

WHY THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION IS

LOST

BEEN CANCELED HELPED TV INTO THE NEW-MEDIA ERA BY JAMES PONIEWOZIK

THERE ARE NO SIMPLE ANSWERS WHEN IT COMES TO *LOST*. When we left the addictively weird serial about the survivors of a plane crash on a desert island, we had just made a startling discovery: the island is linked to the world outside. That revelation, while it seems small, was momentous for fans. It destroyed a whole bunch of theories—for instance, that the characters were dead and in purgatory.

So as Season 3 opens, the question on most viewers' minds is, Will there be more present-day glimpses of the outside world?

Yes, says executive producer Carlton Cuse. But executive producer Damon Lindelof interjects that he might not use the term present.

BOB D'AMICO/ABC



Adds Cuse: "The context of time is something you can't take for granted."

Uh-huh. TV has seen plenty of shows with *Lost*'s geek appeal, but their stories usually end with "... and it was soon canceled, to the dismay of its hard-core fans." *The Prisoner*, the first *Star Trek* series—even *Twin Peaks* went from phenom to flame-out faster than you can say, Who killed Laura Palmer? *Lost* is different. An unapologetically knotty, mass-market commercial hit, it demands commitment—and gets it.

HOW DID *LOST* ESCAPE THE cult-show graveyard? Partly because it's just TV genius. But also because TV has changed—and because *Lost* changed TV. Many of the changes that threatened old-fashioned TV—the rise of the Internet, new technologies, a fragmented audience with new entertainment options—have made *Lost* successful. It won over Internet-centric viewers who are supposed to be bored with TV, and it benefited from technologies like iTunes, DVRs and DVDs that some were worried would be the end of TV. It took the attributes that would once have made it a cult failure—eccentricity and complexity—and used them to harness the power of obsessive, evangelical fans. Like the story told in *Lost*, the story of the series' success is one of careful design, science and a little faith.

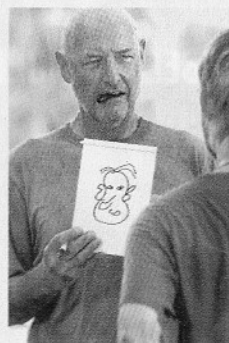
First, the faith. In 2004, ABC was fourth in the ratings. One series in its pipeline was based on an idea by then chairman Lloyd Braun: a fictionalized *Survivor*. ABC turned over the project to producer J.J. Abrams and his partner Lindelof, who elaborated the concept into a wild, character-driven mystery. The wisdom in TV then was that viewers were too busy to follow continuing story lines. Simple procedurals like *CSI* reigned. "We would have loved to have had a *CSI*," says Stephen McPherson, then head of Touchstone Television and now ABC Entertainment president. "But given our choices, it made a lot of sense to try to break out of the clutter." Abrams had a track record, as producer of *Alias*, of making a thriller with emotional impact—although, Abrams says, "it was an ongoing battle" getting the network to support that show's complex serial story line.

With *Lost*, he and Lindelof wrote a geeky mythology show with enough heart, humor and richness of character to appeal far beyond the *Doctor Who* convention set. There is Jack (Matthew Fox), a heartthrob doctor with unresolved father issues, and



OTHER WORLD

Season 3 gets into the lives of the wily Others, above. Sawyer (Holloway), left, is now one of their captives, while Locke (O'Quinn), right, still seeks the island's secrets



Locke (Terry O'Quinn), a paraplegic miraculously healed on the island. There is Hurley (Jorge Garcia), a likable sad sack who won the lottery playing a set of numbers—4, 8, 15, 16, 23, 42—that we learn have mystic significance. There is a fugitive (Evangeline Lilly), a wisecracking con man (Josh Holloway), a heroin-addicted has-been rock star (Dominic Monaghan), a former Iraqi torturer (Naveen Andrews).

I left out the psychic kid, the Korean gangster and many others, but you get the point. The island may not be purgatory, but metaphorically it is: almost all the castaways have a past to atone for, and their backstories, told in flashbacks, give the mystery and monsters emotional grounding. The result is a moving, literate popcorn thriller that weaves dozens of characters' lives into a story of interconnection, redemption and grace.

Lost was a hit out of the gate, but serials typically bleed viewers as casual fans tune out. This is where the science comes in. What *Lost* geeks have that earlier TV cultists didn't is a mature, broadband Internet. The fans set up blogs, reference sites and podcasts. They watched, then debated and posted tidbits and theories (the smoke monster is a nanorobot cloud controlled by a psychic!). "Part of watching this show is talking about it," says Nicholas Gatto, 14, who runs abclost.blogspot.com. "It doesn't just end at the credits."

The mystery of *Lost*—and the opportunities for cyberanalysis—turned it into TV for the post-TV generation. Besides stoking interest, technology has affected the kind of storytelling *Lost* can do. On a practical level, DVRs, DVDs and iTunes downloads mean it's less likely fans will miss episodes, fall behind and give up, which allows the writers to keep the show complex and challenging. "A show that is as serialized as *Lost* would have had a much harder time pre-iPod, pre-DVD, pre-streaming video," says Abrams.

And those technologies allow the producers to add levels of detail. In a Season 2 episode, Eko (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje), a former Nigerian drug lord, has a religious epiphany when he encounters the smoke monster in the jungle. Viewers who TiVoed the scene and played it in slow motion saw a series of images in the cloud: Eko's dead brother, a man Eko killed, a crucifix. The images flash by in fractions of a second. A casual viewer would not have noticed them at all. Either way, it works. You can sit back and enjoy the story, or you can play it, as if it were an adventure-puzzle game like *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Myst*.

