2 provides a broad overview of transmedia storytelling. A transmedia story, in its most basic form, is a story that unfolds across multiple media platforms. Each transmedia extension can be experienced individually, but must also contribute distinct information to an overarching narrative. To explore this definition further, I will map out the research in the field, focusing on some recent examples. I then note the major challenges facing transmedia storytelling, such as staying in canon, overcoming the ‘marketing mindset,’ and my paper’s main focus, catering to hard-core fans without alienating casual ones.

Chapter 3 examines some techniques, primarily from American cult television shows, which help build transmedia stories. In this regard, I propose a potential model for designing a transmedia narrative, arguing that a transmedia/television producer should emphasize the spatial dimensions of a world, motivate exploration through narrative gaps, create satisfying experiences in the extensions, and use the “validation effect” to reward consumers for their transmedia efforts. In this way, consumers can shape their own level of engagement and become not only observers of another world, but also active participants within it. At the same time, television shows can use certain narrative limitations that prevent transmedia extensions from becoming essential for comprehension.

Finally, Chapter 4 analyzes the transmedia storytelling behind ABC's *Lost*. Because its narrative hinges on a complex mythology, *Lost* struggles to supplement a stand-alone television show with distinct and valuable narrative extensions. After examining how *Lost* enables consumers to define their own participation in 'playing' the show, I evaluate the extent to which *Lost* offers an optional, yet compelling experience through its expanded text. However successful at balancing casual and hard-core fans though, *Lost* represents the future of many television shows in that it strives to immerse fans within a vast transmedia universe while also promising an internally coherent television show.

Television is in a period of transition, but storytelling as a whole is evolving along with the medium. In this thesis, I hope to provide creative insight on how television producers can adjust to the changing media landscape and weave stories outside the television box and into the multiplatform environment.



## I. The Era of Convergence: Primed for Transmedia Storytelling

In the June 2001 issue of *Technology Review*, Henry Jenkins observed five types of convergences redefining our media landscape: global, organic, economic, technological, and cultural.<sup>6</sup> Global convergence refers to the international circulation of media content; organic convergence describes consumers' multitasking abilities; economic convergence involves corporate synergy; technological convergence describes the digitization of media content; and cultural convergence represents the increasingly blurred line between media producer and consumer. While global and organic convergences are certainly important, I consider these two terms to be closely related to the other types of convergences as they relate to the development of transmedia storytelling. Thus, in this chapter, I will focus on how economic, technological, and cultural convergences create a media environment ripe for transmedia narratives.

First, horizontally integrated mega-corporations have an interest in developing transmedia franchises across their multiple divisions. Second, in technological convergence, the digitizing and unbundling of media content makes it easier for stories to flow across media platforms. The television industry struggles to find a viable business model in this environment as technological convergence offers new modes of engagement. Finally, cultural convergence can be seen as the way media consumers actively participate within the changing media landscape, becoming producers, sharers, and distributors themselves. I would also like to propose a subset of cultural convergence — “cult convergence” — where the mainstreaming of cult properties has redefined what it means to be a cult fan. As I will discuss in this chapter, all five types of convergences are

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<sup>6</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “Convergence? I Diverge.” *MIT Technology Review*. June 2001.  
<<http://www.technologyreview.com/business/12434/>>

interrelated and interconnected. Together, these processes of convergence form a perfect incubator for transmedia stories to flourish, setting the stage for narratives to flow across media platforms in a coordinated fashion, and changing how media producers and consumers think about storytelling.

### 1.1 Economic Convergence: Media Consolidation

Many scholars and critics have noted that media ownership is controlled by an increasingly small number of mega-corporations.<sup>7</sup> Viacom, Time Warner, NewsCorp, Clear Channel and Disney all have separate divisions for the creation of TV shows, films, comics, and video games. These divisions allow media conglomerates to retain a percentage of the profits from each branch, rather than having to outsource such components to a competitor. Due to this horizontal integration, the entertainment industry has an incentive to produce content that moves fluidly across media sectors. Justin Wyatt describes such content in *High Concept*, arguing that the most marketable and expandable franchises are those claiming a cast of stars, a distinctive style, and an easily digestible, summarized narrative.<sup>8</sup> *Star Wars* is the prime example of such a lucrative transmedia franchise, earning more than 22 billion dollars in 30 years.<sup>9</sup>

The domination of mainstream media outlets by corporate conglomerates makes maintaining and nurturing a franchise relatively easy. Conglomerates can attract diverse

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<sup>7</sup> Robert McChesney has argued that media ownership threatens our democracy. In *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Wyatt, Justin. *High Concept*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> It is unclear, of course, how much of this money goes to NewsCorp and how much goes to LucasFilm. Greenberg, Andy. "Star Wars' Galactic Dollars." *Forbes.com*. 24 May 2007. <[http://www.forbes.com/2007/05/24/star-wars-revenues-tech-cx\\_ag\\_0524money.html](http://www.forbes.com/2007/05/24/star-wars-revenues-tech-cx_ag_0524money.html)>

audiences into their franchise through various entry points — films, magazines, TV shows, news programs — and continue to barrage them with promotions in virtually every other medium. Despite their ubiquity however, traditional cross-promotions are becoming less effective. People are so bombarded with advertisements and sponsors that they are becoming more skilled at ignoring them.<sup>10</sup> As a result, media corporations have discovered that creating emotional attachment to a product yields more responsive and loyal consumers. As Henry Jenkins points out in his influential book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*:

*Where Old and New Media Collide:*

Franchise products are governed too much by economic logic and not enough by artistic vision. Hollywood acts as if it only has to provide more of the same, printing *Star Trek* (1966) logo on so many widgets. In reality, audiences want the new work to offer new insights and new experiences. If media conglomerates reward that demand, viewers will feel greater mastery and investment; deny it, and they stomp off in disgust.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, fans are looking for deeper experiences in the stories they love. They crave more information about their favorite characters and favorite stories and they will use any means necessary to find them. As a result, Jenkins argues, “if each work offers fresh experiences, then a crossover market will expand the potential gross within any individual media.”<sup>12</sup> That is, an *Alias* fan may not be a video gamer, but they’d be more than willing to try *Alias: Underground* if the game contained valuable information to the story world. Simply barraging consumers with branding is not enough. The trick is to add something

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<sup>10</sup> “Advertising the Digital Age.” *Team Digital Company Blog*. 13 March 2009.  
<<http://promotions2.com/2009/new-rules-of-advertising-in-the-digital-age/>>

<sup>11</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York Press, 2006. 105

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “Transmedia Storytelling.” *MIT Technology Review*. 15 January 2003.  
<<http://www.technologyreview.com/biomedicine/13052/page3/>>

new and worthwhile to a franchise in order to facilitate an emotional connection with it.

Before going any further, it is important to understand the relationship between convergence and divergence because the two processes are inextricably linked. Derek Johnson argues that shows like *Lost* and *Heroes* disperse narrative information across media platforms in a process that is more like *divergence* than convergence.<sup>13</sup> Johnson sees “divergent narratives” as a more appropriate term to describe narratives extending not just through digital content, but also through newspapers, novels, magazines, and spaces of everyday life. Yet I tend to agree with Jenkins in that convergence and divergence are complementary, not opposing forces. Dispersing content across a wide range of delivery channels (divergence) ensures multiple points of entry into a single media franchise (convergence). Similarly, dispersing narrative information across a wide range of channels (divergence) encourages consumers to pull together all the information and form a unified story (convergence). Either way, technological convergence and divergence have huge implications for the television industry.

## 1.2 Technological Convergence: Content in a Multimedia World

Where media conglomerates see profit in convergence, television networks see the apocalypse.<sup>14</sup> Executives worry that personal video recorders and Internet access will

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, Derek. “The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*: World Building, Reality, and the Economic Possibilities of Narrative Divergence.” *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*. Ed. Roberta Pearson. London: IB Tauris, 2009. 27-51.

<sup>14</sup> Ritchell, Matt. “What Convergence? TV’s Hesitant March to the Net.” *The New York Times*. 15 February 2009.

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/16/technology/internet/16chip.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/16/technology/internet/16chip.html?_r=2)>

destroy broadcast television and cripple its business model.<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, the industry could control when, where, and how viewers consumed their programming. In the era of Television 2.0 however, new technologies make any assumptions about television audiences impossible.

Lisa Parks points out that the term “Television 2.0” seems to assume that television is like a new version of software, upgraded to become more efficient and easier to use.<sup>16</sup> The term aptly describes television’s shift towards the Internet as it merges with another new version of software: Web 2.0. Television networks now stream their shows online and make them available for download on iTunes. Web syndicators, such as Hulu and Joost, aggregate commercially-produced shows from a host of networks and studios and present them with limited commercial interruption. All this makes the other assumption of Television 2.0 — that it is still television — much more complicated.

In addition to the Internet, consumers can now view *The Office* on iPods, portable DVD players, mobile phones, and handheld devices. One effect of this, as Max Dawson observes, is that content is “unbundled” so as to flow freely between screens and devices:

Digital distribution technologies have facilitated the rapid growth of an alternative ‘Itemized Economy’ of unbundled cultural goods, in which the primary unit of exchange is no longer the compact disc, the newspaper or magazine, or the television series, but rather the track, the article, the episode, or the scene.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kirkpatrick, David. “AOL Is Planning a Fast-Forward Answer to TiVo.” *The New York Times*. 10 March 2003. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/10/business/aol-is-planning-a-fast-forward-answer-to-tivo.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1>>

<sup>16</sup> Parks, Lisa. “Flexible Microcasting: Gender, Generation, and Television-Internet Convergence.” *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson. London: Duke University Press, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Dawson, Max. “Little Players, Big Shows: Format, Narration, and Style on Television’s New Smaller Screens.” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Technologies* 13, 3 (2007): 239.

On the one hand, the unbundling of content means that consumers are no longer watching networks or channels — they are watching individual shows and episodes. This hurts the opportunity for networks to position shows performing poorly in the ratings next to the more popular programs. At the same time, unbundled content is more shareable and spreadable,<sup>18</sup> meaning that a popular *Saturday Night Live* sketch on the Internet can effortlessly become a phenomenon. Many television executives see great potential in this regard. David Poltrack, Vice President for Research and Planning at CBS, explains:

And with network content in all these different places [distribution platforms] — especially video on demand over the Internet — we have to look to brand the network so that people know “that’s a CBS show”...I think network branding is going to reappear. This means more competition and better TV.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, it is unclear whether or not Television 2.0 will lead to “better TV,” but as new technologies afford consumers what Amanda Lotz calls the five C’s — choice, control, convenience, customization, and community— the need for branded, marketable content is undeniable.<sup>20</sup> As Michael Lebowitz, founder/CEO of Big Spaceship, observes, “people care about the content, not the network.”<sup>21</sup> Because consumers want their content to come in all types of formats and sizes, there is an increased need for networks to have a reliable and trustworthy reputation across media platforms. Consumers may be able to alter *how*

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<sup>18</sup> Jenkins defines “spreadability” as “a concept [that] describes how the properties of the media environment, texts, audiences, and business models work together to enable easy and widespread circulation of mutually meaningful content within a networked culture.”

In “If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead (Part One): Media Viruses and Memes.”

*Henryjenkins.org*. 11 February 2009.

<[http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_spread\\_its\\_dead\\_p\\_1.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p_1.html)>

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Sharon Marie Ross on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006. In *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Lotz, Amanda. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. NY: New York University Press, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Ford, Sam. “Futures of Entertainment: Transmedia Properties.” *Convergence Culture Consortium Weblog*. 17 November 2006.

<[http://www.convergenceculture.org/weblog/2006/11/foe\\_transmedia\\_properties.php#mor](http://www.convergenceculture.org/weblog/2006/11/foe_transmedia_properties.php#mor)>

they watch their television, but in the end, the networks still have complete control over the content produced. In addition, if a viewer enjoys a particular show on the Internet, they can more quickly locate its merchandise and be “just one click away” from consuming other media texts.

The prospect of more points of entry and accelerated consumption has led many television producers to change their discourse regarding the television business. Jeff Zucker, CEO of NBC Universal Television, notices that new technologies have forced television executives to rethink how they approach production:

What it really means is producers can no longer just come in with a TV show...It has to have an online component, a sell-through component and a wireless component. It's the way we're trying to do business on the content side, giving the consumer ways to watch their show however they want to watch it.<sup>22</sup>

In order to comply with consumer demands, many television producers are now calling themselves “content-producers,” a more appropriate label for the flow of programs across delivery platforms.<sup>23</sup> But as Ivan Askwith observes in his MIT master’s thesis *Television 2.0: Reconceptualizing TV as an Engagement Medium*, entering the content market means a huge increase in the potential competition:

In recognizing itself as a “content-production center,” NBC is acknowledging that it is now in the same business as — and thus in direct competition with — all content producers. This effectively means that NBC’s competition is no longer limited to rival networks, but has expanded to encompass the likes of Google and Microsoft.<sup>24</sup>

The new competitive environment means that the networks of the “post-network era” must shift their distribution and business models to remain relevant industry players. While

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<sup>22</sup> Fisher, Ken. “NBC Universal chief calls for 'Net-savvy TV pitches’” *Ars Technica*. 13 March 2006. <<http://arstechnica.com/old/content/2006/03/6369.ars>>

<sup>23</sup> Askwith, Ivan. *Television 2.0: Reconceptualizing TV as an Engagement Medium*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Master’s Thesis, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

many journalists have begun writing television's obituary,<sup>25</sup> media scholars like Askwith are more optimistic. Askwith argues that if networks are willing to expand the scope and ambition of their business, they can profit from a global audience. To accomplish this, Askwith highlights the importance for the television industry to understand engagement as a "larger system of material, emotional, intellectual, social, and psychological investments a viewer forms through their interactions with the expanded television text."<sup>26</sup> Expanding a television text across platforms, he argues, should not function as a means to preserve television's traditional business model, but should increase the possibilities for consumers to engage with television. In other words, by recognizing that they are in the "content" aggregation and distribution business, networks must be willing to view convergence not as a threat to television, but as an opportunity for Television 2.0.

### **1.3 Cultural Convergence: The New Consumers of Participatory Culture**

In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins argues that convergence is not a technological endpoint.<sup>27</sup> That is, the future of convergence is not a single "black box" capable of all media functions. Such a perspective fails to consider the economic, social and cultural forces that shape how technology is used.<sup>28</sup> For example, Priscilla Coit Murphy discredits the idea that books will eventually disappear and give way to newer media. She argues that books are deeply embedded within our media system, fulfilling social interests (by

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<sup>25</sup> Helm, Burt. "Why TV Will Never Be the Same." *Business Week*. 23 November 2004. <[http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/nov2004/tc20041123\\_3292\\_tc184.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/nov2004/tc20041123_3292_tc184.htm)>

<sup>26</sup> Askwith, Ivan. *TV 2.0: Reconceptualizing Television*

<sup>27</sup> Understanding convergence primarily as technological is what Jenkins calls the "black box fallacy." In *Convergence Culture*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



offering a unique type of media experience), economic interests (media conglomerates do not want to abandon a viable commodity), and intellectual interests (books are a vital part of learning and knowledge).<sup>29</sup> Though its content, audience, function, and social status may shift, the fact is, “old” media ultimately coexist with “new” media.<sup>30</sup> Theatre coexists with cinema. Radio coexists with television. And as discussed in the last section, television coexists with the Internet.

Instead of understanding convergence as primarily technological, Jenkins argues that convergence is a cultural process emerging from two powerful forces:

The American media environment is now being shaped by two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways; on the other hand, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multinational media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry.<sup>31</sup>

Cultural convergence, then, is the interplay between the top-down power of economic convergence (media conglomerates dispersing content across media) and the bottom-up power of participatory culture (consumers interacting with media content and technology in unpredictable ways, reinforcing or contradicting the producers’ intentions). After focusing on media consolidation in 1.1, I now to turn to the capabilities of participatory culture, specifically as they relate to television.

In our participatory culture, consumers are active, socially connected participants within the changing media environment. New technologies become tools within a

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<sup>29</sup> Murphy, Priscilla Coit. “Books are Dead, Long Live Books.” *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*. Eds. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003. 81-95.

<sup>30</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

multimedia sandbox, empowering ‘typical’ consumers to become creators, artists, and visionaries. With little effort and time, one can easily edit video, manipulate graphics, remix intellectual property, and post it all to YouTube. The way Jenkins sees it, “the power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture, but from writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and then re-circulating it, feeding it back into the mainstream media.”<sup>32</sup>

Crucial to the idea of participatory culture is collective intelligence, the “ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members.”<sup>33</sup> The idea of collective intelligence is that individuals will combine their talents and knowledge to achieve tasks and goals that no one could have completed alone. Within television fandom, one of the best examples is Lostpedia, a comprehensive, user-generated guide to the fictional world of *Lost*. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, *Lost*’s narrative complexity encourages close examination and triggers encyclopedic impulses. Together, fans collaborate to investigate and decipher an array of puzzles and enigmas in order to uncover *Lost*’s vast narrative data.

In light of these participatory practices, consumers have changed their expectations for entertainment. They now crave media texts offering complexity, community, and opportunities for creativity, texts that enable consumers to satisfactorily apply their participatory capabilities. To a large degree, these new demands are associated with younger generations.<sup>34</sup> Sharon Ross, in her book, *Beyond the Box*, notes that the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>33</sup> Jenkins applies the French philosopher Pierre Levy’s notion of collective intelligence to the digital age. *Convergence Culture*, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Jenkins, et al. “Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” White Paper for MacArthur Foundation, 2006.

Millennial generation is particularly “migratory,” meaning that they are quite skilled at traversing multiple media to hunt down content.<sup>35</sup> As Ross observes, Millennials are so used to multitasking on the Internet — sharing, communicating, and social networking — that they do so without even thinking about it. As a result, Jenkins points out, Millennials are coming to expect multiplatform components from their entertainment:

The kids who have grown up consuming and enjoying *Pokemon* across media are going to expect the same experience from *The West Wing* as they get older. By design, *Pokemon* unfolds across games, television programs, films, and books, with no media privileged over any other. For our generation, the hour long, ensemble-based, serialized drama was the pinnacle of sophisticated storytelling, but for the next generation, it is going to seem like well, child’s play.<sup>36</sup>

Jenkins argues that younger consumers are adept at tracking down character backgrounds and side-plots, and then making connections across many different texts of a franchise.

Marsha Kinder argues that these “hunters and gatherers” learn transmedia navigation at an early age through video games.<sup>37</sup> That is, a child’s enjoyment of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* Nintendo game would actively encourage their interest in the film, videogames, websites, and merchandise.

To cater to these transmedia expectations, Sharon Ross observes how television producers are experimenting with “invitational strategies” for ‘tele-participation’:

“interactions with a show beyond the moment of viewing and outside of the television show.”<sup>38</sup> Some strategies are rather explicit, like informing people to vote for their favorite *American Idol* contestant. Other invitations are more “obscure” because participation is encouraged through narrative complexity, inviting fans to compare notes and collaborate

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<sup>35</sup> *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> “Transmedia Storytelling.” *MIT Technology Review*.

<sup>37</sup> Kinder, Marsha. *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. University of California Press, 1991.

