Rhetorics and Technologies

Stuart A. Selber, Carolyn A. Miller

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Literate Acts in Convergence Culture

Lost as Transmedia Narrative

Debra Journet

This essay examines the television show *Lost* as a product of what Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture, a phenomenon characterized not only by media convergence (flow of media over multiple platforms and the resulting migratory behavior of media audiences), but also by participatory culture (interaction between consumers and producers) and collective intelligence (collaborative pooling of resources and skills; *Convergence*). Convergence culture, Jenkins argues, creates new forms of "transmedia storytelling," in which the narrative experience is so large it moves over multiple media, and so complex readers/consumers must work together in "knowledge communities" to understand its full detail and coherence.[1]

In writing this essay, I drew on my own experience watching *Lost* and on responses to *Lost* posted on fan sites to examine some of the literate practices this new form of transmedia storytelling encourages. These practices encompass the analytic and interpretive skills that readers traditionally bring to a complex narrative text. They also entail new kinds of critical interactions among readers and authors and therefore new ways to construct and respond to narrative. Moreover, in their responses, many fans exhibit an intensely detailed and even passionate relationship to *Lost*, committing enormous amounts of time and attention to understanding, appreciating, and perhaps even shaping the fictional story *Lost* offers. All this suggests new ways to read, view, and write about narrative in convergence culture.

As of December 2008, *Lost* had completed its fourth season. Both a critical and popular success, *Lost*, at its height, attracted more than fifteen million viewers. The story line of *Lost* concerns the survivors of Oceanic Flight 815, en route from Sydney to Los Angeles, after it crashes on a mysterious tropical island. At

one level, the show narrates the experiences of these survivors over their first three months on the island. At another level, flashbacks hint at who the survivors were and what they did before boarding Oceanic 815. Beginning in season 4, flash-forwards provide cryptic clues about what happens to some of the survivors after they are rescued. As the series unfolds, we also learn more about the island and its history (what the producers call its mythology)—a world made up of such inexplicable apparitions and phenomena as a black "smoke monster," a strangely reappearing set of numerals (4 8 15 16 23 42), a series of puzzling hatches left over from a failed social science research project of the 1970s called the Dharma Initiative, and an inscrutable group of Others who are discovered to be living on the island. Similarly, as we learn more about the background of the survivors, we discover connections between them and perhaps between their past lives and what happens to them on the island.

But *Lost* is also a complex multimodal and multimedia "text" (Kress) for viewers who follow its story over multiple platforms, including not only television but also the Internet and other media. Engaging with transmedia *Lost* requires active response by viewers/readers who hunt down clues and share textual, audio, and visual information on such sites as fan forums, blogs, and wikis. These new migratory demands create challenges for participants that are both logistical and interpretive. Viewers must engage in such activities as discriminating between counterfeit and legitimate information, identifying a *Lost* "author" and discerning authorial intent, identifying allusions, summarizing episodes, sampling and downloading video and audio segments, rearranging the show's complex story into an accurate chronology, speculating on cultural parallels, and debating meaning. This careful viewing is enhanced by digital technologies that allow viewers to go through bits of story, often frame by frame, zeroing in on particular details that are not apparent to casual viewers. Interpretations are then built collaboratively, as participants pool knowledge and test theories in media-rich environments.

This essay looks at certain literate practices involved in the reception and interpretation of *Lost.* In the first half, I discuss how media convergence shapes acts of reading and viewing. My focus is on the way *Lost* exploits traditional and innovative forms of narrative complexity; in particular, how it draws on the Internet and on gaming as new ways to construct and interact with transmedia stories. Later in the essay, I consider scenes of participatory culture and collective knowledge where viewers engage in processes of "writing back" to *Lost.* I concentrate on critical and interpretive acts I observed in an online community in which participants work together to understand the structure and meaning of *Lost* as a complex narrative text. My goal is to explore both the media convergence that *Lost* makes use of and the cultural patterns of "meaning making" that such convergence promotes.

> I think that there is a very strong likelihood that, if not now, at some time in the near future we are going to find that at least some of the maze material is intentionally released on authorized sites to become part of the whole package of what constitutes the LOST experience. I think it is part of the way that the creative minds behind it all want their work to be experienced and enjoyed. . . . I was initially drawn here, to this board, because I was enchanted by the way a TV show had co-opted the internet to become an additional facet of the overall experience; all this enthusiasm, all this energy, all this creativity shared by anonymous folks drawn by a new approach to multi-media entertainment. . . . This maze stuff may turn out to be a crappy first experiment in how the internet can be integrated into a broadcast TV product. But the thing is it is sure to happen someday, and someday it will be done right, and we will find it hard to imagine how we were ever able to enjoy ourselves just watching TV. (NeillT006)

Narrative Complexity and Media Convergence

Lost is, first and foremost, the television show that airs on ABC. Unfolding in linked episodes over several seasons, it offers an example of what Jason Mittell ("Narrative Complexity") calls a "new model of television storytelling . . . distinct for its use of narrative complexity as an alternative to the conventional and episodic serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception" (29). This new form of narrative complexity, Mittell argues, is characterized by oscillation between the demands of episodic and serial presentation; by self-conscious modes of narration that reflexively call attention to their own mechanics of plotting and production; and by narrative "spectacle," or complex narrative plot twists and turns (such as sudden revelations that make us question whatever has gone before—a narrative ploy frequently used in *Lost*). Such programs ask for new modes of audience engagement because of the complexity of both their content (plot, story world, characters) and their form and structure (for example, innovative use of flashbacks or self-reflexivity). Mittell points out how this narrative complexity is tied to "key transformations in media industries, technologies and audience behaviors" (30). VCR and DVD recorders allow viewers to control when they can watch (and re-watch) episodes. Internet sites allow fans to "embrace a 'collective intelligence' for information, interpretations, and discussions that invite participatory engagement." Other digital technologies, such as blogs, wikis, video games, and fan sites, enable viewers to extend their participation in these rich storyworlds" (31–32). But Mittell's point, like Jenkins's, is not so much the way technologies are converging as it is the kind of narrative competencies and forms of engagement these new converging technologies allow.