The classic image of the TV superfan is the minutiae-obsessed, Vulcan-eared *Star Trek* fan, played by Jon Lovitz opposite William Shatner in a classic *Saturday Night Live* skit. Today the Lovitzization of entertainment is widespread. When *Lost* used

stock footage from Norway to depict the founder of the Hanso Foundation—the apparent prime mover behind its conspiracy—Norwegian fans went nuts speculating over their homeland’s connection to the mystery.

AND THE PRODUCERS ARE LISTENING. Last season they killed a second character in a pivotal episode because the one they intended to kill was so unpopular that they realized she would not be missed. Other times, they rebut the fans. To knock down a popular theory—that the entire series is a dream—they made an episode in which a hallucination tells Hurley that everything that happened on the island was in his head, and then they disproved it. “There’s a kind of reciprocal exchange,” says David Lavery, chair in film and television at London’s Brunel University and a co-author of *Unlocking the Meaning of Lost*. “The fans know more about the show—except what’s going to happen next week—than the people creating the show. Fandoms feel power that they never felt before.”

Of course, the Lovitzes are a minority of *Lost* viewers. But they’re a vocal one. Pop-culture critic Steven Johnson, author of *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, says the show’s makers “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. “Let’s say I go to a Bruce Springsteen show, and he plays for four hours instead of two hours,” says Lindelof. “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 f_____ show in my life.”

It was for the 1% that the producers and ABC this summer created *The Lost Experience*, an online game that delved into the Dharma Initiative, the secretive international project alluded to on the show. For more than four months, players hunted for clues in phony corporate websites, voice-mail messages and video clips online. The trick was to give away information that would tantalize hard-core fans but casual viewers wouldn’t need. (Among the tidbits: *Dharma* stands for *department of heuristics and research on material applications*. See what you can do with that.)

For most of TV history, going to those lengths to get people who already like a show to like it more would have been a waste.

Network TV is paid for by ads, and to advertisers, an eyeball is an eyeball, however passionate. But now you can turn passion into money. Fans buy episodes they missed, from iTunes at \$1.99 a pop. They’re the market for the upcoming video-game and cell-phone mini-episodes. They buy DVDs to catch new details of episodes they have already seen. This month *Lost*’s Season 2 debuted at No. 1 on the DVD charts—listing at about \$60 a set. Season 1 sold 1.2 million copies. The networks take notice when it comes time to schedule new series. “I’m not in the room when the corporate decisions are made,” says Abrams. “But the possibility of making \$50 [million], \$100 million more on DVD sales—it’s not a drop in the bucket.”

Perhaps the greatest test of how *Lost* has changed TV will be its end. The producers say they want the story to finish at its natural conclusion, even if it’s still on top. Surprisingly, they would have some fans on their side. “I’d be happy if it went four years, five years, then quit,” says Craig Hundley, a moderator of two *Lost* fan sites. Then again, the call is ABC’s. Will it be the makers and fans or the network execs who decide when the show’s time has come? TV is still a business. And as Cuse said, with *Lost*, the context of time is something you can’t take for granted. —With reporting by Jeane McDowell/Los Angeles and Sean Scully/Philadelphia

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: V. ZINK—ABC; B. D’AMICO—ABC; V. SHERWOOD—NBC; F. OCKENFELS—FOX; R. VOETS—CBS; E. LIEBOWITZ—ABC; T. PATTON—NBC; P. ECCLESIN—ABC

ICONS FOR TIME BY QUICKHONEY

THE LOST EFFECT

It’s not only on *Lost* that eerie coincidences happen. After ABC’s phenomenon, the networks are stocking up on serials, airing ambitious new shows that have some familiar-looking elements.

KEY: SERIAL PLOT STRANGERS THROWN TOGETHER BY CIRCUMSTANCE CONSPIRACY OR MYSTERY STORY LINE NONLINEAR NARRATIVE VERY LARGE CAST OF CHARACTERS



THE NINE, ABC: This drama looks at the aftereffects of a brutal hostage-taking on nine survivors, including a cop (Tim Daly), and explores the mystery of what happened during the ordeal.



DAY BREAK, ABC: He’s just having one of those days. And another. And another. A detective (Taye Diggs, left) keeps reliving the same day—no ground-hogs here—on which he was framed for a murder.



HEROES, NBC: Ordinary folks discover they have superpowers, including a cubicle drone (Masi Oka) who can bend space-time. Will they band together to prevent a disaster? And who’s trying to stop them?



THE KNIGHTS OF PROSPERITY, ABC: One of several sitcoms with serial plots this year, it will follow a group of unlikely thieves trying to make their dreams come true by robbing Mick Jagger.



SIX DEGREES, ABC: From *Lost*’s J.J. Abrams, it’s a relationship drama about six people who don’t yet know about their relationship: they’re connected in a daisy chain of related story lines.



KIDNAPPED, NBC: This missing-person serial moves in high (and low) society as an ex-fed (Jeremy Sisto) spends the season trying to find the teen scion of a wealthy Manhattan family.



JERICO, CBS: A prodigal son (Skeet Ulrich)—offering suspicious stories about where he has been for five years—has his homecoming interrupted by a nuclear attack that isolates his town.



VANISHED, FOX: And this missing-person serial debuted in August, but you already need Mapquest to follow the byzantine developments as a fed (Gale Harold) tracks down a Senator’s wife.