<sup>38</sup> *Beyond the Box*, 4.

to make sense out of it all. Either way, the key point from Ross' research is that television producers can only offer the invitation; ultimately, the viewer has "the power to refuse it, accept it, bring along a guest, drop by, or stay and really party."<sup>39</sup> Thus, inviting tele-participation, as Ross' research suggests, helps create a shared sense of ownership over a property and tears down the barrier between the "authoritative" media producer and the "passive" media consumer.

If new technologies create a venue for greater audience tele-participation (fan fictions, wikis, remixes, viding), they also enable television networks to capitalize on consumers' participatory activities, generating higher ratings, brand awareness, and save-the-show activism. Many producers and cast members maintain direct interaction with fans. Some networks have fan fiction contests and galleries, while others, like the WB's WBlender, provide tools for users to produce music videos or mash-ups without infringing on copyright. Corporate and grassroots forces are constantly interacting with one another, and it is this exchange that fuels transmedia storytelling.

#### **1.4 Mainstreaming Cult Media**

There also exists a subset within cultural convergence—"cult convergence" if you will—where cult media intersects with the mainstream culture. Many people think of cult television in terms of a sci-fi or fantasy show yielding a small yet devoted following. Yet this assumption breaks down when you consider other genres of TV shows, like *Veronica Mars* and *Arrested Development*, which attract a small, but passionate community.

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<sup>39</sup> "Inviting Our Participation: An Interview with Sharon Marie Ross (Part One)." *Henryjenkins.org*. 8 October 2008.  
<[http://henryjenkins.org/2008/10/an\\_interview\\_with\\_sharon\\_marie.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2008/10/an_interview_with_sharon_marie.html)>

Similarly, sci-fi shows like *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*, are difficult to classify as purely “cult,” since they have attained such high profile, mainstream success. Sara Gwenllian-Jones focuses her definition of cult TV based on a myriad of narrative traits that invite fans to revel in a show’s complexity:

Cult television’s serial and segmented forms, its familiar formulae, its accumulated multiple storylines, its metatextuality, its ubiquitous intertextuality and intratextuality, its extension across a variety of media, its modes of self-reflexivity and constant play of interruption and excess, work together to overwhelm the processural order of cause and effect, enigma and resolution, extending story events and other narrative and textual elements across boundless networks of interconnected possibilities.<sup>40</sup>

This laundry list of narrative qualities is rather overwhelming, but it is a fair assessment of the various elements that promote collective intelligence and loyal fandom. However, Matt Hills argues that cult media is not just “found” based on the content and structure of a text, but “created” based on “a raft of overlapping and interlocking versions of ‘us’ and them.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, what makes a media text “cult” is dependent on the complex processes by which fans position the text in opposition to the mainstream. The distinction between cult and mainstream is even more complicated today, especially as industry professionals seek audiences that engage with programs in “cult-like” ways.<sup>42</sup>

Jeff Gomez, CEO of Starlight Runner, observes this trend at Comic Con, an event that used to be a small gathering of comic book enthusiasts, which has now become a commercial portal into “cult” realms:

Each year, Comic Con attracts well over 100,000 "gatekeepers," fans of niche, cult or genre entertainment who make it their business to spread the word about the newest and coolest content to their friends and acquaintances both in their home

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<sup>40</sup> Gwenllian-Jones, Sara and Pearson, Roberta. *Cult Television*. Eds. Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson. University of Minnesota Press, 2004. xvii.

<sup>41</sup> *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2002. 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ross, Sharon Marie. *Beyond the Box*.

communities and on the Internet. It used to be that one of these gatekeepers would have a circle of five to ten contacts back home to whom he or she would convey what was best about the convention. Now in the age of social networking and pop culture web portals, that number has multiplied exponentially. Add to this the mass media coverage given to Comic Con and content producers can reach untold millions through it.<sup>43</sup>

As described in section 1.3, the reason why cult fans are so valuable is because the Internet enables a small yet vocal fan community to potentially reach a global audience.

As Steven Johnson puts it:

[Showmakers] are relying on the amplifying power of the serious hard-core fans, who are 1% of the audience, to broadcast some of these cool little discoveries to perhaps 10% of their audience. Those are the great evangelists for the show, the 10% who are out there saying, Oh, God, I am so addicted to this show." And they help reel in the other 90%, which is where gratifying the superfans pays off.<sup>44</sup>

Hard-core fans can effectively provide free labor for television shows, but at a price. As the line between commercial and grassroots continues to blur, cult fans look for new resources to maintain their separation from mainstream culture. In 1992, Henry Jenkins observed that fans legitimated their identity through "textual poaching," appropriating and repurposing the meanings of commercial materials for their own interests and needs.<sup>45</sup>

While this certainly is still the case, the era of convergence makes it possible for the entertainment industry to provide unique experiences to cult fans, justifying their distinction from, and even their superiority to, mainstream fandom. Cult fans now expect to interact with the cast and crew of a show through online forums and chats. They expect

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<sup>43</sup> Gomez highlights other reasons for the mainstreaming of cult media, including the rise of baby boomers and gen-Xers in the entertainment industry, the A-list treatment of sci-fi serials, the greater quality of storytelling, and the reflective mood of politics in genre content. In "Talking Transmedia: An Interview With Starlight Runner's Jeff Gomez (part one)." *Henryjenkins.org*. 28 May 2008.

<[http://henryjenkins.org/2008/05/an\\_interview\\_with\\_starlight\\_ru.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2008/05/an_interview_with_starlight_ru.html)>

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Poniewozik, James. "Why the Future of Television is *Lost*" *Time Magazine*. 24 September 2006. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1538635-3,00.html>>

<sup>45</sup> *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

extratextual content with which they can increase their mastery over regular viewers. And the industry is seeing the economic value in legitimating the most loyal cult fans as “insiders,” as members of an elite group.<sup>46</sup> Ed Sanchez, co-creator of the *Blair Witch Project*, explains:

If you give people enough stuff to explore, they will explore. Not everyone but some of them will. The people who do explore and take advantage of the whole world will forever be your fans, they will give you an energy you can't buy through marketing.<sup>47</sup>

Sanchez's comments suggest that the more narrative resources available for cult fans, the more opportunities exist for them to increase the breadth of their knowledge, connect with other fans, form communities, and generally feel more involved in their experience of the fictional world. In an era where ‘geek properties’ are consistently being converted into mainstream ones (*X-Men*, *Star Trek*, *Lost*, *Heroes*), television producers are learning they must find ways to reward the most enthusiastic fans by giving them a sense of value and appreciation.

In conclusion, one might understand the various types of convergences as follows: Media conglomerates want money from many different media sectors. The television industry wants to compete in an expanding content market. Consumers want to increase their participation and freedom within the media environment. And cult fans want to maintain their identity as separate from the mainstream. In Chapter 3, I offer a creative model for designing transmedia narratives, a mode of storytelling that can help address these goals. First, however, I must provide background on a more basic question: what exactly is transmedia storytelling and how does it work in television?

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<sup>46</sup> Ross, Sharon Marie. *Beyond the Box*.

<sup>47</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*, 103.

## II. Transmedia Storytelling 101

Henry Jenkins provides the most widely used definition of transmedia storytelling in

*Convergence Culture*:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics...Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game or vice versa.<sup>48</sup>

One might think of Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling as a photographic mosaic. In a photomosaic, each pixel is its own image, but when the pixels are compounded and stitched together, they form a much larger picture. Similarly, a transmedia story does not privilege one text over another – the fictional world cannot be exhausted within a single medium. When all the dispersed elements of a transmedia story are pieced together, with each text contributing key bits of information, the result is a better understanding and unified picture of the story world at large.

Before examining what transmedia storytelling is, it is important to understand what it is not. As described in 1.1, most major entertainment franchises barrage consumers with promotional and redundant content across media. But this is transmedia *branding*, not storytelling. A *Heroes* promo spot on the Internet or a *Heroes* T-Shirt does nothing to enhance the fictional universe, but *The 9<sup>th</sup> Wonders!* comic book provides a candid, insightful look into the prophetic visions of one of the characters.

Another distinction must be made between transmedia extensions and adaptations. The *Harry Potter* films, for example, are essentially the same narratives as J.K. Rowling's books, with the same characters and the same dialogue, only reinterpreted and subjectively

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 95-96



altered.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the *Harry Potter* films are a retelling of a story, not a distinct addition to it. Granted, some people may consider a visually pleasing and entertaining adaptation “a distinct and valuable” contribution to a franchise, since it brings the characters and events to life. But in transmedia storytelling, each text stands as a distinct component of some larger narrative timeline.

For example, Jenkins describes *The Matrix* franchise as one of the boldest attempts at transmedia storytelling. *The Matrix* is about a dystopian future where mankind’s perceived reality is actually a simulation created by machines. After the success of the first film, Andy and Larry Wachowski sketched out a plan to extend the narrative across additional media components. In theory, by expanding the narrative into comics, short anime films, a videogame, and eventually a massive multiplayer online game, hard-core fans could satisfy their craving for more information while at the same time, new audiences could discover *The Matrix* universe through multiple points of entry.

Rather than serving as redundant adaptations, each text contributed a new part of the overall story. For example, in the animated short *Flight of the Osiris*, the protagonist barely manages to deliver a letter warning the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar*, a hovercraft in “real world,” that the sentinel machines were going to attack Zion, the last human city on Earth, in a mere 72 hours.<sup>50</sup> The letter resurfaced in the videogame, *Enter the Matrix*, where the player had to retrieve the document from the post office. Finally, in *The Matrix Reloaded*, characters make passing references to the “last transmissions of the Osiris.”

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<sup>49</sup> For more on the difference between adaptation and transmediation see: Long, Geoffrey. *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics, and Production at the Jim Henson Company*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Master’s Thesis, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Dena, Christy. “How the Internet is Holding the Centre of Conjured Universes.” Paper presented at Internet Research 7.0: Internet Convergences, Association of Internet Researchers. Brisbane, Queensland, 27-30 September 2006.

People who followed the trajectory of the letter across media platforms were treated to a unique transmedia experience.<sup>51</sup> This passing reference was just one of many recurring motifs across the multiple media components of the *Matrix* franchise. The video game and short animated films developed minor characters in the three films while also providing back-story on the main characters.

Despite its bold transmedia aspirations, *The Matrix* had some notable problems. For one, regular moviegoers were not prepared for the hypertextual logic of *The Matrix* sequels.<sup>52</sup> The sequels' complex narrative placed new demands on audiences, and many were upset that transmedia exploration and collective intelligence seemed to be a requirement for comprehension. Additionally, the *Enter the Matrix* game received poor reviews with many critics and fans who were frustrated by the limited linear game play and the over-use of cut scenes.<sup>53</sup> These two complaints — that the films were too dependent on transmedia content and that individual texts were not enjoyable in their own right — will return in my Chapter 4 discussion of *Lost*. Yet at the very least, *The Matrix* began a discussion about how transmedia storytelling might be refined to succeed creatively and economically in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*.

<sup>53</sup> Gerstmann, Jeff. "Enter the Matrix Review." *Gamespot.com*. 20 May 2003.  
< <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/action/enterthematrix/review.html?page=2>>

## 2.1 Classifying Transmedia Stories

Christy Dena argues that there are other ways to expand content across media platforms in addition to Jenkins' definition of transmedia. She describes three types of multiplatform segmentation formats: series, serial, and hybrid.<sup>54</sup> In a multiplatform series, each transmedia text continues a storyline, but primarily stands alone as an individual experience. An example might be Season 8 of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, which was in the form of a comic book after *Buffy* had left television. Dena also cites *24: The Game*, a video game filling in narrative gaps between seasons two and three.

Multiplatform serials are the most rare. They refer to texts of a multiplatform story that are highly dependent on one another. One example in television might be the *CSI: NY/Second Life* crossover in October 2007. In the *CSI* episode, the investigation team pursues a killer by entering Second Life, a massive virtual world. There is a cliffhanger however, and viewers are told that they won't be able to see the identity of the killer until the following February. That is, unless they log into Second Life, follow the clues, interview suspects, and solve the murder featured in the actual *CSI: NY* episode before then.<sup>55</sup> This isn't the purest form of a multiplatform serial since Second Life players could solve the murder without watching the show, but nevertheless, the core narrative carried over from the television show into Second Life.

Lastly, Dena defines multiplatform hybrids as combining serial and series tendencies. She draws on the television theorist Robin Nelson who introduced the term

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<sup>54</sup> Dena, Christy. "Techniques for Segmenting Content Across Media." *Christydena.com*. 4 September 2008. <<http://www.christydena.com/2008/09/techniques-for-segmenting-content-across-media/>>

<sup>55</sup> Jenkins, Henry. "Producing the CSI:NY/Second Life Crossover: An Interview with Electric Sheep's Taylor and Krueger (1 of 2)." *Henryjenkins.org*. 24 October 2007. <[http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/10/producing\\_the\\_csinysecond\\_life.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/10/producing_the_csinysecond_life.html)>

“flexi-narrative” to describe television shows with self-contained episodes and unresolved narrative threads.<sup>56</sup> This type of narrative structure is evident in the relationship between *Homicide Life On the Streets* and the accompanying web series *The Second Shift*. The web series was generally self-contained, featuring a unique cast of detectives solving crimes after the television detectives went home. But Dena also describes a special crossover episode:

[U.S.] viewers of the NBC television show *Homicide: Life on the Street*, were treated to a special “crossover episode”. It was not a crossover of worlds or brands, instead, it was an intraworld, cross-platform traversal. On the 3rd and 4th of February, detectives started investigating a webcast killing. These detectives were not those seen on air though, they were the second shift detectives who existed only on the Net. The *Second Shift* detectives deemed the case closed, but then the detectives on the television show reopened the case in their television episode called “Homicide.com,” which was broadcast on Feb 5th. The Net detectives then concluded the case the following week on the 12th and 19th online.<sup>57</sup>

Dena’s definition of multiplatform hybrids is most in line with Jenkins’s use of “transmedia storytelling.” In Jenkins’s model, each text is self-contained but also continues the narrative in some way. In the case of *Homicide*, it would not be unreasonable to either watch the web series or the television show, but viewing both improves the overall experience. As Thomas Hjelm, the executive producer of *Second Shift* explains, “The episode on Friday is self-contained and makes sense by itself...But if you go online for the [continuing] 'Second Shift' chapters, it just makes more sense.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, the content from the web series would only be an enhancement, not a requirement.

Of course, producing optional yet valuable narrative enhancements is an incredibly

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<sup>56</sup> Dena, Christy. “Techniques for Segmenting Content.” *Christydena.com*.

<sup>57</sup> Dena, Christy. “Patterns in Cross-Media Interaction Design: It’s Much More than a URL... (Part 1)” *UniverseCreation101.com*. March 10, 2007.  
<http://www.universecreation101.com/category/arg/page/6/>

<sup>58</sup> Wolk, Josh. “‘Homicide’ welcomes its website cast to the show -- a first step in NBC's plans to nab TV defectors.” *Entertainment Weekly*. 5 February 1999.  
<<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,84131,00.html>>

difficult task, an issue I explore in Chapter 3.

Geoffrey Long classifies transmedia stories based on how they were first conceived from the outset.<sup>59</sup> He outlines “hard”, “soft”, and “chewy” transmedia narratives. Hard transmedia narratives are designed and coordinated from the very beginning. Long cites Orson Scott Card’s *Empire* franchise and *Final Fantasy VII: Dirge of Cerebus* as examples. But in television, the most interesting case study is *Push, Nevada*. Produced by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, *Push Nevada* combined a television show with an alternate reality game<sup>60</sup> and a million dollar prize. The show could be enjoyed as a traditional television drama or viewers could scrutinize episodes for clues ranging from web addresses to bits of dialogue in order to unravel the mysteries.<sup>61</sup> The alternate reality game was planned from the beginning to accompany the show. Unfortunately, this real-time contest, however innovative, was a commercial failure, lasting 7 episodes before it was cancelled.<sup>62</sup>

Soft transmedia narratives are those that are expanded across media only after a core property proves to be successful. For example, after *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* grew in popularity, a whole ‘Buffyverse’ began to develop, complete with books, comics, and video games. Shows like *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* are the extremes of soft transmedia narratives. They involve many authors, many characters, and many narratives that span decades, adapting to different audiences along the way. These “unfolding texts,” as Lance

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<sup>59</sup> Long, Geoffrey. *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics, and Production at the Jim Henson Company*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Master’s Thesis, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> I explain alternate reality games in 2.3, 3.3.3, and 4.3.3.

<sup>61</sup> Askwith, Ivan. *This Is Not (Just) An Advertisement: Understanding Alternate Reality Games*. White Paper for MIT Convergence Culture Consortium. October 2006.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Parkin calls them, include so many stories in a variety of media that the franchise as a whole has completely overshadowed the original television series.<sup>63</sup>

Long's last category, "chewy," is somewhere in between hard and soft. It is a transmedia narrative that becomes hard only after the core property's initial success. *The Matrix* may be the best example, as there are very few chewy transmedia narratives in television. *Lost* may be the closest to 'chewiness', since it has now set a definite end date after six seasons, allowing the producers to plan out all future transmedia extensions.

Long's classification system is difficult to apply to television, since in general, television shows tend to support soft transmedia narratives. That is, they are either expanded across media after they have proven to resonate with audiences (*Star Trek, Alias, 24*) or after they have left television (*Sex and the City, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Firefly*). One reason for this is that most television producers do not have the luxury of planning out a full transmedia campaign as the Wachowski brothers did after the first *Matrix* film.

First, in the United States, most new series do not last much more than a season.<sup>64</sup> Designing transmedia extensions from the outset is obviously pointless if the show is cancelled after three episodes. In addition, because television writers do not know what will happen in every episode of every season, planning out hard or even chewy transmedia narratives becomes problematic. Television shows constantly adapt and change their

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<sup>63</sup> Parkin, Lance. "Truths Universally Acknowledged. How the Rules of Doctor Who Affect the Writing." *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*. Eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009. 13-25.

<sup>64</sup> Wyatt, Edward. "New Serials: Now You See Them, Now You Don't." *The New York Times*. 10 January 2007.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/10/arts/television/10seri.html?ex=1326085200&en=dd711c3022557f17&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>>

storylines based off fan feedback, actor availability, and network pressure. As Carlton Cuse, executive producer of *Lost*, points out:

Television shows aren't made in a vacuum. They're made in the real world, and the real world is complicated by the fact that you are coordinating your creative plans with hundreds of other people... You can sort of dictate to a certain degree what you want the show to be, but you have to listen just as hard to what the show is telling you it wants to be.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, as I will discuss with *Lost* in Chapter 4, actors may leave television shows, budget cuts may limit certain scenes, and some plot lines may no longer be relevant. With all these variables, it is incredibly difficult to plan out transmedia extensions early in the development phase. Especially when dealing with seriality, a common characteristic of cult TV shows, many writers struggle to maintain a consistent and coherent narrative in the television show alone. Yet as Maureen Ryan, a writer from *The Chicago Tribune*, explains, television producers are discovering that their job description is changing:

They're [writers and producers] doing all sorts of extra stuff — they're expected to be multimedia producers as well... I think they're being asked to wear a lot of hats right now. Because the stakes are so high, because viewers are expecting and demanding such high quality, the season doesn't end. You reply to fans' questions, write a blog, record a podcast, record a DVD commentary, and oh! Come up with a show that can compete in this incredibly difficult environment.<sup>66</sup>

This endless television season may be a headache for writers and producers, but because television shows rarely have an end-date in the United States, it is a necessity to compete in the content market. Today, when television shows do have transmedia aspirations, they are most often produced by a network's marketing division. *Heroes* may be one of the few exceptions, with a writer/producer overseeing and orchestrating all transmedia

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<sup>65</sup> In Murray, Noel. "Lost's Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse." 22 April 2008. <<http://www.avclub.com/articles/losts-damon-lindelof-and-carlton-cuse,14231/>>

<sup>66</sup> Ross, Sharon Marie. *Beyond the Box*, 228.

development. Yet the question remains: can transmedia storytelling be an art form or is it merely a marketing gimmick?