Unlike some of the television series Mittell discusses, *Lost* is made even more complex by a number of diegetic devices within the television broadcast that point viewers to other texts in other media that are also somehow within the *Lost* world. In particular, the network and producers have made extensive use of the Internet. An ABC podcast hosted by series writers and producers regularly appears, and there is an official forum, "The Fuselage" (www.thefuselage.com), for fan discussion. During the first season, a supposed diary by one of the survivors began to appear on the *Lost* page of the ABC Web site. Later in the first season, a tie-in Web site for Oceanic Airlines, containing "Easter eggs" and more information about the characters, came online. In the second season, more Web sites connected with the Dharma Initiative and other fictitious organizations and businesses mentioned on *Lost* began to emerge. And in the summer of 2006, ABC and Channel 4 (in the United Kingdom) produced The Lost Experience (TLE), an alternate reality game (ARG). In addition, three novels about *Lost* were published, including one by "Gary Troup," who was supposedly on Flight 815 and who later became a character in TLE.

As *Lost* converges on these various books, Web sites, podcasts, and forums, it becomes a form of what Jenkins (*Convergence*) calls transmedia storytelling,[2] a narrative that spills out into a range of multimodal texts that engage viewers in multiple ways. Partly this convergence is a way of branding *Lost* and generating more revenue through viral marketing. The *Lost*-related books, for example, are published by Hyperion, which is owned by ABC's parent company, Disney. Parts of TLE were sponsored and produced through affiliations with companies such as Verizon or Sprite. As one *Lost* fan is reported to have said, "You know you're at an official TLE site if you have to dig through a bunch of advertising to get to the good stuff" (Jensen). But media convergence in *Lost*, as in other transmedia narratives, is not just a question of technological proliferation. More important, perhaps, is that new ways to perform literacy are also converging.

Narrative Desire: *Lost* on TV

At its best (and in my view *Lost* is an example of that best), transmedia storytelling takes advantage of the particular affordances of each medium that it uses. Thus the sustained hour of the television show is the primary conduit for developing what Peter Brooks calls narrative desire, a process of engagement in which readers and viewers are moved "forward, onward, through the text" (37). For Brooks, this act of narrative desire is achieved through the reader's response to the plot—that is, the ways in which readers are continually trying to make sense of the story's meanings as they progress through its textual representation. "Reading for the plot," in Brooks's terms, means discovering (or constructing) the intentions and connections among the discrete elements—incidents, episodes, actions—that make the story into a coherent whole. *Lost* is very good at evoking narrative desire in its fans, and this compulsion to know more is part

of why they are so willing to follow its unfolding plot over various media. *Lost* exploits the narrative structure of many detective-type novels in which the story (the chronological sequence of events—what happened and in what order) is different from the discourse (the discursive sequence in which those events are represented). Understanding the extraordinarily complex plot of *Lost*—Steven Johnson ("Popular Culture") estimates that in its first year it concurrently engaged between thirty and forty mysteries—is the most significant activity undertaken by *Lost* viewers and the most important aspect of its popularity: it is the source from which all the other transmedia pleasures come.

The show is beautifully produced (its two-part pilot was one of the most expensive in network history), and its visual and aural qualities make it highly compelling. The landscape of the island is mysterious and evocative. The structure of each episode is complex—meaning viewers must watch carefully to establish connections among the show's various planes of action. In addition, viewers are confronted with multiple allusions and extratextual references. For example, there are frequent screen shots and mentions of literary works; several characters are named for philosophers (Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Burke, Bentham); and references to such discourses as religion, science, popular culture, and art history abound. Identifying these allusions (what viewers call a catch) and trying to connect them to the show's plot provide another significant interpretive challenge. Watching *Lost* on television—at least for most die-hard fans—is thus an intense, detail-oriented, cognitively challenging, and aesthetically engaging task.