## 2.2 Storytelling or Marketing?

Henrik Örnebring, in his analysis of *Alias*' alternate reality games, argues that transmedia narratives do not create a "master narrative" where each text carries equal weight within the story world.<sup>67</sup> Instead, he argues that transmedia storytelling almost always involves an identifiable central text and a series of satellite texts that provide marketing for it. If we understand Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling as a photomosaic, Örnebring sees transmedia storytelling as a single photograph with an eye-grabbing frame around it. Örnebring does have a point – films and TV shows usually consider web content to be purely promotional no matter how distinctive and valuable the narrative information.

*The Blair Witch Project* was one of the first films to use a website as a storytelling tool. The film generated a devoted fan base a year before it was released, creating a convincing, highly detailed website about the Blair Witch.<sup>68</sup> The site had pseudo-documentaries, historical sightings, audiotapes, and information about a police investigation, all of which presented the events of the film as real occurrences. Once it hit the theaters in 1999, *The Blair Witch* became one of the most successful low budget films

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<sup>67</sup> Örnebring, Henrik. "Alternate reality gaming and convergence culture: The case of *Alias*." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 10.4 (2007): 445-462.

<sup>68</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*.



of all time.<sup>69</sup> Örnebring argues that multiplatform stories like *The Blair Witch Project* have a “hierarchy of meaning,” a dominant text surrounded by ancillary texts.<sup>70</sup>

Television shows are most often the dominant text, not just because they can garner more money than other media, but also because they usually involve the longest commitment for the consumer, spanning years in length and hundreds of hours in content. It is thus tremendously difficult for an alternate reality game, novel, or comic book to carry the same narrative weight as a television show, especially since television shows are one of the most accessible and accepted forms of entertainment.

Nevertheless, while it is still possible to identify a distinction between a central text and its secondary components, a text’s reception does not always reinforce this hierarchal structure. In 2001, the movie *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* launched a massive **alternate reality game** to promote the film. The game was known quite simply as The Beast. An alternate reality game is an interactive narrative that involves difficult challenges across multiple media platforms and everyday life. They have few or no rules and they do not acknowledge themselves as games or as a mode of storytelling. Players use their skills to collaborate to solve puzzles and move the narrative forward. Set in the year 2142, fifty years after the events of *A.I.*, players were able to directly interact with the world, communicating with characters and deciphering fictional websites. Askwith, in his white paper, “This is Not (Just) an Advertisement,” recounts the Beast’s success:

The public response to The Beast was remarkable: during the 120 days of the game, more than 7,000 active participants formed an online collective... Estimates for overall participation range from half a million to three million players overall --

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<sup>69</sup> According to BoxOfficeMojo.com, the film had a production budget of \$60,000 and grossed a total of \$140,539,099 domestically.

<<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=blairwitchproject.htm>>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 445.

the range being a function of how one defines “participation” -- and the press coverage was staggering, with the creators reporting more than 300 million impressions in both mainstream and niche media outlets.<sup>71</sup>

The Beast may have been designed as a marketing tool, but it was also renowned as a creative success. Eight years later, The Beast’s complex design and passionate community became much more memorable than *A.I.*’s short box office run. Instead of just marketing *A.I.*, The Beast became a text all its own, setting the bar for future ARGs.

In television, the Canadian show *ReGenesis* also blurs the boundary between primary and secondary texts.<sup>72</sup> *ReGenesis* follows a scientific organization that investigates mysterious problems often related to bio-terrorism. The organization also has a fictional website where viewer-players can become field agents themselves, hacking into characters’ emails, participating in forums, and taking phone calls. Players could play the extended reality game (ERG) without watching the television show and vice versa. But players who watched the TV show had access to information that helped them play the ERG; likewise, players of the ERG learned background information about the drama of the TV show.<sup>73</sup> This symbiotic relationship is the exception rather than rule in television. Nevertheless, while transmedia storytelling may be more hierarchal than Jenkins’s definition suggests, it can definitely be much more than pure marketing.

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<sup>71</sup> Askwith, Ivan. *This Is Not (Just) An Advertisement: Understanding Alternate Reality Games*.

<sup>72</sup> Dena, Christy. “How the Internet is Holding the Centre of Conjured Universes.” Paper presented at Internet Research 7.0: Internet Convergences, Association of Internet Researchers. Brisbane, Queensland, 27-30 September 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

### 2.3 The Problem of Canon

One of Long's key components to transmedia storytelling is that each extension should be designed as canonical from the outset.<sup>74</sup> That way, he argues, audiences have a better sense of how each component relates to one another and thus can create a more complete fictional encyclopedia in their head. However, in general, a television show is always considered to be official, while secondary components are usually apocryphal at best. There are a few reasons why canonical transmedia texts are so infrequent in television.

First, one of the major sources of contention in the 2007-2008 Writer's Strike was distinguishing between promotional and original content. Because they considered streaming video and ancillary content to be promotional, studios did not provide television writers adequate residual rates for online content. In one case, NBC Universal asked the writers of the *Battlestar Galactica* to develop a webisode series, yet the network refused to pay the writers for their work, claiming such content was 'promotional.'<sup>75</sup> This debate continues to hinder the possibility of fully canonized transmedia stories. Television writers are not willing to devote their time and energy to produce content that might be considered promotional and thus not worthy of compensation.

Most often, a third party team writes and develops transmedia extensions, leaving the possibility for damaging inconsistencies and contradictions. To guard against these

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<sup>74</sup> *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics, and Production at the Jim Henson Company*.

<sup>75</sup> Goldman, Eric. "Battlestar Galactica Producer Talks Strike." Ign.com. 7 November 2007. <<http://tv.ign.com/articles/833/833633p1.html>>

“insincere mistakes”<sup>76</sup> producers either disregard an extension as non-canon, or pick out some canon elements from it. Most fans accept the showrunner’s decision about what is canon and what is not. Joss Whedon, for example, has publicly stated the Season 8 *Buffy* comic series is an official text in the Buffyverse.<sup>77</sup> Of course, because *Buffy* is no longer on the air, Whedon has the luxury of writing storylines without worrying about future inconsistencies in the show.

Secondary texts are also considered non-canonical so that traditional television viewers do not feel required to consume them in order to enjoy the show. However, by considering the television show the only official text, television producers risk stamping additional media components as “optional cash-grabbing fluff.”<sup>78</sup> While this may indeed be the case, a lack of authenticity hurts a loyal fan’s opportunity to deepen their experience of the world and come away with a fuller understanding of it. For this reason, in Chapter 4 I argue that balancing the demands of loyal and casual fans is not a function of the canonicity of the information, but rather the type of narrative information addressed.

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<sup>76</sup> Paul Levitz, President of DC Comics, describes two types of “continuity mismatches.” He says there are sincere mistakes and insincere mistakes. Sincere mistakes are minor and easily forgivable. Insincere mistakes damage the brand, forcing the viewer to ask, “Didn’t the moron read anything that happened before?” In Ford, Sam. “Transmedia Properties.” Convergence Culture Consortium.

<sup>77</sup> Vineyard, Jennifer. “Joss Whedon Sends Buffy Back To The Future In New Season-Eight Comic.” *VH1.com* 2 July 2008.

<<http://www.vh1.com/movies/news/articles/1590279/20080701/story.jhtml>>

<sup>78</sup> Long, Geoffrey. *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics, and Production at the Jim Henson Company*, 40.

## 2.4 Balancing Hard-Core and Casual Fans

Satisfying both hard-core fans and casual fans is a major dilemma in transmedia storytelling. As *The Matrix* franchise illustrates, if the components of transmedia narrative rely too heavily on one another, they can be incomprehensible for the average consumer. Yet in franchises like *Hellboy*, if the components of a transmedia narrative are too loosely connected, with some functioning as speculative fiction, devoted fans may lose interest.<sup>79</sup> Thus, transmedia creators face “the Goldilocks paradox”: too much interdependence and the core narrative is confusing; too little interdependence and the extensions are worthless.

To further complicate matters, many different types of consumers watch television. Jenkins introduces three broad categories: zappers, casuals, and loyals.<sup>80</sup> Zappers might watch snippets of an episode as it airs whereas loyals form a prolonged relationship with the television show across seasons. Casuals fall somewhere in between, watching a full episode when they have the time. These same categories can also be applied to the multiplatform environment. A Zapper might watch the *Star Trek* movie trailer briefly on their way to Facebook, but a loyal will scrutinize a site like Memory Alpha<sup>81</sup> for more information on the Trek universe. Thus, television producers must not only balance catering to loyals and casuals in the television show (shifting between episodic and serial tendencies) but they also must cater to different types of multiplatform users.

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<sup>79</sup> Long notes that the *Hellboy* universe may have been a commercial success, but it also contained many inconsistencies and oddities that frustrated fans. Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*.

<sup>81</sup> Fan wiki for all things *Star Trek*.

Alexander Austin, in his master's thesis *Expectations Across Entertainment Media*, discusses the role of the "implicit contract" between audiences and media providers.<sup>82</sup> He breaks down the agreements of the contract in its simplest terms:

The Audience offers the Provider  
Their time  
Their attention  
And sometimes (e.g. movies, cable TV) their money.

The Provider offers the Audience  
Entertainment  
And the delivery structure they expect.

Whenever an entertainment provider violates the implicit contract created by the audience's expectations (through intrusive advertising or clumsy product placement, for example), they risk alienating their audience.<sup>83</sup>

The implicit contract is much more complicated, of course, and Austin develops the intricacies in his thesis. Hard-core fans might expect a deep, complex narrative world to explore, whereas a casual fan might want an understandable and familiar story line.<sup>84</sup> A hard-core fan may be satisfied with a small bit of learned information in a narrative extension, whereas a casual fan may expect to learn a great deal of information for having to migrate to other media.

I do not mean to suggest that all dedicated, hard-core fans will migrate across platforms and participate in the alternate reality game, play the videogame, or watch the webisodes. Nor will all casual fans be limited to watching the television show. But for

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<sup>82</sup> *Expectations Across Entertainment Media*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Master's Thesis, 2007

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

purposes of this thesis, I'd like to focus on two distinct ends of the spectrum: hard-core fans and casual fans.

Hard-core fans are the equivalent of typical "cult" fans. They watch and re-watch every episode. They enthusiastically consume ancillary texts and join communities to actively discuss the show. Most often, hard-core fans are interested in the dense mythology of the show. In the era of Television 2.0, their implicit contract might look like this:

The Hard-Core Fan offers the Provider

Their time

Their attention

Their commitment to all media texts

Their money

Their free labor (by implicitly marketing the show through blogs, social networks etc.)

The Provider offers the Hard-Core Fan

A compelling, coherent story

Multiplatform entertainment

"Insider" information (interaction with the cast and crew)

The opportunity for mastery

Casual fans, in the sense I'm using the term, only watch the television show. Not to be confused with Jenkins' 'casuals,' these fans most likely have seen every episode of a television show, but do not venture into the multiplatform environment. Instead, their knowledge is limited to the plot of the show, however extensive that may be. Casual fans may be intrigued by the mythology of a show, but they do not pursue narrative extensions to build on their understanding of it. Their implicit contract might look like this:

The Casual Fan offers the Provider

Their time

Their attention

The Provider offers the Casual Fan

A compelling, coherent story

By focusing on these two extremes, I will have a more appropriate vocabulary for discussing how a television show might uphold both sets of implicit contracts. Most fans fall in between these extremes, but by satisfying both sets of demands, television producers can be assured that viewers who are comfortable as casual or hard-core fans will be equally satisfied.



### III. Designing Transmedia Narratives

Thus far, I have given an overview of what transmedia storytelling is and why it is important. In this next chapter, I propose some strategies and techniques for crafting a transmedia narrative around a television show. There are, of course, many ways to tell a transmedia story, but as of now, there has been no proven creative model. Though no one knows exactly how to effectively construct and sustain a transmedia narrative, I hope to provide some prescriptive ideas for how a television show might use transmedia to deepen the experience for hard-core fans without alienating traditional television viewers.

#### 3.1 The Art of World building

In a conversation with Henry Jenkins, a Hollywood screenwriter explained how the nature of “the pitch” has changed.

When I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story you didn't really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media.<sup>85</sup>

Part of the shift towards world building, as discussed in Chapter 1, comes from economic incentives. In a well-developed world, every interesting detail can potentially launch a new toy, novel, or game. The *Star Wars* franchise has accumulated an estimated 9 billion dollars of revenue from its toys and merchandise.<sup>86</sup> Like *Star Wars*, the worlds of cult television support an array of merchandizing, inviting fans to collect and find tokens of

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<sup>85</sup> *Convergence Culture*, 114.

<sup>86</sup> Ahrens, Frank. “Final 'Star Wars' Caps Moneymaking Empire.” *The Washington Post*. 14 May 2005.

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2005/05/13/AR2005051301512.html>>

their beloved world. *Lost* for example, offers jump suits, t-shirts, and mugs from the Dharma Initiative, a fictional institution of the show. In doing so, fans can demonstrate their fandom while feeling more a part of the *Lost* universe.

However, Geoffrey Long observes that the shift in emphasis from plot to character to world is not just an opportunity for more branding and merchandise; it is an important strategy for fostering transmedia narratives.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, many cult television shows like *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5*, *Farscape*, *The X-Files*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* present fantastic worlds not just as a backdrop for a narrative timeline, but also as a diverse and vivid geographical domain, ripe for new adventures and discoveries. In these worlds, ordinary people suddenly develop superhuman powers (*Heroes*), female slayers protect humans from vampires, demons, and werewolves (*Buffy*), and a space crew goes where no one has gone before (*Star Trek*). For many fans of these shows, the question is not ‘what will happen to Hiro, Buffy, or Captain Kirk?’ but ‘what will happen in a world full of superheroes, vampires, and aliens?’

As Long points out, transmedia narratives are often the story of a world. *Star Wars*, for example, cannot be easily summarized in terms of a specific character (is it about Luke or Anakin?) or in terms of a specific plot line (is it about learning to become a Jedi or defeating the evil empire?). The *Star Wars* narrative branches off into so many different video games, comics, novels, and movies that it has become the story of a world, or more precisely, of “a galaxy far, far away.”<sup>88</sup> Long concludes:

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<sup>87</sup> *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics, and Production at the Jim Henson Company*.

<sup>88</sup> The *Star Wars* universe serves as a useful model for world building because it has influenced many writers and producers of cult television today. As Jesse Alexander, a writer on *Heroes*, proclaimed, “everything I know about transmedia, I learned from *Star Wars*.” In

When developing a narrative that's meant to extend across multiple media forms, the world must be considered a primary character of its own, because *many transmedia narratives aren't the story of one character at all, but the story of a world*. Special attention must be paid to developing a stage upon which multiple storylines (often in different media types) can unfurl, and every story must maintain the consistency of that world.<sup>89</sup> (original emphasis)

Emphasizing the “stage” or “backdrop” to a television show does not reduce the importance of characters. Engaging characters are essential for identification and emotional connection. In fact, some transmedia narratives do just fine around a primary character like James Bond. But while characters can grow old, plot lines overused and tired, worlds always have the potential to remain fresh. This leads me to my first suggestion: **a transmedia/television producer should construct a story that involves not just a timeline to be followed, but also a world to be discovered**. In order to offer some techniques in the world building process, I look towards the medium that excels in this area – video games.<sup>90</sup>

Historically, game designers have always been more interested in level design and realistic graphics than character and plot development. This does not mean, however, that narrative disappears in video games. Rather, in “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” Jenkins introduces the term “environmental storytelling” to describe how game designers

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Taylor, Alice. “Hollywood & Games: An Interview with Jesse Alexander.” *Wonderland Blog*. <<http://www.wonderlandblog.com/wonderland/2007/06/hollywood-games.html>>

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>90</sup> The video game industry (which includes computer games) also constantly struggles to appeal to both hard-core gamers and casual gamers (however you define them). In Morris, Chris. “Requiem For The Hardcore.” *Forbes.com*. 9 September 2008.

<[http://www.forbes.com/2008/09/29/hardcore-casual-gamer-tech-personal-cx\\_cm\\_0930hardcore.html](http://www.forbes.com/2008/09/29/hardcore-casual-gamer-tech-personal-cx_cm_0930hardcore.html)>

incorporate narrative into spatial structures.<sup>91</sup> According to Jenkins, environmental storytelling is accomplished by creating a space that evokes a pre-existing narrative, providing a stage to enact a narrative, presenting narrative information within the mise-en-scene, or encouraging new narratives to be built by the player. I would argue that transmedia storytelling involves the opposite process – incorporating spatial structures into narratives to develop *a storytelling environment*. In other words, by evoking the presence of a larger spatial structure in the narrative, a transmedia story can support a near infinite amount of plots and characters.

Matt Hills calls this concept the **hyperdiegesis**, “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nonetheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension.”<sup>92</sup> To use a cliché, a hyperdiegesis is like revealing only the tip of the iceberg. By presenting a well-defined, intricate, and coherent space, audiences are left to imagine a larger world and deeper mythology. For example, Derek Johnson observes that the fictional institutions of *Star Trek* (The Federation), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Watcher’s Council), *24* (CTU), and *Lost* (Dharma Initiative) suggest an extensive expanse that can be filled in either through fan fiction or transmedia storytelling.<sup>93</sup>

Part of the importance of a hyperdiegesis is purely practical. Because television shows are usually soft transmedia narratives, there needs to be enough ‘untouched’ space to expand the world without contradictions. In addition, creating the impression of a vast

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<sup>91</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “Game Design as Narrative Architecture.” *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004. 118-120.

<sup>92</sup> Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*, 137.

<sup>93</sup> “The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*.” *Reading Lost*.

fictional space and history ignites audience's imaginations, resulting in a more immersive experience. As Sara Gwenllian-Jones notes in her essay, "Virtual Reality and Cult Television:"

The cosmologies of fantasy genre cult television series...present exotic and ethereal fictional worlds to which the alchemy of textual data and imagination transports the reader, facilitating a pleasurable psychic sense of "being there" as the action unfolds. Successful fictional worlds are a matter not only of textual surface but also environmental *texture*; they create an impression of spatial presence and of solid geography, of gravity, height, distance, terrain, climate, and so on.<sup>94</sup>

All of these textual details, Gwenllian-Jones argues, invite a viewer to "actively create belief"<sup>95</sup> and form a sophisticated virtual world that appears to be inhabitable. Fans invest tremendous effort in developing a fictional encyclopedia for such a world, logging every narrative detail in order to flesh out the world and make it more real. A fully furnished environment helps build a hyperdiegesis, a vast expanse that is only partially seen. For example, the *Star Trek's* frequent references to the Klingon culture allow a viewer to imagine a larger cosmology, well beyond the scope of the Enterprise's travels.