In the television show, viewers are confronted with a densely realized dramatic achievement, a story that is deeply compelling on many levels. But there is another kind of pleasure in watching *Lost* on television that connects it not so much with dramatic genres (such as movies or plays) as with a different form of popular culture: games, particularly video games. Game allusions are sprinkled throughout the show. A bit of dialogue at the end of the fourth season, for example, sounds like it comes straight out of a game walk-through or the game Dungeons and Dragons.[3] Similarly, just as games frequently take the player from one "world" or "level" to another, each season of *Lost* opens up to a new world. The first season is set on the beach where the plane has crashed. The second explores an underground hatch built by the Dharma Initiative, and the third opens in the camp of the Others. The fourth shows the post-island world and closes with a character rotating a frozen wheel that, like similar devices in the game Myst, moves the action to a completely new level. Thus, along with its temporally complex plot and its discontinuities of story and discourse, *Lost* also exploits the kind of world-building spatial architecture that is characteristic of many video games (Jenkins, "Game Design"). The viewer, like the characters—and like a game player—explores spaces in the show, seeking clues to what is going on. Fans go through digital recordings of episodes, examining each frame of some sequences in order to uncover hidden details or decode particular signs. They

then upload particularly significant screen shots to fan forums so that others can debate the scene's complexity. *Lost* producers seem aware of and to be aiming for this kind of viewing; at one point, after some of the survivors have discovered a film that supposedly explains the Dharma Initiative, one of the characters says, "we have to watch that again," a statement that many see as a nod to the repeated-viewing habits of die-hard fans. This experience of clicking through the show, frame by frame, is also reminiscent of playing early click-and-advance video games, such as Myst, in which one also goes screen by screen to try to orient herself in the game world, locate significant details, and map their relation.

Lost is also gamelike in the kinds of puzzles it poses. Like the characters who are trying to make sense of the strange experiences they have been thrust into, viewers try to solve the mysteries of the island and its mythology. To do this, they engage in a number of gamelike activities, such as identifying patterns, solving logical puzzles, and mapping mazelike spaces. In these and other ways, watching the television show itself seems to elicit in its viewers some of the same cognitive challenges (Gee; Johnson, *Everything*) and literate practices (Selfe and Hawisher) that characterize certain kinds of video games. For example, viewers have noted how frequently and in what ways they have seen juxtapositions of black and white, or how often they have observed objects that resemble an I-Ching symbol. They have spent enormous energy identifying every time one of the "numbers" appears on the island and in flashbacks (for example, "Sledgeweb's *Lost* Stuff") and trying to uncover the logic of their sequence. Fans have also drawn and debated maps of the Dharma hatches and the island's topography ("Diggs' Great LOST Map," for instance) or constructed elaborately detailed chronologies ("Lost/Timeline").

Gaming Agency: *Lost* on the Internet

Gaming experiences are further enhanced for those viewers who supplement watching the television show with playing *Lost*-related games on the Internet. Here, viewers not only can find small tidbits of information, or "Easter eggs," that add to what they already know about plot or characters, but they also have the opportunity to experience the kind of gaming agency in which player actions have consequence within the game world.

These possibilities for gaming interactivity became even more exciting for fans in the summer of 2006 with the advent of TLE, a complex alternate reality game that was closely related to *Lost*'s unfolding plot and that played out over four months and over multiple media—including Web sites, podcasts, blogs, advertising, 1–800 phone numbers, press releases, and live appearances.[4] TLE is a good example of the collective intelligence and participatory culture that Jenkins (*Convergence*) sees as characteristic of transmedia narrative. The complications of the puzzles were simply too much for any one person, and it was only by pooling resources and sharing information in knowledge communities that

groups of people were able to make their way through the webmaze of TLE. Therefore there were blogs, forums, and other Internet sites where people traded clues, outlined solutions, and competed to see who could crack the riddles first. TLE was not a complete success. For many viewers, including me, it became too complicated for insufficient payoff.[5] It also had to walk a delicate line. Because most viewers of *Lost* were not going to play TLE, nothing really crucial to their understanding of the show's plot could be uncovered. But, on the other hand, because some fans were investing enormous time and effort in playing the game, there had to be some reward. The result was that TLE solved a major puzzle for game players: The meaning of the numbers was revealed. But the solution to that puzzle, the numbers' significance, turned out to be irrelevant to the ongoing mysteries of the island as depicted in the television show—the version of *Lost* experienced by most of its millions of viewers. This compromise seems to have satisfied few, and much of the criticism leveled against TLE (for example, Jenkins) suggests some of the strategic and material difficulties that will need to be confronted as transmedia stories develop.

Although TLE was not a complete success, the gamelike strategies that are built into transmedia *Lost* do suggest that gaming is affecting how people learn to tell and respond to stories. Although there is a dense theoretical debate about whether games are narratives, a narrative/game like *Lost* may be a sign that such a debate is already outmoded.[6] That is, *Lost* (on TV and on the Internet) does not offer the choice between game and narrative; rather, the kind of narrative it tells requires gamelike responses to understand it. This kind of convergence goes beyond establishing connections among various forms of technological media. Instead, what may also be converging are the interpretive and performative commitments that belong to the genre of the video game and the genre of the television show. Media convergence can thus resemble the kinds of literate negotiations that are involved in other genre-blurring activities, such as interdisciplinary research or new media production. Furthermore, as more readers, viewers, and writers grow up on gaming, they may increasingly rely on gaming-type assumptions about how stories operate. If this is true, we can expect to see more narratives, like *Lost*, characterized by spatial structure, puzzle plots, interactivity, or other features associated with game play. Concomitantly transmedia productions such as *Lost* may help us understand how games can be made more effective and engaging through their narrative depth and density.

Writing Back to *Lost:* Collective Intelligence and Participatory Culture

> "Four Quartets is a set of poems by T. S. Eliot. . . . The key repeating concept in the poem is 'The Still Point of the Turning World'—the idea of a central timeless concept or place of stillness around which all other things in the time revolve. I think the Island is an attempt by the

> writers to literalize this idea into a physical setting. I believe there are intentional parallels and echoes between LOST and the quartets, which may help identify the show's central themes. I am going to deal with this one quartet at a time, due to length. I think each quartet represents a portion of the show (not necessarily chronologically)." (jmberger)

> "Nice. I'm not familiar with the poem (or wasn't until now), but I've been thinking along similar lines. I was sort of thinking more of parallel universes, with the Island being a 'still point' that is removed from the infinite number of parallel universes, instead of from a single turning world." (zigbertToschius)

> "Analyzing [this poem] is not unlike picking apart Lost. Your comparison is right on, brotha—but do you really, really think the writers were using this quartet as a blueprint for the show? I think eliot's universal ideas in the poems allow for the comparison—as we know the universal elements of Lost allow for many, many literary comparisons." (trinabobina)

Using the collective and participatory environment of the Internet, fans "write back" to *Lost* in a number of ways. There are the blogs and other sites that support TLE; the wiki *Lostpedia* (www.lostpedia.com) that functions as the series' unofficial encyclopedia; sites where fans post their own dialogue transcriptions, maps, diagrams, and other catalogs of *Lost* information. In addition, some viewers write fan fiction in which they extend the lives of the characters; create fan art, such as banners, avatars, or pictures; and produce video parodies and homages that they post on sites such as YouTube. And in what may be the deepest, most intense, and longest-lived kind of response, an extraordinary number of fans participate in forums where they gather to consider and debate what *Lost* "means." These sites, in particular, offer literate spaces in which people write and read together, in order to make sense of their shared experience of watching *Lost.* Here, in scenes of collective intelligence and participatory response, viewers construct and defend elaborate theories based on close readings of textual details. They also identify and speculate on intertextual references, probe the psychology of particular characters, and offer aesthetic evaluations. Among the many ways of writing back are suggesting scientific explanations drawn from physics, astronomy, mathematics, or biology and placing events and references into larger historical contexts. All this is done within a dialogic environment characterized by verbal play and intense audience awareness.

This is not to say that everything posted on fan forums is critically inflected—or even interesting. Much of what appears is community building:

trading quips, practicing one-upmanship, chastising those who egregiously break the rules. A great deal of what is offered as research or speculation is simply cut-and-pasting long sections from wikis or other sites. But there is also a high level of critical and intellectual engagement: a willingness to approach *Lost* as an intricate, multi-layered work and to understand its meaning and structure. In the sections that follow, I outline a specific set of critical activities I observed on one fan forum. My focus is on certain exchanges in which viewers talk about how *Lost* works as a complex narrative text. In particular, I identify three types of critical response: (1) close reading, in which participants work together to discover the formal and thematic coherence of specific scenes; (2) intertextual analysis, in which they collaborate to identify specific allusions and speculate on their significance; and (3) consideration of authorial intention, in which participants debate questions about interpretive freedom and textual authority. There are, of course, many other ways of interpreting *Lost;* posted responses also examine the show through science, history, politics, popular culture, philosophy, theology, art history, aesthetics, and from multiple other perspectives. In fact, many of the conversations on *Lost* forums resemble the kind of critical literacy acts prized in university classrooms. I chose to focus on literary analysis, though, because as an English teacher I am most interested in the ways people read and make sense of imaginative texts.

The exchanges I will describe all come from the Lost-TV forums (*www.losttv-forum.com*), an Internet site on which I have been an observer and occasional participant for about three and a half years. Lost-TV has been active since just after the show first began airing in 2005. As of December 2008 it had about 24,000 registered members, more than 2.5 million posts, more than 38,000 threads, and an incalculable number of hits.[7] Although it includes sections devoted to fan fiction, fan art, spoilers, TLE, the "webmaze," and various non-show topics, the exchanges I will consider all come from the General Discussion and Lost Theories sections, which represent the substantive core of *Lost* analysis and are the major sites for the critical activities I will describe.

What Does This Mean? *Lost* and Close Reading

Reading the Lost-TV forums, one is struck by how carefully participants attend to *Lost*'s verbal, visual, and aural details. Their responses suggest an implied interpretive contract between them and the writers and producers that anything is potentially meaningful. Thus they comb through particular scenes, seeking details that might connect to or extend what they already know. Transcriptions of each episode are posted online, as are screen shots of key moments, allowing participants to do fine-grained analysis and highly recursive readings. Fans have noted inconsistencies that turned out to be prop errors, such as when a resume written in Korean appeared that suggested a character had begun working at too young an age. When this happens, fans are often irate because they believe the

writers and producers of *Lost* have failed to live up to their end of the bargain. Similarly, although there is a great deal of theory talk on this forum (it is clear that some academics participate[8]), most fans do not accept the poststructuralist premise that the meaning of a text is indeterminate. Instead, many of them read like New Critics. They practice the close-reading strategies of New Criticism, with its focus on nuance and detail, and they share its belief that the successful work of art is a perfectly wrought artifact, in which every aspect has meaning and coherence.