Gwenllian-Jones offers four broad narrative formats for cult television that facilitate the worldbuilding process: the travelogue, nodal, combination, and portal. The travelogue follows the nomadic lifestyle of a protagonist(s) across multiple locations, such as Xena, who travels across realms inhabited by supernatural and fantastical creatures. The nodal format consists of a single stable location such as *Deep Space Nine* where most of the action is on the space station. In combination formats, the characters inhabit a localized space in addition to traveling across exotic worlds (i.e. *Star Trek*). Finally,

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<sup>94</sup> *Cult TV*, 84.

<sup>95</sup> Janet Murray uses the phrase "create belief" instead of the more passive "suspend disbelief." In *Cult TV*.

portal formats, like *Buffy*, take a presumably naturalistic world and add fantasy and science fiction elements to it. All of these categories afford entry into the fictional world because they present hyperdiegetic depth, even in a contained setting. *Deep Space Nine* and *Buffy*, for example, feature a diverse range of character species, costumes, and customs, hinting at a much larger universe. Thus, Gwennlian-Jones' categories, though not exclusive, provide a useful framework for creating a fictional world that has "inexhaustible possibility."<sup>96</sup>

In contrast, *Twin Peaks* struggled to expand its world beyond the location of the town; the series revolved around a single mystery, 'Who Killed Laura Palmer?' This type of narrative hook, once resolved, left no room for further expansion and development. By the time the show tried to open the world up by leaning heavily on sci-fi elements, the plot became so obscure and drawn out that it caused many people to abandon it.<sup>97</sup> Whereas *Twin Peaks* was centered on one 'closed' narrative question, a show with an effective hyperdiegesis can support many questions and narratives across multiple media.

Perhaps a useful litmus test for a proposed transmedia world might be the question, 'Would a gamer want to navigate this universe?' Jon Stovey and Helen Kennedy describe the structure of the computer games *Myst* and *Doom*:

Both are spatial journeys...*Doom* and *Myst* present the user with a space to be traversed, to be mapped out by moving through it. Both begin by dropping the player somewhere in this space. Before reaching the end of the game narrative, the player must visit most of it, uncovering its geometry and topology, learning its logic and its secrets...In contrast to modern literature, theater, and cinema which are built around the psychological tensions between the characters and the movement in psychological space, these computer games return us to the ancient forms of narrative where the plot is driven by the spatial movement of the main hero,

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>97</sup> Abbot, Stacey. "How *Lost* found its audience: The Making of a Cult Blockbuster." *Reading Lost*

traveling through distant lands to save the princess, to find the treasure, to defeat the Dragon, and so on.<sup>98</sup>

Transmedia storytelling, like *Doom* and *Myst*, present a world to be traversed and explored. The consumer might watch the television show to follow the journey of saving the princess, play the alternate reality game to find the treasure, then defeat the Dragon through the videogame. As a whole, these experiences position the hard-core fan as “the main hero” who drives the plot forward through their own spatial movements. Just as a character in a videogame discovers a new part of a world by entering a new level or area, a hard-core fan discovers a new part of a transmedia world by purchasing a new novel, movie, or comic book. As hard-core fans navigate the nuances of a world, casual fans can imagine a vast expanse (hyperdiegesis) without having to explore it further. It is the same logic as many role-playing games: hard-core fans can get the full experience by following every side mission, while casual fans can focus on the main quest and see how the primary story unfolds. In any case, a transmedia creator should evoke the spatial dimensions of a world in order to encourage hard-core fans to “play” within it.

### **3.2 Inviting Exploration**

Once the foundation for a world is set, a transmedia creator must then motivate audiences to explore its various extensions across media. The television show should *invite* hard-core fans to track down ancillary content and improve their overall experience. At the same time, these invitations must not make casual fans feel obligated to participate in transmedia consumption. In order to understand how this might work, we must first consider the unique capabilities of television.

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<sup>98</sup> *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*. New York: Open University Press, 2006.

In his book *Television Culture*, John Fiske draws on Roland Barthes to distinguish between two types of texts: ‘readerly’ texts and ‘writerly’ texts.<sup>99</sup> Readerly texts are most popular because they invite a narrow interpretation – the audience can easily uncover the text’s pre-determined meaning. For example, when viewing *Die Hard*, audiences expend very little effort to make sense out of the film; rather, they can enjoy its thin plot and action sequences as pure entertainment. Writerly texts, on the other hand, resist closure and coherence, requiring much more interpretive effort. They involve an unfamiliar discourse that is difficult to decipher. Avant-garde films are writerly because they rely on the audience to find some semblance of meaning and as a result, do not attract a wide audience.

Yet some texts are both readerly and writerly. Fiske expands on Barthes’s categories to offer a third: producerly texts. Like readerly texts, producerly texts are popular and easy to read, but they also have the openness of writerly texts. Producerly texts incorporate many “loose ends” and “gaps” but audiences can draw on their own feelings and experiences to fill them in and produce their own meanings. Producerly texts may be open, but different readers can easily read them in different ways. Fiske argues that television, as a medium, operates in this way:

Television is a producerly medium: the work of the institutional producers of its programs requires the producerly work of the viewers and has only limited control over that work... The pleasure and power of making meanings, of participating in the mode of representation, of playing in the semiotic process – these are some of the most significant and empowering pleasures that television has to offer.<sup>100</sup>

Television is producerly because no single author can impose a single meaning on the

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<sup>99</sup> *Television Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1987.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.



audience. Rather, television viewers participate in a “semiotic democracy,” where they bring their own experiences and beliefs to engage with a text and thereby produce meanings that give them pleasure.<sup>101</sup> For example, Fiske notes that live sports games invite disagreement and interpretation from the audience. The commentators may offer their opinion on a particular play or call, but the viewer can look at the footage and disagree based on their own experiences of playing the sport. Similarly, Fiske argues, viewers form strong emotional connections to characters on television because they can understand and relate to how the characters act out problems. Fiske says that because television characters enter a viewer’s home at a set time each week, there is a sense of “nowness” and “liveness.” Characters become familiar faces as they continue to return week after week, seemingly existing even when the television is turned off. Television’s characters thus invite the viewer to draw on their own experiences and relate to the characters as if they were real people. This producerliness is attributed to why “cult” fans become such loyal and devoted followers of a television show – they assign deeper, more personal meanings to the characters of the show than non-fans.<sup>102</sup>

A producerly text is one that can be enjoyed and accessed on multiple levels. Its openness can be read on the surface level, or it can promote more active interpretation. As an example, consider *Twin Peaks*. At first glance, the show appears to be writerly due to its avant-garde and surreal tendencies. It also appears to be writerly because it encourages the use of VCRs to figure out the meanings of many hidden clues. Subscribers to

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Porter, Patrick. “Buffy vs. Dracula. Intertextuality, Carnival, and Cult.” *Refractory Journal of Entertainment Media*. 9 (2006).

<<http://blogs.arts.unimelb.edu.au/refractory/2006/07/04/buffy-vs-dracula%E2%80%9Dintertextuality-carnival-and-cult-patrick-j-porter/>>

alt.tv.twinpeaks exchanged videotapes, deciphered cryptic dialogue, and analyzed sequences of events.<sup>103</sup> This would suggest that *Twin Peaks* is writerly because of the tremendous effort expended to make sense out of the show. Yet *Twin Peaks* was also a popular culture icon, garnering huge ratings for ABC in its first season<sup>104</sup> – how do we account for such mass appeal? If we understand *Twin Peaks* as a producerly text, the answer becomes clear. As Jenkins puts it:

‘People who didn’t get it’ might have related it to another level, either as part of the plot, or as invoking a different set of references that meshed with their own personal experiences...Here the viewer is central and meaning derives from what people make of the program, through their interactions with what they see and chains of association it forms with them. *TP* was very open this way. There was something for everyone and that added to the pleasure.<sup>105</sup>

*Twin Peaks* was not so writerly that it was absolutely incomprehensible; rather, people could relate to it on different levels. The show’s narrative was complete with cryptic messages, riddles, conundrums, dreams, clues, secret passages, idiosyncratic characters, ominous figures, and a soap opera narrative structure.<sup>106</sup> Viewers were satisfied in making meaning from any combination of these elements.

Producerly texts are incredibly important in balancing hard-core and casual fans. In the case of *Twin Peaks*, casual fans could assign their own meaning to the show while hard-core fans had the opportunity to work harder and find deeper meanings. Producerly

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<sup>103</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “‘Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?’: alt.tv.twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery.” *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*. Ed. David Lavery. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995. 51-70.

<sup>104</sup> Carter, Bill. “The Media Business: ‘Twin Peaks’ May Provide A Ratings Edge for ABC.” *The New York Times*. 16 April 1990.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/16/business/the-media-business-twin-peaks-may-provide-a-ratings-edge-for-abc.html?sec=&spon=>>

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Reeves et al. “Postmodernism and Television: Speaking of *Twin Peaks*.” *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*.

<sup>106</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “‘Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?’” *Full of Secrets*.

texts, then, carve out room for transmedia storytelling, inviting hard-core fans to increase their expertise and create deeper meanings by seeking out further narrative information.

For example, fans looking to solve the mystery, ‘Who killed Laura Palmer?’ had the option of buying *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*, a hidden diary with missing pages. The book provided a candid look into Laura Palmer’s life as she balances prostitution and cocaine with her status as a homecoming queen and high school student. But the novel also added insights into Laura’s relationship with BOB, a mysterious being who sexually abuses and terrorizes her, and suggested that perhaps he may be her father.<sup>107</sup> The knowledge allowed hard-core fans to interpret references in the show at a different level than the mainstream, casual fans. Transmedia storytelling, then, legitimates “cult” fans by giving them the resources with which to experience a producerly text in a more meaningful way.

To give fans more ‘interpretative tools’, **a television/transmedia producer should incorporate strategic gaps into a core narrative and reserve these gaps to be filled in or better understood through narrative extensions.** A strategic gap may be the cornerstone of a show or a minute detail. But in both cases there must be sufficient room for a narrative extension to add distinct and valuable information. Narrative extensions can offer clues to solving important mysteries and/or provide explicit answers to nonessential questions.

First, narrative extensions can contribute to a kind of game, where viewer-players try to figure out the core mysteries of a show. Matt Hills describes “**endlessly deferred narratives**” as promoting infinite interpretation and speculation regarding a particular

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<sup>107</sup> Desmet, Christy. “The Canonization of Laura Palmer.” *Full of Secrets*.

question.<sup>108</sup> This “undecidability” of cult television is exemplified by questions like, What is Rambaldi’s endgame? Who is Doctor Who? What is the mysterious island? These central mysteries are often repeated and alluded to, but never fully resolved (until the end of the series). Endlessly deferred narratives postpone solutions to encourage investigation, providing a goal and a quest for hard-core fans to hunt down transmedia content and scrutinize episodes for clues towards their next theory.

Fans of *Twin Peaks* centered their discussion on Palmer’s murder, examining even the smallest gesture from one character to another.<sup>109</sup> The Internet intensifies this process of hunting and gathering information, comparing notes with one another, and collaborating to develop theories. Transmedia extensions such as *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* can be another tool for fans to produce their own meanings and theories as they make sense out of endlessly deferred narratives.<sup>110</sup>

As Jenkins notes however, fans assumed that David Lynch, the creator of *Twin Peaks*, had a reason for his madness: “the complexity of Lynch’s text justified the viewers’ assumption that no matter how closely they looked, whatever they found there was not only intentional but part of the narrative master plan, pertinent to understanding textual secrets.”<sup>111</sup> Invariably, the very fact that a specific question had been built up to become an obsession increased the likelihood that the answer would be disappointing. David Lynch reflects on the anticlimactic nature of ending an endlessly deferred narrative:

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<sup>108</sup> *Fan Cultures*, 101.

<sup>109</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “Do you Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?” *Full of Secrets*.

<sup>110</sup> *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* became a New York Times Bestseller. In Askwith, Ivan. *TV 2.0: Reconceptualizing Television as an Engagement Medium*.

<sup>111</sup> Jenkins, Henry. “Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?” *Full of Secrets*.

It's human nature...to have tremendous let down once you receive the answer to a question, especially one that you've been searching for and waiting for. It's a momentous thrill, but it's followed by a kind of depression. And so I don't know what will happen. But the murder of Laura Palmer is...it's a complicated story.<sup>112</sup>

Indeed, after the revelation of Laura Palmer's murder, the show lacked narrative focus and ratings plummeted.<sup>113</sup> This suggests that perhaps the fun and playfulness of traversing media in an attempt to solve an endlessly deferred mystery can actually be more rewarding than the narrative pay-off itself.<sup>114</sup> Fans take pleasure in hypothesizing about many aspects of the story, demonstrating their expertise in the process.<sup>115</sup> As one fan put it, "I don't care who killed Laura Palmer. I just love the puzzle."<sup>116</sup> For many fans of *Twin Peaks*, using their collective intelligence to match wits with David Lynch, the "trickster author," was the main appeal in watching the show.<sup>117</sup> Unfortunately, *Twin Peaks*' jarring resolution and ratings downfall illustrates the problem of centering a show on a single endlessly deferred mystery. So while transmedia extensions that offer clues to a central enigma can be fun, they also can frustrate fans by 'hying up' the resolution and setting them up for disappointment. As a result, television shows can invite transmedia exploration in more subtle ways.

Geoffrey Long argues that transmedia stories should create "passing references to external people, places, or events" which act as "**potential migratory cues**" or signals

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<sup>112</sup> Hayward, Jennifer. *Consuming pleasures: active audiences and serial fictions from Dickens to soap opera*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997.

<sup>113</sup> Abbot, Stacey. "How *Lost* found its audience: The Making of a Cult Blockbuster." *Reading Lost*.

<sup>114</sup> This theory is further supported in my Chapter 4 discussion of *Lost*.

<sup>115</sup> Jenkins, Henry. "Getting Lost." *Henryjenkins.org*. 25 August 2006.

<[http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/08/getting\\_lost.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/08/getting_lost.html)>

<sup>116</sup> Jenkins, Henry. "Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?" *Full of Secrets*.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

towards future narratives.<sup>118</sup> These passing references can be developed or “actualized” in other media, adding insight into the story world without becoming a requirement for comprehension. For example, in season one of *Heroes*, the character Hiro goes back in time and falls in love with a waitress named Charlie. While viewers only see glimpses of that affair on television, *Heroes* released an entire novel called *Saving Charlie* revolving around their relationship. In this case, the potential migratory cue of Charlie and Hiro’s relationship was *actualized* in the novel.

Long also draws on Roland Barthes’ **hermeneutic codes** to provide five categories for potential migratory cues: cultural (anything hinting at a larger culture), character (characters that do not appear on screen), chronological (referenced events in the past, present, or future), geographic (places that appear only briefly on screen), environmental (flora and fauna), and ontological (the existential nature of the story).<sup>119</sup> Casual fans have the capacity to fill in these gaps with their own imagination in the core narrative, but crucially, these gaps have the potential to be actualized or explained in secondary texts.

We may look at NBC’s *Heroes* as an example. *Heroes* tells the story of ordinary individuals who develop superhuman powers. The show excels at actualizing character hermeneutic codes and developing back-stories. One of the main characters, a genetics professor from India, discovers important research from his father, who died early in season 1. A *Heroes* graphic novel fleshes out the relationship between Mohinder and his father, revealing that Mohinder came to trust his father’s scientific beliefs at an early age. In another example, the graphic novel “The Crane” reveals that Hiro’s grandfather had

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<sup>118</sup> *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics, and Production at the Jim Henson Company*.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

survived Hiroshima, providing another reason why Hiro was so motivated to save the world from a large explosion. These back-stories are based off questions that a casual fan would not think to ask during the television broadcast, but they provide greater depth into the world of *Heroes* for hard-core fans.

*Heroes* also makes use of cultural migratory cues. In season 1, Hiro believes that a Japanese Kensei Sword holds the power to focusing his ability. While the television show never fully explains the history of the sword or why it is important, a five-part documentary about its founder, Takezo Kensei, provides an in-depth look at sword's legend, complete with epic battles, dragons, and princesses. Again, this back-story allowed hard-core fans to increase their mastery and knowledge of the show without confusing traditional television viewers.

In both Hills' endlessly deferred narratives and Long's hermeneutic codes, narrative gaps exist for transmedia extensions to emerge. Transmedia extensions can help fans hypothesize about an endlessly deferred narrative, allowing them to produce more informed meanings and interpretations, or, as with Long's hermeneutic codes, transmedia extensions can explicitly answer questions that were not essential to a core narrative. Either way, the process of filling in narrative gaps has unique potential in television.

Consider John Fiske's assessment of television's "nowness:"

The future of television serial appears to be unwritten, like the real future, but unlike that in a book or film, whose readers know that the end has already been written and will eventually be revealed to them. The suspense in television, its resolution of uncertainty, engages the viewer more intensely because its enigmas appear to be unresolved and the viewer is invited to experience their resolution, not merely learn of it.<sup>120</sup>

Television's "nowness" and immediacy allows hard-core fans to pursue migratory cues

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<sup>120</sup> *Television Culture*, 97.

and attempt to fill in gaps all while the primary text's narrative is still unfolding. This creates a ludic quality to the meaning-making process. Viewer-players scavenge for narrative information across media texts and can receive seemingly instantaneous reward for their efforts, as I will discuss in 3.4. In the case of endlessly deferred narratives, viewer-players can use ancillary texts to improve their hypotheses on central enigmas and then tune in each week to see if the next episode confirms their theories. Likewise, by pursuing Long's migratory cues, viewer-players can increase their expertise and develop their ability to find deeper meaning in future episodes.

### **3.3 Designing Expansion**

So far, a transmedia producer should develop the spatial dimensions of a world and leave narrative gaps to facilitate exploration and discovery. But how should the secondary texts be crafted? By definition, transmedia extensions should add some insight into the overarching narrative. And they should be integrated through various forms of migratory cues. But in this section, I argue that transmedia extensions should be understood as individual experiences, not just sources for more narrative information. **A**

**transmedia/television producer should make the process of discovering narrative information a fun and worthwhile experience in its own right.** Obviously, different types of extensions have different potential for creating enjoyable experiences. As such, I examine transmedia extensions in the form of a **'new episode,' diegetic artifact, or alternate reality.**



### 3.3.1 “New Episode” Extensions

As the name suggests, “new episode” extensions are essentially a new episode(s) of the TV series, only in a different form of media.<sup>121</sup> These may exist as graphic novels (*Heroes*), videogames (*Alias: Underground*), webisodes (*24: Conspiracy*), or mobisodes (*Battlestar Galactica: The Resistance*), and function as spin-offs, sequels, prequels, or fillers, but in all cases, new episode extensions must satisfy two requirements. They must be tonally and thematically consistent with the television show and they must be a transparent mode of storytelling. That is, unlike diegetic artifact and alternate reality extensions, new episode extensions maintain the boundary between the fictional world and everyday life.<sup>122</sup> Audiences take pleasure in experiencing the television narrative through the lens of a different medium and can do so from the comfort of the outside world looking in.