As an example of this kind of close reading, I want to summarize a thread that was active during the second season, titled "The significance of the buildings in London (Pink Floyd Album Cover)." This exchange focused on trying to understand the meaning of a single shot of a building in London that was part of one character's flashback. Earlier, in a podcast, the show's producers had alerted fans that this episode would contain an image of an iconic building and some signage that would turn out to be important. When the shot was identified, it was noted that the building was also pictured on a Pink Floyd album called *Animals.* To try to understand why this was significant, viewers scrutinized the image in great detail and shared comments on what might be crucial visual details. They also discussed the names of the album songs and their possible connection to *Lost.* They considered the relation of the album to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the potential associations of that novel with *Lost* and noted that one of the songs is considered to be a parody of the Twenty-third Psalm (a reference very important in *Lost* history). They even analyzed the lyrics of the songs on the album in terms of their possible relation to characters. Interspersed with these comments were running tangential conversations about the Kinks (a discussion that was eventually moved, to the relief of many, to another thread) and about whether or not the second Pink Floyd band should have been allowed to use that name.

As the exchange continued, better images of the screen shot became available, and eventually viewers located the sign on the building and agreed that its second word was *Construction.* This led to speculation that the building or the sign was connected to Michael—a character who had revealed in an earlier episode that he used to be a construction worker. Fans then revisited key scenes from past episodes in which Michael appeared, trying to determine whether his actions, speech, or demeanor should now be interpreted differently. At this point, visual and verbal references to *The Wizard of Oz* were also beginning to emerge on *Lost*, and there was subsequently some discussion about whether the balloons on the Pink Floyd cover might be another allusion, or might even foreshadow the survivors' next attempt to get off the island via hot air balloon. Eventually, in a later podcast, the producers explained that the banner had been meant to be readable to viewers but was inadvertently made too small. They then announced that the banner said "Widmore Construction." Because, at that time, the name Widmore had no known associations with *Lost*, fans tried

to figure out whether the word had a hidden meaning. There were several attempts to find anagrams, a type of puzzle frequently used in *Lost*, and in what even the writer of the post seemed to understand was a stretch, one viewer remarked, "This probably means nothing . . . but during the picture shoot for the Pink Floyd cover, the inflatable pig was either released or became unattached from one of the stacks . . . it drifted toward an airport and finally came down in Kent. There is a Widmore road/street in Kent."

This exchange is not the longest or the most intense moment of critical analysis on Lost-TV forums, but it is typical.[9] As an example of close reading, it has some problems. There is a tendency to go off topic, and some interpretations have only dubious warrants. There is also an often-strained sense of how much deliberation can reasonably be attributed to every element of such a complex production as a sixty-minute television show. Nevertheless, the exchange shows great attention to detail, a strong understanding of how a metaphoric chain of references can accrue meaning, insightful analysis of character development, knowledge of how music and words intersect, and an ability to recognize verbal play. And while it is possible to do this kind of close reading by oneself, it is not nearly as much fun. Nor is it as productive. Much of the information on which this bit of analysis was based came from media other than the show itself, including the podcasts in which the producers offered supplementary information, the uploaded screen shots that were meticulously scrutinized, the Web-based research about Pink Floyd, and, most important, the online conversations themselves. Viewers searched these converging media to collect evidence and advance claims. Through the dialogic interchanges of the forum, fans were able not just to put forward ideas, but also to test them in a critical environment where fellow participants offered additional or qualifying evidence, proposed competing explanations, and questioned the warrants for specific claims. These participants also debated the degree of intentionality that one might reasonably infer from a particular scene. Therefore converging media and collaborative participation in the forum deepened the acts of close reading in which fans engaged.

Where Does This Come From? *Lost* and Intertextuality

The "Official List of Literature (Book/Author), Movie, TV, Song & Art References" posted on Lost-TV forums identified, as of 2006, about fifty titles that are "concretely or explicitly seen or mentioned" on *Lost*. About forty references are listed as having "looser associations / possible implied references or jokes," and there is a link to another post that compiles the "full definitive list" of "Character-created nicknames that are allusions to books, movies, TV." The "Official List" also catalogs the titles of about fifty songs (but "for brevity's sake, only songs heard prominently during the episodes, not all the songs of the soundtrack") and six works of art. As of 2006, the "The Lost Theories Index"

listed at least seventy-five threads that built theories, including ones titled "Literature, Cinematic, Pop Culture & Music Analysis & Allusions" and "Mythology." (These lists are no longer kept current, and the actual number of texts alluded to in *Lost*, now at the end of its fourth season, is considerably larger.)

Some of these allusions are obvious. The Dharma Orientation film, for example, was hidden behind a copy of *The Turn of the Screw*, and the camera lingered on the cover of the book for several seconds. Many viewers suggested that the book's narrative complexity and its ambiguity about what really happened might suggest how viewers were intended to respond to the film-within-the-show hidden behind the book. Other references are more subtle. One location on the island, for instance, is called Pala Ferry. One viewer noted that Aldous Huxley's book *The Island* is set on an island called Pala, and others, seeking a connection, commented that the book not only tells the story of a utopian society that, like *Lost*, "grapples with ethic[s] and philosophy as themes" but also "includes references to Taoism, seen on the show."

Identifying and understanding these intertextual references is a major interpretive task for *Lost* fans. Indeed, there is great competition to be the first person to "catch" an allusion, although more merit is awarded to those who actually can make sense of it and relate it meaningfully to the show's plot or themes. The best responses are, predictably, to texts with which a great many viewers are already familiar, such as allusions to popular culture (music, films, novels) or to canonical texts that many have read or are reading in school. When the text is unfamiliar to most of the participants, and interpreters have to rely on plot summary or cut-and-paste paraphrase from an online site, the analysis is often thin. (One of the major references in the second season, for example, was to Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, a lengthy book that almost no one on the board had read and that few, if any, were prepared to tackle.)[10]

The allusive, intertextual web of *Lost*, like the ludic maze of TLE, is a particularly rich site for participatory and collective response. The complex play of associations stirs what Jenkins (*Convergence*), writing about a similar effect in the film *The Matrix*, calls "epistemophilia" (98). This desire to *know*, one of the greatest pleasures that *Lost* so deftly evokes and controls, is made even more intense by shared interactions between diverse knowledge communities, many of whom know something others do not. That is, *Lost* constantly suggests to viewers that more is going on than meets the eye and that part of its complicated meaning lies in a dense network of proliferating associations. But there are simply far too many associations for any one person to identify, let alone understand adequately (think trying to read *Ulysses* by yourself). Thus viewers work together collaboratively to elicit, evaluate, and organize all this information, just as they work together to solve the other puzzles *Lost* offers.

Although responding to *Lost*'s intertextuality does resemble the collective responses of puzzle solving, it is more complicated because of the open-ended

ways in which textual associations can multiply. If close reading asks *Lost* fans to be New Critics, sorting through its intertextuality makes them Deconstructionists. In a thread about a reference to the Ambrose Bierce story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," for example, the discussion included not only summary and speculation about parallels in plot and character, but also a consideration of how the story related to other allusions in that episode, such as a snippet of Glen Miller playing "Moonlight Serenade" picked up by a character on a shortwave radio. This, in turn, led to discussion of an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, in which an "old man picks up an old radio signal from 20 years prior—a disc jockey introducing Glenn Miller's 'Moonlight Serenade.'"

Framing this discussion were questions about how intentional these linked references were and how viewers should interpret them. Participants debated, for example, whether they represented a specific set of clues (Ambrose Bierce and Glen Miller, like the *Lost* survivors, famously "went missing"), a thematic pattern, a particular nod to die-hard fans (the Bierce story takes place at the moment the main character dies, and there has long been speculation that *Lost* takes place in "purgatory"), or simply a way "to get us all to think in one direction without any consequence." When the exchange ended, the participants had identified and analyzed an intertextual web of allusions that was larger, more complex, and more ambiguous than any one person would have understood before the exchange began. One poster remarked, "That's why I love this board. Someone always knows what you don't."

Who Is the Author? The Hermeneutic Challenges of *Lost*

One of the primary challenges for viewers of transmedia *Lost* is deciding which texts are "canon," a term that in fan culture refers to content considered genuine or official. The complications of determining what is canon are both logistical and hermeneutic. In particular, as "official" *Lost* spreads out across multiple media, especially the Internet, numerous fake sites have sprung up, forcing viewers to discriminate between counterfeit and legitimate information. But questions of determining authenticity go beyond figuring out the source code. Instead, fans engage in a process similar to what Jenkins (*Convergence*) describes as "exercises in popular epistemology" (44)—complex debates about who is the "author" of *Lost* and how viewers can discern authorial intent. Considering these questions is central to interpreting *Lost:* If it is true that any detail is potentially significant in revealing the mysteries, then it becomes imperative to determine which details, as canon, come with an author's imprimatur.

For some viewers, canon is anything originating with ABC—Web sites, blogs, podcasts, or interviews that originate from an ABC or Disney source. But others argue that a television network's corporate presence—especially its marketing strategies—is not necessarily under the control of the producers and writers of a particular show. These viewers require a specific endorsement by producers or

writers before accepting information as canonical. But because a television series is the shared responsibility of many people—including producers, writers, directors, actors, musicians, cinematographers, and editors—many fans refer not to specific individuals but to a collective entity called The Powers That Be (TPTB). Identifying bona fide TPTB and discerning their intention is a significant challenge. In *Lost*, for example, fans raise questions about who writes the material on the complicated series of linking Internet sites of the webmaze, how much control TPTB have over the webmaze, and whether every link on an authorized Web site is also authorized. Fans also try to determine how much material is related to marketing and how much to advancing the narrative.

Such questions became particularly compelling at the end of the second season, when TLE appeared and when fans learned that the solution to certain questions—such as what the numbers mean—would be revealed there. The status of information gained from TLE thus became the subject of intense debate. Many of the most heated exchanges centered on whether participants could use information gained from TLE in their contributions to the subforums General Discussion or *Lost* Theories, or whether all TLE-related material had to remain in its own subforum, Lost Spin-off and Webmaze Discussion (see, for example, the fifty-plus-page discussions "I think we need to discuss . . . ," "mods we need a new forum," or "Lost and the Lost Experience inextricably entwined"). Many participants considered this a bureaucratic issue, but it turned out to have profound implications for how *Lost* was interpreted and how such critical concepts as "author" and "intentionality" were defined.

The participants divided loosely into two groups. One group, whose members might be considered purists, wanted only to watch the television show or accepted a Web page only if it bore the "signature of someone related to *Lost.*" Because alternate reality games, by their very nature, do not announce themselves as games, however, they will always lack direct authorial attribution. The other group, which sometimes referred to its members as "mazers," wanted to use non-show material to build interpretations, although they differed in the standards they applied for establishing a definitive link to TPTB.