In one example of a new episode extension, Joss Whedon continued the storyline of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* into a comic series known as “Season 8.” The comic book reads like an episode from the show, with the same characters, mythology, and fantastical creatures. Except, Whedon understands that a comic should not be *exactly* like a television episode:

The show was very mundane, deliberately mundane...A comic has got to work on a

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<sup>121</sup> Jason Mittell first used the term “new episode” as a category to describe some video games’ relationship to serial narratives. In “Serial Narratives and Tie-In Games: Problems, Possibilities and Pleasures.” Unpublished paper presented at Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Vancouver, Canada, March 2006.

<sup>122</sup> These are a similar category to what Ivan Askwith calls “narrative extensions” in *TV 2.0: Reconceptualizing Television*, which are also unique for acknowledging themselves as a mode of storytelling. However, unlike my use of ‘new episode,’ Askwith does not include role-playing games in his category of narrative extensions. (whereas I have included video games)

grander, epic scale. We can really take the characters wherever we want... That's where the fun is, in revisiting these characters. It's like being with my old friends, but in actuality, not being with my old friends, because the actors aren't there to play them. It's a little different. It's a symphony based on the little tune we played.<sup>123</sup>

Whedon knows that extending a storyline into a new medium means that the story must be altered to fit the capabilities of the medium, while also maintaining the integrity of the show. So while Whedon can afford to be more fantastical and “grand” in his presentation of a comic book narrative (due to lack of financial and personnel limitations), the characters’ actions must still be consistent with the beloved characters from the show. Each medium has different storytelling possibilities: books can add psychological depth to characters, video games can put spatial dimensions into a story, and films can provide visually stunning sequences. Thus, new episode extensions can offer fresh experiences based on how well they capture the same appealing qualities of a television show, while also taking advantage of the medium’s unique storytelling potential.

### 3.3.2 Diegetic Artifact Extensions

Askwith uses the term “diegetic extensions” to describe transmedia extensions that originate in the fictional universe, but are available to explore in the actual world.<sup>124</sup> Janet Murray calls these “hyperserials” or virtual artifacts from the fictional space of the TV

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<sup>123</sup> Vineyard, Jennifer. “Re-Buffered: New Comic Book Series Resurrects Vampire Slayer.” *MTV.com*. 1 February 2007.

<<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1551286/20070131/index.jhtml>>

<sup>124</sup> Askwith develops the category “diegetic extensions” in *TV 2.0: Reconceptualizing Television*. However, Askwith distinguishes between diegetic artifacts (“objects that have explicit significance in the core television narrative”) and diegetic extensions (“objects that do not appear in the core narrative, but are presented as if they exist within the diegetic space of the program”). For purposes of simplicity, I will conflate these categories into one.

series.<sup>125</sup> These may come in the form of diaries, legal certificates, telephone messages, instant messages, and e-mail messages. John Caldwell presents three types of digital artifacts: characterized proliferations, narrativized elaborations, and back-story textuality.<sup>126</sup> Characterized proliferations enable users to explore items from a character's life.<sup>127</sup> For example, on DawsonsCreek.com, users could explore Dawson's emails, IM chats, journals, and trashed items. Narrativized elaborations "allow the narrative arc to continue outside the show."<sup>128</sup> And back-story textuality increases "intimacy" with a character by providing more in depth character development, like a college essay or blog post. However, as Askwith argues, these categories often blend together, making it difficult to differentiate between the three.<sup>129</sup> Thus, I find it useful to break down hyperserials into two broad categories: character artifacts and institutional artifacts.

### **Character Artifacts**

Dawson's Desktop is an excellent example of a character artifact. The site filled in gaps between aired episodes (narrative elaborations) but also gave users the opportunity to dig around Dawson's trash bin (characterized proliferations).<sup>130</sup> Fans could even send their own e-mails to Dawson as if they were fellow students.<sup>131</sup> Character artifacts are usually based off characters appearing in the show. Examples include *The Office's* Shrute Space

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<sup>125</sup> *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: The Free Press, 1997.

<sup>126</sup> "Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration." *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>129</sup> *TV 2.0: Reconceptualizing Television*.

<sup>130</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*, 115.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

(the blog of Dwight Shrute) or *24*'s 'Palmer Campaign,' which allowed users to gain insight on Senator Palmer's political platform and his stance on issues like wildlife protection and clean energy.<sup>132</sup>

One interesting character artifact comes from the second episode of *Heroes*. Hiro, a computer programmer who can bend time and space, discovers a comic book called *9<sup>th</sup> Wonders!*. The comic book is the creation of another main character named Isaac Mendez, an artist who can accurately draw the future. Hiro frequently consults the comic to see what will happen next. And when the *9<sup>th</sup> Wonders!* went online, viewers could follow the painter's prophecies along with Hiro.

### **Institutional Artifacts**

As Derek Johnson has argued, many cult television shows depend on the presence of institutions to expand a hyperdiegesis.<sup>133</sup> Institutional artifacts usually come in the form of novels or websites. *The House Special Subcommittee's Findings at CTU* was a novel framed as a piece of investigative journalism from within *24*'s story world. Published to expose declassified documents and transcripts from The C.I.A's Counter Terrorism Unit, the author claims that "24" was the code-name given by the news media to refer to the scandal in the agency.<sup>134</sup> The book jacket reads: "This report names names, wags fingers in some surprising new directions, and may even serve to clear some well-positioned scapegoats of culpability...It's the kind of drama you only expect to see on TV." By

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<sup>132</sup> Johnson, Derek . "Inviting Audiences In: The spatial reorganization of production and consumption in 'TVIII'." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. 5, 1 (2007): 61-80.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Cerasini, Marc and Alfonsi, Alice. *The House Special Subcommittee's Findings at CTU*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003.

positioning the book within *24*'s hyperdiegetic space, readers play the role of a citizen in the show's universe. While no one would mistake *The House Special Subcommittee's Findings at CTU* for non-fiction, many fans took pleasure in immersing themselves within *24*'s diegesis and imagining Jack Bauer as a real person.

In both character and institutional artifacts, television moves even closer from our living rooms into our everyday lives. Their effectiveness seems to be judged based on how well they bring elements of the fictional world into the actual world, while also improving our understanding of the television show. Yet as mentioned in 3.1, institutional artifacts are generally better for worldbuilding than character artifacts. Institutional artifacts encourage characters to play a role, but it is a role that exists comfortably in the off-screen space of a show's hyperdiegesis. In contrast, character artifacts may allow more direct interaction with a character, but such interactivity risks bringing fans 'too close' to the action of the show. In her study on the relationship between the television show *Spooks* and its ancillary games, Elizabeth Jane Evans argues that fans want to maintain a distinction between themselves and the television characters in the show.<sup>135</sup> They want to "imagine what another person must feel like in their situation without for a moment confusing ourselves with that other person."<sup>136</sup> Yet when we interact with institutional artifacts, we do not play our actual selves, as much as we play a character in the same world as the characters on the show. This role is intensified through alternate reality extensions.

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<sup>135</sup> Evans, Elizabeth Jane. "Character, Audience Agency and Transmedia Drama." *Media Culture Society*. 30, 2 (2008): 197-213.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 205

### 3.3.3 Alternate Reality Extensions

Alternate reality extensions allow people to play a role as a member of the narrative world and challenge the boundaries between the reality of the show and everyday life. Generally, only the most devoted fans participate in alternate reality extensions. However, these extensions offer the most interactive and immersive experience within the diegetic world of the television show. Sometimes an ARG<sup>137</sup> can run concurrently with the television show, such as *Alias*, *ReGenesis*, and *Push, Nevada*. In the *Alias* ARG, participants paid close attention to the show in order to follow the clues of the ARG. For instance, after seeing two characters memorize a binary code in the show, viewer-players entered the same binary code into an online chatbot, receiving a URL where they could access a secret message from a major character on the show.<sup>138</sup>

Alternate reality games do not just exist on the computer; they can also incorporate SMS messaging, voicemail, newspapers, billboards, flyers, and live events. Steven Jones argues that many fans enjoy the simple act of crossing the fictional world and the actual world:

Part of the fun of such intermediation is the viewers' or players' pleasure in following the official "hacks" or media re-purposing, crossing the threshold between text and outside world, seeing different media crossed and re-crossed in order to use the media network as the 'platform' for a larger, unstable structure, even if we know that structure is...a marketing device for an entertainment product."<sup>139</sup>

Jones argues that this "threshold crossing," a characteristic of alternate reality games, is similar to early role-playing games, where people acted out imaginary characters and

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<sup>137</sup> Alternate Reality Game.

<sup>138</sup> Ornebring, Henrik. "Alternate Reality Gaming and Convergence Culture."

<sup>139</sup> "Dickens on Lost: Text, Paratext, Fan Based Media." 22 May 2007. Loyola University, Chicago. <[www.rc.umd.edu/reference/wcircle/sejones.pdf](http://www.rc.umd.edu/reference/wcircle/sejones.pdf)>

fantasy worlds. However, unlike many fantasy-role playing games, which transport the player into a fictional world, alternate reality games bring the fictional world into everyday life. This can cause some jarring disconnects with television, as I will discuss in Chapter 4.

To conclude, a transmedia extension should not just be something more for the hard-core fans to do, but actually an individually satisfying experience all its own. Though it is impossible to evaluate what makes an extension “fun,” a television/transmedia producer should pay special attention to what kind of story they want to tell and pick the appropriate transmedia extension. New episode extensions blend the appeal of a television show with the capabilities of a new medium. Diegetic artifact extensions let users be a part of the fictional world and alternate reality extensions enable a higher degree of interaction and participation within that world.

### **3.4 The Validation Effect**

After a transmedia producer builds a world, reserves narrative gaps for extensions, and develops worthwhile experiences, adding one more step can be quite gratifying for hard-core fans and at no expense to casual fans. It involves what I will call the “**validation effect**.” The validation effect rewards fans not just with additional knowledge, but also with a sense of recognition for their efforts to pursue narrative information across transmedia extensions. As one fan said of *Doctor Who*, “couldn’t there be something for the faithful viewer? Some reward for staying all 13 weeks?”<sup>140</sup> This reinforcement can

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<sup>140</sup> Russell T. Davies as cited in Perryman Neil. “Doctor Who and the Convergence of

come from seeing a character from the comic book or ARG appear on the television show. A validation can also come in the form of a hidden object in the mise-en-scene, a piece of clothing, or a bit of dialogue referring to the events of an extension that came before it. One might draw from Long's six classes of hermeneutic codes to insert validations in the television show. In any case, a **transmedia/television producer should look for discreet ways to validate narrative extensions, creating a more unified, coherent world.**

I often see the validation effect happening in televised sporting events. For avid fans who know every player's name, stat line, and background on their favorite team, seeing a little known bench player enter the game is an amazing opportunity to demonstrate their masterful knowledge. When people ask, "Who is that guy?" avid fans gladly rattle off the player's information, validating their status as a hard-core aficionado.

The validation effect has its origins, of course, from the *Star Wars* franchise. In the animated *Star Wars Holiday Special* in 1978, a character named Boba Fett appeared.

Damon Lindelof, executive producer of *Lost*, describes the experience:

The special was, like, the worst thing ever...but there was this Boba Fett cartoon. He wasn't a character in Star Wars. He was just an action figure, and it was like, 'Send in a proof-of-purchase, and you get this Boba Fett.' And we were like, 'Who the fuck is Boba Fett?'<sup>141</sup>

Kids obsessed over Boba Fett. They bought the action figure and re-enacted their own stories with it. Two years later, when Boba Fett appeared in *The Empire Strikes Back*, the Boba Fett fans got the ultimate pay-off.<sup>142</sup>

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Media: A Case Study in Transmedia Storytelling." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 20.1 (2008): 21-39.

<sup>141</sup> Kushner, David. "Rebel Alliance." *FastCompany.com*. 11 April 2008.

<<http://www.fastcompany.com/node/798975/print>>

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.



Television's "nowness" has great potential to provide immediate reward for hard-core fans. For example in *ReGenesis*, players of the "extended reality game" worked together to create a report on a suspect. In the following episode, the character on the show received a report via fax and mentioned something to the effect of "our field agents have given me this information."<sup>143</sup> To casual fans, this line means nothing. But to hard-core fans, their work has been validated—they can feel a part of the show. Jeff Gomez sees the validation effect happening in *Heroes*:

Also powerful on the home front, as families gather to watch *Heroes*, a teen fan of the show might recognize a peripheral character making her first appearance on a given night's episode as one he originally read about in the online comic. So our fan takes on the role of gatekeeper for the show, filling in family and friends on the back-story of the character, and giving them a greater appreciation of the show with his "exclusive" knowledge, and making the whole experience more entertaining.<sup>144</sup>

Gomez is referring to Hana Gitelman, also known as "Wireless" due to her ability to communicate with electronic and digital devices. Hana's back-story began in the graphic novels, which explained her past in the Israeli Army and how she first developed her ability to mentally generate text messages. Then, in the episode, "Unexpected," Hana made her television debut. Hana's appearance on the show rewarded fans who were familiar with her back-story, but her role was minimal enough so that casual fans did not need to understand her character. The introduction of Wireless was simultaneously a validation and a migratory cue, as many curious fans went on discussion boards to ask, "Who was that girl?" and were directed to read the graphic novels to find out.

In effect, then, validations can also function as migratory cues for casual fans because they can motivate television viewers to find out the identity of a seemingly random

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Christy Dena. April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>144</sup> Quoted in Jenkins, Henry. "Talking Transmedia: An Interview With Starlight Runner's Jeff Gomez (part one)." *Henryjenkins.org*

character. But for hard-core fans, who are familiar with every text in a transmedia system, the validation effect happens when the *primary* narrative references a *secondary* text previously released. Ideally, both the primary and secondary texts should cross-reference each other, forming a more cohesive unit.

Thus, the validation effect is more than “additive comprehension;”<sup>145</sup> it is an explicit acknowledgment that a viewer-player’s transmedia traversals actually *matter* in some way. Though validations are rarely used today, they can provide a powerful tool for transmedia producers to celebrate hard-core fans without confusing or upsetting casual fans. In Chapter 4, I will explore some examples in *Lost*.

To summarize Chapter 3, a television/transmedia creator can create a transmedia story by following four steps:

- 1.) **Construct a fully furnished world** in order to support multiple story lines. The transmedia world should not only have a complex history, but also implied spatial dimensions in order to encourage exploration and discovery. Hard-core fans can seek out transmedia content to flesh out the world, while casual fans can imagine a vast expanse.
  
- 2.) **Insert strategic narrative gaps** that are reserved for development in transmedia extensions. A television producer should give fans the opportunity to ‘produce’

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<sup>145</sup> Jenkins defines additive comprehension as “a piece of information that makes you look at the whole differently. For example, in the director’s cut of *Blade Runner*, an origami unicorn caused people to surmise that Deckard might be a replicant. In *Convergence Culture*, 122.

deeper meanings and improve their experience of the show. Though the exact story of a transmedia extension may not be easily planned at the outset, leaving narrative gaps open for transmedia storytelling is an important part of the transmedia design process. Television is unique in that viewers can attempt to fill in these gaps while the show's narrative is still unfolding. Sometimes these gaps can be easily filled (by following the migratory cues of the hermeneutic codes), other times they help viewers interpret or predict how the gap might be filled, creating a game of formulating and testing theories.

- 3.) **Develop satisfying experiences** in each individual transmedia extension. A transmedia text should stand on its own, making the process of learning new narrative information fun in its own right. Transmedia extensions should be carefully designed to reflect the capabilities of a specific medium and type of transmedia extension. New episode extensions can capture the core qualities of a show in a different medium, diegetic artifacts can capture the core qualities of a show and bring them to everyday life, and alternate reality extensions can play with threshold crossing, puzzle solving, and community building.
  
- 4.) **Reward consumers' efforts** to explore a transmedia story by making passing references that validate the information they learned elsewhere. That way, stories can flow not just from the television show *out to* transmedia extensions, but also from transmedia extensions *into* the television show. This creates a pleasure in seeing how a transmedia text operates as a whole and how it creates opportunities

for consumers to engage with a story on multiple levels. When watching with casual fans, the validation effect empowers hard-core fans to become ‘gatekeepers’ of information, allowing them to demonstrate their expertise and even encourage others to pursue migratory cues towards transmedia extensions.

It is not coincidental that this proposed model reflects the logic of many video games. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, many hard-core fans already approach cult television shows as if they are games. They scrutinize individual shots, construct and test theories, collaborate to solve puzzles, and create encyclopedic “walkthroughs” for the show. My model, then, is an attempt to harness this gaming culture through transmedia storytelling. We can see similar strategies at work in *Halo*, for example. *Halo*’s designers created an immersive world (a war between Covenant aliens and humans), provided goals or missions within the world (rescue a soldier, investigate a mysterious bunker, etc.), made the process of accomplishing those goals enjoyable (killing aliens with a weapons arsenal), and then rewarded the player for accomplishing the goal (a new cut scene that moves the narrative forward). This formula, when applied to transmedia storytelling, allows hard-core fans to create a deeply engaging experience that goes beyond watching television. In my model, hard-core fans enter an immersive world, explore the world with a purpose (to fill in narrative gaps), enjoy the process of exploring (by creating worthwhile experiences), and feel rewarded by seeing a more unified transmedia text come to life (through the validation effect).

To be clear, I am not suggesting that television shows should be more like video games. Television will always be an attractive medium simply because viewers can relax

and sink into a storyline. Most industry professionals know that viewers do not want to literally interact when immersed in a television show.<sup>146</sup> But transmedia storytelling allows hard-core fans to shape their experience and engage with a television show on a much deeper level. The trick is to subvert these gaming elements within a television show's narrative so as not to detract from the casual fan's experience. For more specific techniques in accomplishing this, we must examine the lessons from a television show currently experimenting with transmedia storytelling.

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<sup>146</sup> Ross, Sharon Marie. *Beyond the Box*.

#### IV. *Lost* in a Transmedia Universe

ABC's *Lost* has been hailed as one of the most innovative and thrilling shows on television. In many ways, *Lost* has also been the poster child of entertainment in the "convergence era," embracing new technologies as tools for discovery rather than threats to intellectual property. In 2005, Disney set a new precedent by offering downloads of *Lost* on iTunes. Within a year, *Lost* sold more than six million dollars worth of downloads<sup>147</sup> and was also streamed from the ABC website. William Brooker observes how these developments encourage close scrutiny and analysis.<sup>148</sup> Just as *Twin Peaks* could not be completely unraveled without the help of a VCR, *Lost* is often described as "interactive television"<sup>149</sup> since it encourages the use of DVDs, DVRs, and the Internet to freeze frame and re-watch episodes in order to find 'Easter eggs' and hidden clues.