What ensued as these two groups hammered the issue out was a kind of theory war about the nature of authorial intention, validity, evidence, and interpretive freedom. Thus mazers, for example, pointed to the fact that several people known to be affiliated with the show had indicated that they were extending *Lost* onto Internet sites, while purists countered (arguing, one said, "from LitCrit 101") that what an author says he is doing and what he actually does are two different things. Moreover, since many fans are not certain that TPTB actually have a grand plan (as opposed to making it up as they go along), they question how much value to give TLE information, even if it can be proven to be canon. If, for example, TLE really did reveal the meaning of "the numbers," then this major piece of information ought somehow to be incorporated into the unfolding

narrative of the television show—which thus far has not been the case. And if it is not included in the television show, then is the solution—and by extension the numbers themselves—in some sense now irrelevant to the main story? Fans thus become caught in a circle of interpretation. Or as one participant summed it up: "My theory is that this argument is metaphorical for the dissension we are seeing amongst the Losties themselves. On one hand we have the science based side—sorta Jack's side—the side that only wants to see what is shown to them and is therefore 'fact.' And then there are the 'faithful,' the Lockeans, the webmazers, who have seen what the island 'might' be and are enchanted by what the possibilities are" (lostagainnaturally).

At issue in the end was, in the words of another participant, whether "*Lost* is one product or two." If it is one, then the information offered on TLE is canon and potentially as relevant as anything on television. But if it is two, then TLE is a form of disinformation—no different from that offered by spoilers, previews, or even fan fiction. Clearly most of the millions of people who watch *Lost* did not play TLE, and for them the show and the ARG (which many viewers may not have been aware of) were distinct. But for fans of Lost-TV—including those who played TLE, those who only watched as others played it, and those who wanted to ignore the game altogether—the issues were more complicated. These discussions, Jenkins (*Convergence*) argues, "centering as much on how we know and how we evaluate what we know as on the information itself" (44), will become increasingly common as we learn to live in a knowledge culture. The debates about whether to use TLE information in General Discussion engage such epistemological issues, although in their concern with textual interpretation as well as factual information, they are even more complicated.

Implicit in these debates are even more complex epistemological issues about the nature of interpretive freedom. *Lost* generates responses—theories about what it all means—that are so complicated and so dependent on esoteric information that they could not possibly be the explanation for the action of a mainstream television show. At some level, fans must know that the mysteries of *Lost* will not, in the end, be tied up primarily by complex scientific phenomena such as Messier objects or abstract philosophical theories such as psychoanalysis or dialectical materialism. Television shows (especially those with large audiences) simply do not work that way. Nevertheless, many fans have claimed the kind of interpretive freedom readers have long asserted with literary texts such as novels or poems. The question of authorial intention is almost suspended as they construct ever more complicated frameworks in which *Lost* might be understood—simply, it would seem, for the sheer pleasure of doing so. This kind of participatory relation between the viewer and TPTB suggests that fans are willing to claim a share in interpretive ownership of the text—a move, I believe, that is enhanced in the participatory environment of convergence culture.

Conclusion

Analysis of the literate acts involved in "viewing," "reading," and "writing back to" *Lost* supports the claims of Jenkins, Mittell, and others that more is converging in transmedia storytelling than the media themselves. Even more important are the new and dynamic interactions among "readers," "authors," and "texts." Readers converge with one another in their collaborative construction of meaning. Authors and readers converge as they interact on fan sites, and modes converge as meaning gets played out on visual and aural, as well as textual, planes. Texts converge as stories become instantiated on the page, on the Internet, and on television. These convergences are made possible by new media. But the change is not just technological; it is, as Jenkins emphasizes, cultural.

All this signals the beginning of a new, potentially rich, and still unpredictable kind of narrative. To address this innovative form of storytelling, we will need new theories of production and reception. In particular, we will need to pay attention to a set of complex interpretive and epistemological questions, such as: What constitutes a "text"? How do we define concepts such as "author" or "intention"? How do visual, aural, and textual modalities interact? What is the relation between low and high culture, as they are currently defined? But we should also consider what makes *Lost* so much fun. On Lost-TV forums, I witnessed many literate acts I would have welcomed in the classroom. I saw people not only devote enormous amounts of time and attention to understanding how a text works, but also respond to that text with intensity and passion. This is not an argument for replacing the study of literary texts with a study of a television show such as *Lost* (although I believe popular genres should be a part of our curricula). But it is an acknowledgment that many fans respond to *Lost* with the kind of commitment we hope to promote in university classrooms.

Why this deep level of engagement? I think *Lost* succeeds for many of the same reasons James Gee argues that video games are both personally compelling and highly effective in promoting learning. In particular, I am persuaded by Gee's "situated meaning principle," in which he claims that learning always happens in relation to embodied experience. I have argued elsewhere that one of the ways in which games make experiences feel embodied is through their narrative shape (Journet). That is, games narrate an imagined world in which the actions of the player—like those of the characters in the game—have consequence, and it is in relation to this story that learning becomes situated. The same is true, I believe, for the kind of learning promoted in *Lost.* It is in the context of *Lost*'s unfolding narrative that the interpretive actions of the viewer—like the physical actions of the characters—have meaning. What makes watching, reflecting on, or writing about *Lost* even richer than playing video games (at least for me), however, is that the challenges viewers take on are specifically literate.

These literate practices are both connected to and different from the ways we read and write about established narrative genres, such as novels. That is,

responding to *Lost* requires much the same kind of interpretive work used with other types of imaginative texts, such as close reading, identifying intertextual references, and debating authorial intention. But it also calls on new literate challenges—such as moving among multiple media, discerning how narrative is shaped by media and mode, retrieving and sharing information and analyses in virtual environments, and building interpretations collaboratively in communities of participants. *Lost*, as an early attempt to construct a transmedia story, thus points to the new sorts of narrative experiences we may expect to find in convergence culture. As both a text to be read and a prompt for viewer and reader response, *Lost* suggests the kinds of interactive, collaborative, collective, and participatory literate practices that media convergence may promote.

Notes

1. Ian Bogost's review of *Convergence Culture* offers a different argument about the role of narrative in media convergence. For a complex discussion among Jenkins, Bogost and others about these and further issues related to convergence culture in general, and *Lost* in particular, see "A Response to Ian Bogost," parts 1 and 2. For a more specific discussion about *Lost* as transmedia narrative, see Mittell ("Lost in an Alternate Reality;" "The Lost Experience").

2. Jenkins's main examples of transmedia storytelling in *Convergence Culture* are *The Matrix* movies and their associated short animated films, comics, and games. Other examples he discusses include *A.I.*, the promotional alternate reality game The Beast, and *The Blair Witch Project* with its Internet connections.

3. From a transcript posted in lostpedia.com: "You're gonna go into that greenhouse through that hole there. Once inside, you're gonna turn left. Go about 20 paces until you see a patch of anthuriums on your left. They're in an alcove against the north wall. Face the wall, reach down with your left hand. You'll find a switch that activates the elevator. The elevator takes you down to the actual Orchid station" ("There's No Place like Home, Part 1").

4. It is impossible to summarize fully the complications of The Lost Experience (TLE). The following synopsis draws on material from TLE posted on *Wikipedia*, where one can also find references to other sites that offer more detailed analysis of how the clues work. TLE began in May 2006, when advertisements on ABC led viewers to the Hanso Foundation's Web site, which contained clues to further Web activity. Parts of an interview with "Gary Troup" (the fictional author who had been on Oceanic Flight 815) then showed up on the Barnes and Noble and Amazon Web sites. Newspaper advertisements in real-world newspapers and television commercials subsequently directed viewers to further Web sites containing concealed messages about the author, his credentials, and his motives. After the second season finale of *Lost*, "Hugh McIntyre" of the Hanso Foundation appeared on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. The same night, advertisements led viewers to other sites. In June a video was posted on Monster.com featuring a woman named Rachel Blake. Source code from the Hanso site then led viewers to a Web site run by radio host DJ Dan and to Rachel Blake's blog. In July,

Blake interrupted a Q&A at Comic-Con International that included *Lost* producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse to ask them about the Hanso Foundation. When Lindelof and Cuse said the Hanso Foundation was "fictional," Blake said that she had "evidence" that it really existed. Clues on Blake's blog and other Web sites then allowed viewers to start uncovering fragments of a video supposedly made by Blake that revealed nefarious activities of the Hanso Foundation. Eventually 70 codes or "glyphs" were released on Web sites and in physical locations, each corresponding to a video clip. The full video was then put on YouTube. In August, DJ Dan hosted a live webcast of his show to answer questions from actual viewers, as opposed to staged callers in earlier podcasts. Starting in August, free Apollo candy bars (a brand name first mentioned on the show) were handed out at other events. Viewers then got further messages from Blake, through email. TLE concluded with a "phone call" from Blake on the DJ Dan show and a link on ABC's home page to the full Rachel Blake video.

5. See Jensen for a good analysis of the ways in which *Lost* fans responded to TLE.

6. Henry Jenkins ("Game Design") describes the "blood feud" that has "threatened to erupt" between "the self-proclaimed ludologists, who want to see the focus shift onto the mechanics of game play, and the narratologists, who were interested in studying games alongside other storytelling media" (118). See also Nick Mountford or Marie-Laure Ryan for arguments that computer games are narrative and Espen Aarseth or Jesper Juul for arguments that they are not.

7. There have actually been more posts, but in 2005 Lost-TV was hacked and several months' worth of contributions were lost.

8. Most notably "drabauer," the forum name for Dr. Amy Bauer, an assistant professor of music at the University of California, Irvine, who is frequently interviewed about *Lost* and the forum and who edits *Lost Online Studies*, a peer-reviewed e-journal that is the organ for the Society for the Study of *Lost* (*www.loststudies.com)*.

9. To get a sense of how complex and interesting discussion can be, see, for example, the threads "Freud Meets the Matrix," "Lost, time and cowboy movies (for Sergio Leone fans)," or "Official Numbers thread (aka How 'bout them numbers!!!)."

10. The relation of *Our Mutual Friend* to *Lost* turns out to be very complex. There are numerous plot parallels, and both works exploit the idea that people are often unknowingly connected to one another via different networks (the six degrees of separation principle). More important, though, the works are connected in their serial publication or performance and in the ways the authors have to help readers or viewers follow a complex plot over an extended period of time. Dickens's explanation of his aim and method at the end of *Our Mutual Friend* provides an apt description of the challenges of creating and responding to *Lost:* "To keep for a long time unsuspected, yet always working itself out, another purpose originating in that leading incident, and turning it to a pleasant and useful account at last, was at once the most interesting and the most difficult part of my design. Its difficulty was much enhanced by the mode of publication; for, it would be very unreasonable to expect that many readers, pursuing a story in portions from month to month through nineteen months will, until they have it before them complete, perceive the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern which is always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom" (798).

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