When the show first premiered, viewers expected the premise to be quite simple: a plane crash on a remote South Pacific island causes 48 survivors to fight for survival. But after a rampant smoke monster, a polar bear running through the jungle, a sequence of numbers causing unimaginable bad luck, a secretive group called the Others populating the island, and a scientific research project named the Dharma Initiative, no one knew exactly what *Lost* was going to do next. Furthermore, *Lost* employs unique narrative strategies. Nearly every episode focuses on a single character and reveals their back-story through a series of flashbacks nested within the events happening on the island. Yet *Lost*

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<sup>147</sup> Lowry, Tom. "Network finds marketing paradise with *Lost*." *BusinessWeek*. 24 July 2006. <[http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06\\_30/b3994072.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_30/b3994072.htm)>

<sup>148</sup> Brooker, Will. "Television Out of Time: Watching Cult Shows on Download." *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*. Ed. Roberta Pearson. London: IB Tauris, 2009.

<sup>149</sup> Askwith, Ivan. *Reconceptualizing Television*.

resists a conventional formula, as it toys with seriality, shifts perspectives, and utilizes frequent time jumps.

There are many appealing aspects to the show: an international cast, compelling performances, exciting action sequences, clever dialogue, romance dramas, and of course, plenty of puzzles and mysteries. With its lengthy narrative arcs and multiple character storylines, both Steven Johnson and Jason Mittell have observed that *Lost* satisfies viewers' hunger for complex, intellectual, and "quality" entertainment.<sup>150</sup> Due to its complexity however, *Lost* faced serious challenges as the writer's strike loomed and the hiatus between seasons grew longer. How could the show maintain its "buzz" and momentum in the off-season?

Damon Lindelof and Carleton Cuse, the showrunners of *Lost*, decided they would offer hard-core fans more insights into *Lost*'s mythology through alternate reality games, mobisodes, novels, and a videogame. Ideally, this transmedia content would amplify the voice of *Lost*'s evangelists and keep the show's mysteries fresh. As Damon Lindelof puts it:

Let's say I go to a Bruce Springsteen show, and he plays for four hours instead of two hours. Why? What is he getting out of it? Your ticket price is exactly the same. But what happens is, you go to work the next morning, and you say, I just saw the greatest fucking show of my life."<sup>151</sup>

This suggests that by dispersing *Lost*'s narrative across media platforms, Damon Lindelof and Carleton Cuse hoped hard-core fans would not only gain a greater appreciation for *Lost*, but they would also hype up the show and encourage non-fans to catch up. (which

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<sup>150</sup> Rauch, Peter. "Is Popular Culture Good for You?" 6 October 2005. <[http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/popular\\_culture.htm](http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/popular_culture.htm)>

<sup>151</sup> Poniewozik, James. "Why the Future of Television is *Lost*" *Time Magazine*. 24 September 2006. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1538635-3,00.html>>

would not be too difficult given that every episode of *Lost* is available on ABC.com) Yet the *Lost* producers have learned from the mythology-driven shows that came before it, as Carlton Cuse comments:

What worries us about X-Files as a model...is that the show ran for nine years. Sustaining the mythology of that show ultimately led to it being frustrating for the fans.... [Lost's] mythology has to be accessible enough to casual fans, but also involving enough so loyal viewers feel like they're being fed.<sup>152</sup>

*The X-Files*, of course, attempted to balance casual and hard-core viewers by combining episodic tendencies (with a monster of the week format) and serial threads (with an overarching conspiracy). *Lost* attempts a much more ambitious strategy. Rather than altering its narrative structure, *Lost's* producers offer ancillary content to “feed hard-core fans” more information on the mythology. At the same time, the producers assure casual fans that they only need to watch the television show to understand *Lost*.<sup>153</sup> In this chapter, I will evaluate *Lost's* attempts to achieve this balance. By examining the development of *Lost's* transmedia universe, I will build on my proposed model in Chapter 3 and offer more specific strategies for applying transmedia storytelling to television.

#### 4.1 The World of *Lost*

Though *Lost* very easily could have been a fictional version of *Survivor*, the producers decided to go a step further by incorporating worldbuilding strategies. For one, *Lost* gradually and masterfully expands its hyperdiegesis. After much of the show's action

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<sup>152</sup> Jensen, Jeff. “What to do? Lessons from Cult TV Shows.” *Entertainment Weekly*. 11 April 2005. <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1046376,00.html>>

<sup>153</sup> The producers say the only true canon is the show itself. In Jensen, Jeff. “‘Lost’: Mind-Blowing Scoop From Its Producers.” *Entertainment Weekly*. 20 February 2008. <[http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20179125\\_5,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20179125_5,00.html)>



was limited to the Losties<sup>154</sup> on the beach and in the caves, viewers were shocked when Sayid, an ex-Iraqi communications officer, stumbles into a trap set by Rousseau, a woman living on the island for sixteen years. This revelation – that the Losties were not the only humans on the island – introduced a larger mythology to the show. Rousseau reveals that she lives in isolation to avoid the dangerous “Others,” thus expanding the world of forty-eight survivors to become a world complete with scientific expeditions and native, “hostile” people. Later in season 1, Rousseau finds the Black Rock, a British trading ship located inland on the island. Again, the world of *Lost* expands to include a history dating back to nineteenth century. And yet, *Lost*’s world continues to build. When Locke blows open the hatch in season 2, he also opens *Lost*’s world to encompass the underground scientific bunker of the Dharma Initiative. The man who lives there, Desmond, has been pushing a button every 108 minutes for 3 years in order to “save the world.” Finally, at that moment, *Lost*’s world was more than the events on the island—it was about all of mankind.

This “**gradual world progression**” has the powerful effect of stimulating viewers’ imaginations. *Lost* begins with a small, contained hyperdiegesis and slowly expands it to create a sense that the island has an extensive geographical, environmental, cultural, and chronological history. One might think of a role-playing video game like *Baldur’s Gate* or *Diablo*, where players can only see the environment immediately in front of their avatars. Beyond them exists an abyss of darkness, until the player moves forward, and a little more of the spatial environment is revealed. Crucially, *Lost* does not expand its world with definitive answers. It would have been very easy for Rousseau to know exactly who the

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<sup>154</sup> A term for the 48 passengers of Flight 815.

Others were and why they were on the island. Instead, *Lost* leaves many potential storylines open to create more possibilities within its mythology.

In particular, *Lost* references many institutions existing off the island, including the wealthy and powerful Widmore Industries, the Dharma Initiative, Oceanic Airlines, and even a candy brand. These institutions suggest an extensive expanse that is not seen but still operates “according to principles of internal logic and extension.”<sup>155</sup> For example, when Hurley, the comic-relief character of *Lost*, finds an abandoned Volkswagen van in the jungle, he notices that it is filled with beer. Instead of Budweiser or Bud Light however, the beer cans are marked by the mysterious octagonal Dharma Initiative brand. Even the VW logo is replaced by the Dharma symbol.<sup>156</sup> Derek Johnson points out that avoiding product placement not only creates a ‘*Lost* brand’, it also expands *Lost*’s universe and makes it more naturalistic.<sup>157</sup> As I discussed in 3.3, hinting at institutions facilitates the emergence of alternate reality games, making it possible for hard-core fans to participate in the world of *Lost* without interacting directly with the show’s characters or events.

In addition to its hyperdiegetic depth, *Lost* also creates spatial dimensions by mirroring the conventions of videogames. Steven Jones, in his book, *The Meaning of Video games*, points out that *Lost*’s Hawaiian setting seems virtual since the landscape is a mixture of computer generated images and actual footage. Geography and topography play a huge role on the island. There are multiple ‘levels’ below and above ground, in bunkers, and on top of mountains. Man-made structures are scattered throughout the

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<sup>155</sup> Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*

<sup>156</sup> Johnson, Derek. “The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*.” *Reading Lost*.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

spatial dimensions of the island, and, as of season 5, they are also dispersed across temporal dimensions of the island. All of this encourages viewers to map out and navigate the space. One blogger even created extensive iconographical maps of events and structures on the island.<sup>158</sup> But whereas casual fans might be satisfied without knowing where the Black Rock wreckage is located in relation to the beach, hard-core fans are hungry for more narrative information that would help them analyze the island's domain.

*Lost*'s narrative structure is also similar to a video game. As ex-writer Jeff Pinkner says on the special features of the season 1 DVD: "the island would be a dramatic version of a videogame...you could find the hatch but it could take you several weeks before you had the proper tools to open the hatch."<sup>159</sup> Indeed, Locke, a paraplegic before crashing on the island who is miraculously healed after the crash, obsesses over opening the hatch in season 1. Then in "Deus Ex Machina," Locke kneels over the hatch and expresses a similar frustration as many gamers who can't seem to find a way to get to the next stage of the game: "I've done everything you've asked me to do! Why?" Turns out, just like a video game, Locke and the Losties must go on a journey to find "the key." They salvage dynamite from the Black Rock and blow open the hatch, moving on to the next level.

Throughout *Lost*, rarely do major events of one season happen in the same place or time period as another season. The characters are constantly traveling to a new location, often with a new goal in mind. Whether the Losties are moving to the caves, following Rousseau to the Black Rock, tracking the Others, getting back to the island, or planting a

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<sup>158</sup> Adkins, Jonah. "The World of Lost." *Mapping Lost*. 27 January 2009.  
<<http://mappinglost.blogspot.com/>>

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Jones, Steven E. *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

hydrogen bomb to change the future, they always seem to be navigating the narrative space in order to complete a mission.

Thus, *Lost* masterfully employs gradual world progression and borrows structural conventions of video games to create an environment that encourages exploration. This environment propels hard-core fans to seek out more information, draw connections, and gain a better understanding of the fictional world.

#### 4.2 The Hierarchy of Mystery

As discussed in Chapter 3, narrative gaps leave room for transmedia expansion. But fans are often skeptical of endlessly deferred narratives. In his article, “Do you even know where this is going?” Ivan Askwith discusses one of the major debates surrounding *Lost* – whether or not the writers know where the show is going.<sup>160</sup> Ex-writer David Fury, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, confirmed *Lost* fans’ worst fears when he insisted that *Lost* had no “master plan.”<sup>161</sup> In response, *Lost* writer Javier Grillo-Marxauch explained that television narratives are an ongoing, complex process:

The truth about all television shows – arc-dependent or otherwise, is that they are slightly amorphous living beings. They develop over time and things that work or don’t work are used or discarded accordingly... We allow ourselves the freedom to incorporate new ideas that improve and enhance our story.<sup>162</sup>

Grillo-Marxauch points out that the *Lost* writers plan a road map of the series from the very beginning, but leave many unanswered questions to be addressed later. For example, while the writers knew who the Others were early in the first season (Grillo-Marxauch

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<sup>160</sup> Askwith, Ivan. “Do you even know where this is going?” *Reading Lost*.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> This excerpt is from an interview with Grillo-Marxauch, who responded vehemently to David Fury’s claims that is no master plan to *Lost*.

<http://www.digitalspy.co.uk/forums/showpost.php?p=23814082&postcount=45>

claimed this was the case), they did not know who would be their leader until Michael Emerson delivered an impressive performance as Ben Linus.<sup>163</sup> Unlike films and novels, television is not the product of a single creative vision and thus certain elements must be left open for future development. Nevertheless, after *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, fans worried that they were being duped and misled into following the show's mysteries without any set resolutions.

*Lost*, fundamentally, is a show about mystery. Cuse describes *Lost*'s uniqueness in its ability to maintain the power of the question in the age of the Internet where answers are often readily available:

What we've been able to do, which I think is different than most network shows, is leave certain things ambiguous and open to interpretation. And that allows people to get on the boards and theorize about what's meant by a given story or scene, or move in the show's direction. It allows people to feel participatory about the process.<sup>164</sup>

Askwith points out that unlike *Twin Peaks*, *Lost* provides adequate satisfaction by resolving some of the many mysteries, thereby assuring viewers that there are answers to the larger mythology.<sup>165</sup> The promise that 'everything happens for a reason' propels casual viewers to tune in each week and assures hard-core fans that it is, in fact, possible to figure everything out. It is a promise based on the logic that not all questions have equal narrative weight. *Lost* carefully plays with a hierarchy of mysteries made up of four types: **endlessly deferred, lingering, implied, and hidden**. Some mysteries are meant for all TV

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<sup>163</sup> Thomas, Rachel. "An Interview with Michael Emerson (Ben Linus/Fake Henry Gale, *Lost*)" *About.com*. <<http://tvdramas.about.com/od/lost/a/mikeemersonint.htm>>

<sup>164</sup> Hoey, Matt. "All who wander are not *Lost*." *Written By: The Magazine of Writer's Guild of America, West*. September 2006.

<<http://www.wga.org/writtenby/writtenbysub.aspx?id=2195>>

<sup>165</sup> *TV 2.0: Reconceptualizing Television as an Engagement Medium*

viewers, while others can only be detected by “forensic fandom”.<sup>166</sup> I’m not suggesting that all mysteries can be applied to this hierarchy. Some fans may be more interested in the Others than the secrets of time travel. Though it is impossible to explain what types of mysteries appeal to a particular audience, these categories are useful when deciding how to present the narrative-pay off for a transmedia extension. Before examining this further, I must first provide a description of each type of mystery. It is worth noting that mysteries can move from one category to another—as the television show’s narrative changes, some mysteries are emphasized, while others take a back seat.

The most important and tantalizing questions, as discussed in Chapter 3, are endlessly deferred mysteries, the essential mysteries of a show that are prolonged across seasons. What is the smoke monster and why is it terrorizing the island? What is the Island and why is it important? Who are the Others? Whereas *Twin Peaks* was tied down by one large-scale mystery, *Lost* incorporates multiple. Thus, in contrast to *Twin Peaks*, which collapsed after resolving its endlessly deferred narrative, *Lost* can afford to answer one or two major enigmas without hurting the show’s appeal.

Lingering mysteries are mysteries that are important and memorable for casual viewers, but do not carry the same narrative weight as endlessly deferred mysteries. Crucially, casual viewers cannot use their imagination to satisfactorily fill in the gaps of lingering mysteries. Traditional television viewers may be distracted by new mysteries and plot lines, but they still expect answers to such questions as, What are the whispers in the jungle? Why do the Others refer to Walt as “special?” Who are Adam and Eve, the two

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<sup>166</sup> Jason Mittell uses this term to describe the way that *Lost* encourages a ‘hyper-attentive mode of spectatorship,’ where hard-core fans become detectives, seeking out clues and assembling evidence. In Mittell, Jason. “Lost in a Great Story.” *Reading Lost*.

corpses in the cave who had a small bag containing a black and white stone? The producers of *Lost* have admitted that some lingering mysteries will be left dangling, such as why Libby, Hurley's romantic interest, was in the same mental institution as him before they met on the island. Carleton Cuse told Lostpedia:

Everything is graded in terms of importance for us, and, as we are doing the last season of the show, it's not going to be sort of a didactic, you know, here's a list of a thousand questions that we're going to answer. That would not make for a very entertaining show... We are focusing on what we consider to be the main questions of the show and the main narrative. It's impossible to tie up every loose end... Libby's story is incredibly tangential to the principle action on the show.<sup>167</sup>

Indeed, not all lingering mysteries can be answered in the television show. But transmedia storytelling can explore tangential stories and provide answers to those fans who really want them. Of course, as I will discuss in 4.3, explicitly answering a lingering mystery in a transmedia extension is risky because casual fans expect such major questions to be addressed solely on the core television show. But because Libby's mystery is relatively trivial compared to the wealth of other enigmas, one could imagine her back-story presented in at least a web series.

Implied mysteries are less detectable to casual viewers. They are passing references to external people, places, or events, similar to Long's use of potential migratory cues.<sup>168</sup> The casual viewer often does not think to ask these questions or they can fill in the gaps with their own imagination. Yet hard-core fans of *Lost* have an interest in these questions. Where did Jack get his tattoos? What do the various elements of the mural in the hatch mean? What do the hieroglyphics represent? Who were the other people

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<sup>167</sup> Interview with The Amaal. *Lostpedia*. 17 April 2009.

<[http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Lostpedia\\_Interview:Carlton\\_Cuse\\_%26\\_Damon\\_Lindelof](http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/The_Lostpedia_Interview:Carlton_Cuse_%26_Damon_Lindelof)>

<sup>168</sup> *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics, and Production at the Jim Henson Company*.

on the Flight 815? The latter question exploded on the show midway through season 3.

The producers decided to introduce new faces to the Losties crew by introducing the back-story of Nikki and Paulo, two characters on Flight 815 who were not seen in the previous two seasons. As Damon Lindelof said:

For Nikki and Paulo, we kept hearing fans saying, "What's going on with the other 30 people on the island? Why don't they go on any adventures?" And we were like, "That's a good and legitimate gripe, and let's see if we can figure out a way to get some of those guys into the show."<sup>169</sup>

Fans were not receptive to these new, unlikable characters. They complained that Nikki and Paulo jarringly appeared with speaking roles and that they were forced into the show in order to waste time. The producers were dissatisfied with the characters as well, and decided to literally bury Nikki and Paulo alive in “Exposé.”<sup>170</sup> Indeed, sometimes implied mysteries are best left up to the imagination—or, better yet, to transmedia extensions. One might imagine the story of Nikki and Paulo in a videogame or series of mobisodes. That way, Nikki and Paulo’s back-story and island story could have been explored without upsetting the flow of the show. And with the validation effect, fans could have felt rewarded by Nikki and Paulo’s brief appearance, rather than appalled by it.

Finally, hidden mysteries are only noticeable to the hard-core fan who rewinds, re-watches, and freeze frames parts of an episode. These “Easter Egg mysteries” are thus only available through DVDs, DVRs, or the Internet. Often times, they act as clues to larger mysteries, but are mysteries nonetheless in and of themselves. For example, Why does the shark have a Dharma Initiative symbol on it? Why is Henry Gale’s balloon

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<sup>169</sup> Murray, Noel. “Lost’s Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse.” *A.V. Club*. 22 April 2008. <<http://www.avclub.com/articles/losts-damon-lindelof-and-carlton-cuse,14231/>>

<sup>170</sup> Jensen, Jeff. “Lost in Transition.” *Entertainment Weekly*. 13 April 2007. <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20034817,00.html>>



sponsored by Widmore, Mr. Cluck's Chicken, and Nozz-A-La-Cola? Why does Eko, an ex-drug smuggler from Nigeria, see flashes of his life within the smoke monster before he dies? One of the most notable series of hidden mysteries occurred in "Lockdown." In the episode, Locke is trapped under the blast door of the hatch when the black lights suddenly come on, revealing an ultra violet map. The contents of the map were illegible to the naked eye, since much of it was scribbled in Latin. But before any television viewer could begin to look at the writings, the lights came back on and the map was gone. Within hours, hard-core *Lost* fans freeze framed the image and translated the map in its entirety on Lostpedia, revealing the names of the six hatches on the island and their various descriptions.<sup>171</sup> But there were also new mysteries introduced by the map like, Why are some of the writings crossed out? Why are many of the statements and locations on the map speculative? What does the station marked "unknown" do?<sup>172</sup> At the time of this writing, these questions have yet to be answered.

Sometimes fans interpret hidden mysteries even when they are not there. For instance, in "The Economist," Sayid finds a metal bracelet on Naomi's body. Many fans speculated that there was a connection between Naomi's bracelet and the bracelet worn by a woman Sayid killed. The producers stepped in however, and announced that there was no connection: "sometimes a bracelet is just a bracelet."<sup>173</sup>

This hierarchy of mystery allows different viewers to find an appropriate 'level of difficulty' in viewing the show. As Carleton Cuse explains:

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<sup>171</sup> Lostpedia is an online, collaborative encyclopedia for all things *Lost*.

<sup>172</sup> All these questions were discovered on Lostpedia.

<[http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Blast\\_door\\_map](http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Blast_door_map)>

<sup>173</sup> Jensen, Jeff. "Lost!: Mind-Blowing Scoop From Its Producers."

I also think that it's rewarding for the audience to not always be frustrated and behind. We have certain mysteries on the show that we hope the audience figures out on their own, and can have the satisfaction of saying "Aha! I knew that! I knew that the guy on the boat was going to be Michael!"... We intentionally mix up the degree of difficulty in solving the puzzle.<sup>174</sup>

By incorporating a hierarchy of mystery, *Lost* ensures that viewers can determine how deep they want to travel 'down the rabbit hole.' It is important, then, that transmedia extensions match the level of difficulty for their intended audience. In general, I would argue that transmedia extensions should primarily address implied and hidden mysteries, since television viewers are not as concerned with these. But transmedia extensions can also provide hints into endlessly deferred or lingering mysteries, allowing fans to construct their own theories and test them when *Lost* airs. In 4.3, I discuss how *Lost*'s transmedia extensions should address specific kinds of mysteries.

#### 4.3 Expanding the *Lost* Universe

*Lost*'s expanded universe includes new episode, diegetic artifact, and alternate reality extensions. Each extension attempts to balance contributing narrative information to the overall mythology while also standing alone as an individual experience. In this section, I will evaluate each type of transmedia extension based on how well they achieve this goal.

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<sup>174</sup> Murray, Noel. "*Lost*'s Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse."

### 4.3.1 Licensed Novelizations

Tie-in novels are often the easiest way to cash in on a successful franchise. *Lost* experimented with three novels framed as new episode extensions, and one novel as a character artifact.

*Lost*'s first transmedia extensions came in the form of spin-off novels. Each of the three novels published during the show's first season focused on the history of a new character that had not appeared in the television program. The books were commercial and creative disasters, causing Damon Lindelof to say quite bluntly after reading one: "this is terrible."<sup>175</sup> The fans agreed. One reader commented:

This book is one of the worst books I have ever read, the author has no idea what's going on in LOST, and the portrayal of the characters is so off the mark that's it laughable. I was so disappointed in this book that I actually threw it out in the rubbish bin. If you like LOST and need something to do in-between seasons or episodes bang you head against the wall – it would be a far better use of your time.<sup>176</sup>

Indeed, the books offered no new insights on the greater mythology of the show, focusing instead on the back-story and experiences of off-screen characters. While this premise would be acceptable in theory, without the direction of the producers, the novels did not answer or provoke any of the island's mysteries and they often conflicted with details of the show. Thus, the tie-in novels frustrated, rather than answered the implied mystery of 'Who are the other passengers of Flight 815?'

In contrast to the spin-off novels, the *Lost* producers seemed to think that they could increase the value of a transmedia extension by placing a diegetic artifact within the mise-en-scene of the show. In the episode "Two for the Road," Sawyer sits on the beach

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<sup>175</sup> *TV 2.0: Reconceptualizing Television as an Engagement Medium*

<sup>176</sup> Post by R. Bryant. *Amazon.com*. 17 June 2006. <<http://www.amazon.com/Lost-Signs-Life-Book-3/product-reviews/0786890924>>

reading a manuscript called *Bad Twin*. When the other survivors confront Sawyer to give back some stolen guns, Sawyer remains interested in the manuscript, saying, “I’m about to be the first and only guy to find out who done it. I think I’ve gotten it figured out!” Unfortunately, before Sawyer could reach the end, Jack tosses the manuscript into a fire and points a gun at a Sawyer, demanding that he return the stolen guns. To casual fans, there is nothing significant about the manuscript or its title *Bad Twin*. In fact, most television viewers are probably more interested in the conflict between Jack and Sawyer, a recurring theme throughout the first two seasons. But Gary Troup<sup>177</sup>, the credited author of *Bad Twin*, is actually a fictional character on board Oceanic 815 who died in the crash.<sup>178</sup> After “Two for the Road,” Troup’s book was released in bookstores and Amazon.com, offering fans the opportunity to figure out “who done it” themselves. The book jacket claims that Troup delivered a copy of his manuscript to a publishing company before his death:

Bad Twin is the highly anticipated new novel by acclaimed mystery writer Gary Troup. Bad Twin was delivered to Hyperion just days before Troup boarded Oceanic Flight 815, which was lost in flight from Sydney, Australia to Los Angeles in September 2004. He remains missing and is presumed dead.<sup>179</sup>

The positioning of *Bad Twin* within the *Lost* television show was successful in generating buzz and sales. Hard-core fans saw the manuscript as a “paratextual portal,” hoping it

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<sup>177</sup> Gary Troup is an anagram for “purgatory,” possibly a reference to the popular fan theory that the survivors were trapped there.

<sup>178</sup> The producers claim he was the unfortunate man who was sucked into the engine during the opening sequence of “The Pilot Part 1.”

<sup>179</sup> Troup, Gary. *Bad Twin*. New York: Hyperion, 2006.

would unlock new levels of meanings and insights.<sup>180</sup> On May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006, *Bad Twin* reached #14 on *The New York Times* bestseller list.<sup>181</sup>

Yet despite the book's successful integration into the *Lost* world, the story offered little explicit insights into *Lost*'s larger mythology.<sup>182</sup> According to *Variety*, Laurence Shames, the real author behind *Bad Twin*, ignored many of the *Lost* producers' suggestions and wrote the novel according to his own 'vision.'<sup>183</sup> This artistic incongruence illustrates the difficulties in coordinating creative efforts across media divisions.

Though the story of *Bad Twin* revolves around the separated twins from the Widmore family (an institution in *Lost*), the book neither explicitly answers mysteries relevant to *Lost*'s mythology, nor does it allow fans to experience the core narrative in a different way.<sup>184</sup> Thus, *Bad Twin* was successfully integrated within *Lost*'s world, but it did not satisfactorily answer implied/hidden mysteries or provide new evidence for speculating about lingering/endlessly-deferred mysteries.

Nevertheless, Steven Jones argues that *Bad Twin* had a much different pleasure than simply searching for narrative clues.<sup>185</sup> Jones notes that blurring the textual and the outside worlds through "threshold crossing" results in new kinds of entertainment. As he puts it:

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<sup>180</sup> Jones, Steven E. *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*, 41.

<sup>181</sup> Lee, Felicia R. "Bad Twin,' a Novel Inspired by 'Lost,' Makes the Best-Seller Lists." *The New York Times*. 27 May 2006. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/27/books/27lost.html>>

<sup>182</sup> Askwith, Ivan. *Reconceptualizing Television as an Engagement Medium*.

<sup>183</sup> Zeitchik, Steven. "Inside Move: It's a Shames." *Variety*. 18 June 2006.

<<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117945504.html?categoryId=14&cs=1>>

<sup>184</sup> It should be noted however, that the significance of *Bad Twin* could be validated in season 6 of *Lost*.

<sup>185</sup> Jones, Steven E. *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*.

[The pleasure] comes from seeing the media crossings of fictional creations take place in real time and physical space—watching Sawyer read a manuscript on the show (on the island as it were) and at that moment, watching TV with a laptop in front of you, being able to find the material, hardcover book and traces of its author in the real world, at Amazon.com—but also the next day in a brick-and-mortar retail store; and then seeing that semi-real novel’s fictions referred to in newspaper ads as if they were real.<sup>186</sup>

Jones’ comments suggest, perhaps *Bad Twin*’s greatest accomplishment was expanding *Lost*’s universe into everyday life, allowing fans to take pleasure in crossing the threshold between worlds. In 4.3.3, I discuss the Lost Experience, which takes this threshold crossing to another level, enabling participants the opportunity not just to inhabit another world, but also to interact with it.

#### 4.3.2 Videogames/Mobisodes

*Lost* also incorporated two highly anticipated ‘new episode’ extensions made for the screen. *Lost: Missing Pieces* consisted of 13 two-to-five minute “mobisodes” (mini-episodes made for mobile devices) occurring somewhere in the timeline of the first three seasons. Then, in 2008, Ubisoft released *Lost: Via Domus*, a video game incorporating many of the characters and locations from the first three seasons of *Lost*. Both extensions contributed narrative information in very different ways.

First, some of the *Missing Pieces* mobisodes were well-received. The mobisode “So it Begins” takes place before the very first scene of *Lost*, showing Christian Shepherd, Jack’s father who was presumably dead, telling Vincent to wake up Jack immediately after the plane crash because he has “work to do.” This suggests a host of questions: Is Christian dead? Was he responsible for bringing Jack to the island? Why does he have

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 27.

Vincent? The mobisode sparked massive speculation about Christian's role in the overall *Lost* mythology. Another mobisode assured viewers that the producers had not forgotten about lingering mysteries. For example, in "Room 23" Juliet confronts Ben about Walt being "special." We learn that Walt was in the brainwashing room named Room 23 and that his 'gift' had caused problems amongst the Others (i.e. killing birds).

Yet as a whole, the significance of the vignettes from *Missing Pieces* was unclear. The mobisodes avoided explicitly answering any mysteries introduced in the show and some scenes seemed completely irrelevant. In "The Adventures of Hurley and Frogurt," viewers learn that Neil "Frogurt," a minor character in the show, had an interest in Libby and threatened to take her away if Hurley didn't "close the deal." This rather trivial scene avoided vital narrative information, frustrating many fans. As the *Lost* blogger Jon Lachonis observes:

Mobisodes were a highly anticipated chunk of hiatus relief for island heads. Well, fooled you. The Mobisodes so far have most fans kvetching about the irrelevancy and down right LOST-lessness of the tidbits that are meant to traverse gaps in the story.<sup>187</sup>

Because they did not form a coherent story all their own, the fan community essentially understood the mobisodes as deleted scenes rather than transmedia extensions.<sup>188</sup> This made many fans feel like the producers were just tossing out useless scenes left on the cutting room floor. In contrast, consider the original idea for the *Lost* mobisodes series in which Hurley finds a Dharma camcorder, documents life on the beach, and discovers a

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<sup>187</sup> Lachonis, Jon. "Lost Mobisodes Unraveled." *Ugo.com*.  
<<http://www.ugo.com/ugo/html/article/?id=18038>>

<sup>188</sup> The mobisode "The Envelope" was, in fact, a deleted scene from season 3, only 'canonized' as part of the mobisodes.

new Dharma orientation film previously recorded.<sup>189</sup> This idea seems like a much more satisfying transmedia extension than *Missing Pieces*, which essentially filled in gaps that didn't need filling. To truly get *Lost* fans buzzing, the show's producers needed an experience, not a random group of trivial scenes.

The videogame *Lost: Via Domus* featured Elliot Maslow, a photojournalist from Flight 815, who conveniently loses his memory after the crash. Elliot explores the island and even interacts with familiar characters from the show. The *Lost* producers did not consider the videogame to be canon except for aspects of the environmental and spatial design.<sup>190</sup> Though it featured spectacular graphics, many players thought the game tried to be too much like a *Lost* episode with a gimmicky flashback structure and a short narrative length (for a game):<sup>191</sup>

The story was okay, but the game play was really bad. I did not feel like I was in the TV show at all. It felt more like a 24-esque game that just happened to exist in the *Lost* universe. If there is a next game, it needs to be more about exploring on your own, discovering things, almost like an *Oblivion*.<sup>192</sup>

*Via Domus* received an average reception from most critics; it didn't work as a gratifying game nor as a means to shed light on *Lost*'s secrets. Fans felt *Via Domus* forced them from point A to B, without any freedom to survey new territories. The game's value, from those who liked it, was from exploring pre-existing island locations and increasing their ability to conceptualize the island's spatial design. Thus, *Via Domus*' did not specifically

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<sup>189</sup> Lachonis, Jon. "Lost Mobisodes Unraveled." *Ugo.com*.

<sup>190</sup> Jensen, Jeff. "Mind Blowing Scoop from Producers." *Entertainment Weekly*. 20 February 2008. <[http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20179125\\_5,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20179125_5,00.html)>

<sup>191</sup> *Metacritic.com* 26 February 2008.

<<http://www.metacritic.com/games/platforms/ps3/lost>>

<sup>192</sup> Post by EkoIRC. *Lostpedia*. 22 July 2008. <<http://forum.lostpedia.com/did-you-like-game-t17119.html>>



answer mysteries from the show, rather it functioned as a tool for *Lost* fans to speculate about mysteries, offering them the chance to re-examine the blast door map and hatches.

*Lost: Missing Pieces* and *Lost: Via Domus* both struggled to offer a stand-alone experience with a valuable narrative pay-off, as both extensions seemed to focus on preserving the core mysteries of the show. In their effort to make these narrative extensions non-essential, *Lost* sacrificed their narrative value. Yet one must wonder if the response to these narrative extensions would have been different if they were validated by the show in some way. What if Elliot was referenced in the show? What if the significance of “The Watch”<sup>193</sup> was explained? Perhaps *Missing Pieces* and *Via Domus* would have more perceived value if they were acknowledged by the show in some way.

### 4.3.3 Alternate Reality Games

*Lost* experimented with alternate reality games in between seasons, offering participants the chance to gain further insights on *Lost*'s mythology. The first alternate reality game for *Lost* was also the most ambitious. ABC launched a five-month interactive marketing campaign called The Lost Experience (TLE) that simultaneously allowed the *Lost* producers to present parts of the mythology unaddressed by the television show.<sup>194</sup>

As Darlton (fan name for Carleton Cuse and Damon Lindelof) explained:

We sort of felt like the Internet Experience was a way for us to get out mythologies that we would never get to in the show. I mean, because this is mythology that doesn't have an effect on the character's lives or existence on the island. We created it for purposes of understanding the world of the show but it was

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<sup>193</sup> In the mobisode, “The Watch” Christian hands Jack a gold watch that belonged to Christian's father. Jack handed this watch to Hurley in season 1 to time a pregnant women's contractions, but the watch has not appeared since.

<sup>194</sup> Carlton Cuse explained that “there were certain stories that [we] were interested in telling that don't exactly fit into the television show.” In Miller, Lia. “To Counter the Doldrums During Summer Reruns, ‘Lost’ Fans Can Get Lost in a Game Online.” *The New York Times*.

something that was always going to be sort of below the water, sort of the iceberg metaphor, and the Internet Experience sort of gave us a chance to reveal it.<sup>195</sup>

Uncovering the clues and piecing together the narrative would take the talents of a collectively intelligent community, a challenge participants were more than willing to accept. Participants assisted Rachel Blake, a hacker/blogger, as she investigated the Hanso Foundation, the corporation financing the Dharma Initiative, and their crimes against humanity. The first stage involved exploring the Hanso Website and following hidden clues embedded by Blake. Blake then launched a video blog where she introduced her mission to stop the Hanso foundation and its top mastermind Thomas Mittelwork.

Soon after, Blake informed players that she had obtained incriminating evidence of Mittelwork's crimes when she filmed him at a Hanso meeting in Sri Lanka. To hide the evidence, she had dispersed pieces of the video across the Internet and asked players to 'unlock' each fragment by gathering hieroglyphic symbols or 'glyphs' located online and in physical locations. These were planted everywhere from *Lostpedia* to *Lost Magazine* to Damon Lindelof's Comic Con bracelet.<sup>196</sup> When the glyph hunt was complete, players could finally see the full Sri Lankan video where major narrative revelations were revealed.

The Lost Experience consistently blended the real world with the fictional world. On *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, Hugh McIntyre, the communications director for Hanso, claimed

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<sup>195</sup> Lachonis, Jon. "BuddyTV Interviews LOST's Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse - and gets Answers!" *BuddyTV.com*. 7 March 2007.  
<<http://www.buddytv.com/articles/lost/buddytv-interviews-losts-damon-4766.aspx>>

<sup>196</sup> "The Lost Experience." *Lostpedia*.  
<[http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Lost\\_Experience](http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/The_Lost_Experience)>

“the writers and producers of *Lost* have decided to attach themselves to our foundation.”<sup>197</sup>

Jimmy Kimmel treated McIntyre as a “real” guest, allowing him to denounce the *Lost* TV Show and *Bad Twin* for misrepresenting the Hanso Foundation. Furthermore, at Comic Con, while Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse responded to questions, Rachel Blake suddenly accused the producers of fictionalizing the Dharma-Hanso agenda and not revealing “the truth.” Both live events brought theatrical drama to a real life space, claiming that *Lost* was portraying real characters and organizations.

The Lost Experience featured a new set of characters; yet this time, the characters were not passengers on Flight 815. As I mentioned in 3.3.2, it is likely that participants felt more comfortable interacting with a storyline that was not within the same narrative space as the Losties. As Derek Johnson notes:

It would nearly be impossible for The Lost Experience to construct any kind of meaningful interactive narrative in which all participants could be friends with Jack, Sawyer, and Kate without sacrificing the agency of those participants in the story world. By shifting the focus away from characters and towards institutions, the ARG sidestepped these obstacles, generating larger infrastructures that could be effectively shared by a wider range of participants.<sup>198</sup>

Johnson rightly points out the importance of institutions in TLE. Viewer-players can suspend their disbelief when they are positioned in the same universe as *Lost* (which in this case blends into everyday life), but in a uniquely separate narrative space of that universe.

As a reward for their efforts, participants of TLE were given answers to endlessly deferred mysteries such as the significance of the numbers 4 8 15 16 23 42 and the

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<sup>197</sup> “The Lost Experience Clues: Clue #42 – Jimmy Kimmel Interview with Hugh McIntyre.” *Lost Experience Clues Blog*. 25 May 2006.  
<<http://thelostexperienceclues.blogspot.com/2006/05/clue-42-jimmy-kimmel-interview-with.html>>

<sup>198</sup> “The Fictional Institutions of *Lost*.” *Reading Lost*.

original intentions of the Dharma Initiative on the island.<sup>199</sup> In doing so, TLE effectively became a requirement for fully understanding *Lost*. Television viewers who wondered about the recurring mysterious numerical sequence might expect to have an answer in the television show, though as of now, the answer remains unique to The Lost Experience. At the same time, *Lost* essentially treated endlessly deferred mysteries as if they were implied ones. That is, TLE made it seem like the answers to the numbers and the Dharma Initiative were a trivial side story, not crucial parts of the *Lost* mythology, upsetting hard-core fans who expected the new learned narrative information to be validated. At the time of this writing, *Lost* has failed to address the answers from TLE, though the producers have stated that the significance of the numbers and Dharma are in fact canon.<sup>200</sup>

Nevertheless, many *Lost* fans have indicated that participating in a community and tackling the challenges of TLE were far more rewarding than the narrative pay-off. As one fan put it:

Working on the TLE was one the most satisfying experiences of my entire life, as well as the most consuming. Over the course of the five-month span, an amazing community came together, most which still stands strong today. While the actual game play components were great, it was definitely the fan base and community that made the event. Most of all, I loved leading a community based around one of my passions and making many, many, new friends that I still keep close contact today.”<sup>201</sup>

Difficult yet solvable challenges brought together a community and allowed fans to form social connections with one another. In *Deconstructing the Lost Experience*, Askwith

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<sup>199</sup> Blake’s video revealed that the mysterious recurring number sequence was a series of variables in the Valenzetti Equation, an equation that calculated the time remaining until the human race destroys itself. The purpose of the Dharma Initiative was to somehow change one of those variables and save the world from destruction.

<sup>200</sup> *Lostpedia*. <<http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Canon>>

<sup>201</sup> Johnston, Amy and Lachonis, Jon. *Lost Ate My Life: The Inside Story of a Fandom Like No Other*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2008.

suggests that ARGs should “build communities, not audiences,” highlighting how TLE provided the foundation for a community to collaborate, combine talents, and form friendships.<sup>202</sup> According to Askwith, “To get the greatest possible value of ARGs, [an ARG creator should] design challenges and game mechanics that acknowledge these communities, and give them compelling reasons to work together.”<sup>203</sup> It is the power of social connections from an alternate reality game that outlast any possible narrative revelation.

As popular as TLE was amongst *Lost* fans, ARG players unfamiliar with the show were less impressed. Jason Mittell points out that ARGs are not traditionally tied to a pre-existing narrative, nor are they supposed to generate mainstream buzz and press.<sup>204</sup> Loyal *Lost* fans expected insights into the show and ARG fans expected a traditional ARG experience. This suggests that transmedia storytelling is not at a point where non-fans can enter a transmedia narrative from any extension, as Jenkins’ definition for transmedia storytelling might suggest. Instead, extensions like TLE are best suited for enhancing the television show for hard-core fans and enriching their viewing experience. TLE may have accomplished its goal of strengthening a community, but as Mittell points out, the narrative capabilities of ARGs and serial television shows are often too incongruent with one another.<sup>205</sup>

After The Lost Experience, *Lost* launched Find 815 in the months leading up to season 4. The game involved alternate reality elements and presumably served as a means

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<sup>202</sup> Askwith, Ivan. *Deconstructing the Lost Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Convergence Culture Consortium, 2006.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>204</sup> Mittell, Jason. “Lost in an Alternate Reality.” *Flow TV* 4.7 (2006)  
<<http://flowtv.org/?p=165>>

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

to get people talking about the show again. Find 815's story line revolved around a technician named Sam Thomas, who embarks on journey to find Sonya, the love of his life and a flight attendant on Oceanic 815. Unlike TLE, Find 815's goal was not to answer endlessly deferred mysteries, but to foreshadow the mysteries of season 4. The conclusion showed a salvage ship known as the 'Christiane 1' discovering the wreckage of Oceanic 815 in the Sunda Trench of the Indian Ocean.

Rather than handing fans a packaged answer to a large scale mystery like TLE, the ending to Find 815 gave fans enough clues to discover the answer to a lingering mystery on their own, albeit in theory form. In other words, the game did not explicitly say that Widmore faked the plane crash, but fans were able to deduct such a hypothesis from the clues of the game and previous episodes. One blogger posted his/her train of thought in arriving at this conclusion:

First, from an earlier stage, we learned that The Maxwell Group is a subsidiary of Widmore Industries. Second, we know that whatever ship Naomi came from is not Penny's boat. Also, Naomi was in possession of the picture of Desmond and Penny. *Using these pieces of evidence, I am capable of coming to only one conclusion.* Charles Widmore, the only other person in the world other than Penny or Desmond capable of possessing that photo, staged the fake plane in the bottom of the ocean for the purpose of ending Sam Thomas' and any other concerned party's search for Oceanic 815...There is only one Oceanic 815. This is all just a result of a conspiracy. That seems plainly evident to me, thanks to the knowledge that Sam was practically forced to go to those coordinates by The Maxwell Group.<sup>206</sup> (my emphasis)

It is unclear whether the game designers intended for fans to discover the Widmore conspiracy on their own. But many fans were able to use their collective intelligence to solve a lingering question from season 3. Specifically, fans who played Find 815 could hypothesize why Naomi, a woman who landed on the island from the outside world, knew

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<sup>206</sup> Post by HipsterDoofus. *Dark UFO*. 31 January 2008. <<http://find815.blogspot.com/>>

that the 815 plane wreckage and passenger bodies were already found. The answer—that Widmore faked the plane crash—was not explained on the television show until well into season 4. Yet the hard-core fans who had played Find 815 were not surprised by this twist.

The first scene of season 4 picked up where Find 815 left off as viewers saw the *Christiane 1* hover over the wreckage of Oceanic Flight 815. Many implied mysteries were raised in this scene: What was the ship doing in this area? Where and how did they find the wreckage? Why didn't the *Christiane 1* try to recover the bodies? All of these mysteries, though probably not a major concern to casual fans, were answered in Find 815. Furthermore, a news story explicitly mentions the *Christiane 1* on television. Fans seemed to be happy with the validation:

I don't know about anyone else, but I thought it was really cool having played this whole game, hearing them mention the *Christiane I* in tonight's episode, and then seeing these clues pop up in the show. It really makes the whole thing worth it, even if it was a little tangential.<sup>207</sup>

This suggests that even an unsatisfactory extension can be deemed valuable if it is validated in some way. Fans want to feel like their actions matter, not like their being duped into a marketing scheme. This was important because Find 815 had serious game play problems. Many of Find 815's clues were too easy and involved simple tasks. As one fan posted on Unfiction.com:

So far there hasn't been anything more complicated than a pictorial scavenger hunt with a flashlight- I'm kind of thinking we're due though. The last TLE game involved ASCII decryptions and stenography and all kinds of cool code breaking challenges- I'm looking for something more complex in the billboards as well and even if the phone message turns out to be nothing, I sure hope the organizers didn't "dumb down" the game since the last TLE experiment!!!<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Post by Clue Hunt. *Dark UFO*. 8 February 2008. <<http://find815.blogspot.com/>>

<sup>208</sup> Post by Nelbot. *Unfiction*. 3 January 2008.

<<http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=22925&start=315>>

Unfortunately, after the precedent set by TLE, many fans were dissatisfied with Find 815's linear game play and underwhelming challenges. Rather than piecing together videos through activities like 'the glyph hunt,' much of Find 815 involved clicking on random objects to unlock additional videos. In addition, Find 815 used far less threshold crossing than *The Lost Experience*. One fan posted at Unfiction.com:

There is no "alternate" in this reality - at no point in the game is the player made to wonder whether any of this is real, or caused to suspend his disbelief. Much to the contrary - a player is able to check his progress in the game. Sam either stays on the boat or doesn't based on the player's completing a flash puzzle. That does not happen in real life, and there is nothing "alternate" about it... You click, get a green square in the progress bar, and are notified as to how many hours are left until the next clue release.<sup>209</sup>

For many fans, the game play of Find 815 felt too linear and constricted. Yet I would argue the major lesson to take away from Find 815 is how it framed its narrative pay-off. The game gave hard-core fans the necessary information to construct the theory that Widmore faked the plane crash. This caused massive debate, as fans attempted to weigh the evidence in support of or against this theory. Facilitating 'informed guesses' in a transmedia extension effectively does two things. First, it enables hard-core fans to use their collective intelligence not just to find the answers, but also to theorize and debate the answers. This engages a community and adds a game-like quality to seeing who was right and who was wrong when the television show airs. Also, because the conspiracy theory was still a theory, hard-core fans could not spoil the information to casual fans with any merit. Thus, the revelation from Find 815 was essentially an 'unconfirmed spoiler.'

There may be an additional pleasure for hard-core fans in discovering a narrative pay-off without knowing exactly how it relates to the core narrative, and then watching the

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<sup>209</sup> Post by yanka. *Unfiction*. 9 January 2008.  
<<http://forums.unfiction.com/forums/viewtopic.php?p=455936#455936>>



show to see how it is validated. Validations call attention to the process of narration, as they deliberately bring the transmedia story's constructedness to the forefront. It is what Jason Mittell calls the "operational aesthetic" in which viewers take pleasure in the question "How did the writer's do that?" in addition to "What will happen next?"<sup>210</sup> If a transmedia extension is canon (and that is a big 'if'), then hard-core fans can wonder not whether the narrative pay-off will be validated, but *how* it will be validated. They can enjoy observing how the transmedia "machine" operates, how the producers tie together plot lines from a range of media and form a unified whole, all while casual fans focus solely on the television show's core narrative. Validations have potential to be admired as an innovative technique that allow producers to quietly embrace hard-core fans.

In the most recent ARG, between season 4 and 5 of *Lost*, an unknown source attempted to re-launch the Dharma Initiative in what was simply known as "The Project. The game began with a commercial advertisement for "Octagon Global Recruiting," a volunteer recruiting organization for the Dharma Initiative. Participants logged into the website and took a series of tests. At the conclusion of the game, players were given a job from the Dharma Initiative based on their score.

The Project combined poor game play and little narrative pay-off. In one of the few implied mysteries addressed, a video at Comic Con revealed that Pierre Chang, the Dharma scientist who hosts 'Orientation films,' was "a professor of theoretical astrophysics" and that he was brought to the island to study the Kerr Metric solutions to Einstein's Field Equations.<sup>211</sup> In the video, Chang explains that he is speaking 30 years in

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<sup>210</sup> Mittell, Jason. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap*. 58 (2006): 29-39

<sup>211</sup> "Pierre Chang." *Lostpedia*. <<http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Chang>>

the past and that the Dharma initiative must continue its work in the present time. This mystery was never fleshed out however. After the financial crisis, an e-mail explained that the Dharma Initiative had been sold to *Lost*. One fan vented on Lostpedia's forum:

If it is the end of the ARG, and I think it is, that email was just a huge slap in the face to all of us...we spent the whole summer pouring over everything for nothing, nothing was revealed, we didn't get any new knowledge from the ARG about LOST, and we've all just pretty much wasted our time for it to be ended in an email so uncharacteristic of the rest of the game. It's a bunch of bullpoo!<sup>212</sup>

This lack of narrative pay-off was only one of the problems plaguing the Project. Fans complained there were technical issues, uninteresting game play, and a lack of a storyline.<sup>213</sup>

The 'no storyline' is the biggest problem, I mean, I haven't the slightest idea about what I could have learned about *Lost* or the [Dharma Initiative.] (the only thing I've learned so far is how to solve a tangram very quickly and I don't think that's the intention of this ARG).<sup>214</sup>

Whereas *The Lost Experience* offered a compelling, community building experience, and *Find 815* successfully provided a valuable yet non-required narrative pay-off, *The Dharma Project* achieved neither. Ultimately, the game seemed to be more like something-to-do for casual fans who went on the Internet rather than a distinct addition to the *Lost* universe.

Damon Lindelof told Lostpedia:

Essentially the whole idea was to...strongly imply that our characters were going to appear in Dharma times. So that would be something that would be sort of set up in the Internet experience...These events are sort of partially canon but more promotional than they are canon. Giving the audience a sneak peak as to what the season is about.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Post by YouAreEverybody21. *Lostpedia Forums*. 19 November 2008. <<http://forum.lostpedia.com/so-arg-nothing-t20486p2.html?t=20486&page=2>>

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Post by Ms. O's. *Dark UFO*. 9 October 2008.

<<http://lostoctagonglobalrecruiting.blogspot.com/2008/10/whats-biggest-problem-you-have-with-arg.html#comments>>

<sup>215</sup> Interview with TheAma1. *Lostpedia*. 17 April 2009.

The Project had similar goals as Find 815—to foreshadow future events in the show—but because the game ended early, it is impossible to evaluate as a complete transmedia extension. Nevertheless, after The Lost Experience provided answers to crucial mysteries, it seemed the producers were hesitant to provide any significant narrative information that might upset traditional television viewers.<sup>216</sup> Their solution, like most of television, was to frame all narrative content outside the television show as non-canonical. Yet I have argued that a better solution to balancing hard-core and casual fans is not to write off transmedia extensions as promotional, but to focus on how they can be original and optional at the same time.

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<[http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Lostpedia\\_Interview:Carlton\\_Cuse\\_%26\\_Damon\\_Lindelof](http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/The_Lostpedia_Interview:Carlton_Cuse_%26_Damon_Lindelof)>

<sup>216</sup> Askwith, Ivan. *TV 2.0: Reconceptualizing Television*.

## V. *Lost*'s Transmedia Lessons: Five Takeaway Techniques

There is no definitive paradigm for how a television show might use transmedia storytelling and certainly no two shows will use the same methodology. Nevertheless, in this thesis, I have offered some techniques for transmedia producers to craft multiplatform stories. If we combine my proposed model from Chapter 3 with the lessons learned from *Lost* in Chapter 4, we might come up with five takeaway tools for transmedia producers to apply to television.

- 1.) **Construct a fully furnished world and then gradually reveal the space/mythology of that world.** Gradually revealing a world's hyperdiegesis and borrowing the spatial configuration of video games creates an environment that encourages exploration. This environment propels hard-core fans to seek out more information, draw connections, and gain a better understanding of the fictional world. At the same time, casual fans can imagine a vast expanse while focusing on the characters and main events of the show.
- 2.) **Develop a hierarchy of narrative gaps or mysteries that allow different viewers to engage with a show in a variety of ways.** The hierarchy of mystery increases the likelihood that any given fan will find some question or mystery that interests them. And by inserting plenty of implied and hidden mysteries, there will always be potential for transmedia extensions to contribute valuable information to the overall storyline without affecting "the mother ship." Thus, it is important to include a wide range of endlessly deferred, lingering, implied, and hidden mysteries so that transmedia producers will always have options when creating the narrative pay-off to transmedia extensions.

**3.) Transmedia extensions can explicitly answer implied and hidden mysteries or provide enough clues for hard-core fans to make informed theories about lingering or endlessly deferred mysteries.** The key is to identify what type of mystery a particular transmedia extension will address and adjust the narrative pay-off accordingly. The Lost Experience definitively answered endlessly deferred mysteries (upsetting casual fans), while the answers from *The Missing Pieces* mobisodes were not definitive enough for a series promising to “fill in narrative gaps” (upsetting hard-core fans). Thus, answers to implied and hidden mysteries should be definitely answered in transmedia extensions, while answers to endlessly deferred and lingering mysteries should be more open-ended, sparking fan speculation and anticipation. Of course, transmedia storytelling can also function as an outlet for any mystery that is not going to be addressed in the show (like Libby’s story, for example). Because *Lost* has a near infinite amount of mysteries, transmedia storytelling seems to be a perfect tool for providing narrative closure to all remaining questions.

**4.) Each transmedia extension should aim to be a satisfying individual experience in addition to offering narrative insights.** The process of discovery matters as much as the narrative revelation. As the Lost Experience illustrated, the journey in hunting down narrative information and bonding with a social community is often more rewarding than the end result. For ‘new episode extensions’, the process of discovery may involve experiencing how a new medium presents the story in an interesting way, while alternate reality extensions are best at facilitating a community of interest. Either way, a transmedia extension should balance the narrative-pay off with the fun of discovering it. As Damon

Lindelof told the Fuselage, “the road is long, friends, but hopefully, when at last you reach your destination, you’ll look back and remember having enjoyed the journey even more than where you ended up.” Lindelof is talking about *Lost* as a whole, but the same principle applies to a transmedia extension. Each transmedia extension should not be another thing for fans to do or a gimmicky way to present new information, but an engaging individual experience all its own.

**5.) Reward the efforts of hard-core fans by adding suspense in how a narrative revelation will be addressed and then validate the revelation.** As Find 815 showed, hard-core fans can theorize about how a narrative pay-off relates to the show and then take pleasure in seeing how the show validates their findings. Because of television’s nowness, learned information can be confirmed quickly, giving a sense that the show is reacting to hard-core fans’ off-screen activities. Validating transmedia extensions in subtle and interesting ways can lead to new modes of engagement in that hard-core fans can admire how transmedia creators are able to create a story on multiple levels. As Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell note, “A good story can be a well-told tale, but it can also be a puzzle and a challenge, an object to be marveled at (directing focus to the well-told tale’s actual telling), a familiar space, a complex network to be mapped, and a site to stimulate both discussion and the proliferation of textuality.”<sup>217</sup> The validation effect calls attention to the formal construction of transmedia narratives, adding a new pleasure in seeing how a story can be dispersed and expanded across other media, only to be molded back together to form a unified whole. In this sense, it would not be unreasonable to think of transmedia

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<sup>217</sup> Gray, Jonathan and Mittell, Jason. "Speculation on Spoilers: Lost Fandom, Narrative Consumption and Rethinking Textuality." *Particip@tions*.

storytelling as a kind of game, where players search for narrative information and then anticipate how that information will be relevant in the core television text. Transmedia storytelling certainly offers new opportunities for mastering a diegetic world, but it can also provide a pleasure in observing how the transmedia story is constructed, how it sparks fan discussion, how it alters expectations for future episodes, and how it rewards consumers with an insider look into the process of piecing a complex tale together.

## 5.1 The Future of Transmedia Storytelling

While new technologies and new consumers may threaten the industry's traditional business model, the demand for compelling and exciting stories will always be vibrant. More and more television programs are incorporating transmedia components into their DNA. Jesse Alexander, a writer on *Alias*, *Lost*, and *Heroes*, sees a need for television producers and writers to educate themselves about gaming and new media.<sup>218</sup> Similarly, Mark Warshaw, a transmedia creator on *Heroes*, believes the role of a transmedia producer/writer will be even more important in television's future.<sup>219</sup> Indeed, while it is still difficult to pinpoint exactly what constitutes a successful multiplatform narrative or how to monetize its various extensions, transmedia storytelling will likely play a crucial role in ushering television into the era of convergence. Undoubtedly, many television shows will follow in *Lost*'s footsteps, pushing the level of complexity and difficulty in narrative comprehension and cross-media navigation. Yet transmedia storytelling can have more value than merely serving the economic interests of television executives and media conglomerates; it can have creative and artistic merit as well. As consumers grow more accustomed to transmedia exploration and polish their skills in new media literacy, transmedia storytelling is poised to build its own unique set of aesthetics and develop its own version of "narrative special effects."<sup>220</sup> (The validation effect may be one example of this)

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<sup>218</sup> Taylor, Alice. "Hollywood & Games: An Interview with Jesse Alexander. *Wonderland Blog*. <<http://www.wonderlandblog.com/wonderland/2007/06/hollywood-games.html>>

<sup>219</sup> Interview with Mark Warshaw. 4 May 2009.

<sup>220</sup> Jason Mittell argues that narratively complex shows involve "narrative pyrotechnics," allowing viewers to marvel at the craft in constructing the narration. In "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap*.



After all, transmedia storytelling does not require a big, bloated budget. Web series like *Lonelygirl15* and *Kate Modern* illustrate the ease with which transmedia content can exist at relatively low costs.<sup>221</sup> And alternate reality games, a form of cross-media storytelling, are most often grassroots and independent productions. In today's participatory culture, anyone with an idea, some time, and basic knowledge of digital media, can create a transmedia story. As the Millennials, a generation quite familiar with multiplatform consumption, filter into the workplace and pursue their storytelling careers, one can imagine transmedia narratives exploding as a popular 21<sup>st</sup>-century form of entertainment. Yet while the logistics of transmedia storytelling remains unclear, storytellers face a bright future full of opportunities to weave narrative threads in and out of another, stitch them together with a compelling mythology, and craft some complex, dazzling narrative tapestries.

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<sup>221</sup> The company producing both shows, EQAL, uses the tagline "The show is everywhere."

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