

The Future is *Lost*: Economic, Social, and Technological Impact of a Cult (and Cultural) Phenomenon

The course: When a plane crashed on more than 18.5 million American television screens in September 2004, a new television show had taken up the mantle of "cult hit." *Lost*, seemingly a mix of *Survivor* and *The X-Files*, was an instant paradox: a mainstream media blockbuster that defied categorization and appealed to some of the most fringe elements of human nature. In three short years, the show has spawned an empire of entertainment, marketing, and community that eclipses the show itself. Its producers have pushed *Lost* to the bleeding edge of new media; online communities take pride in dissecting each episode, from literary references to philosophical allusion; and the show's format has inspired dozens of copycats on networks desperate to adapt to a newly demanding audience. This course is an interdisciplinary endeavor into the heart of the phenomenon. We'll examine the economic circumstances that led to the development of the show, the societal context that it evolves in, and the possible effects of the show on technology and the future of media.

Instructors: Chadwick Matlin, LA '07, and Ed Kalafarski, LA '06, will steer the weekly discussion. They will be responsible for adapting the source material and research as necessary, based on the evolution of the class discussion.

Prerequisites: We're going to assume that students have a working knowledge of the show. Students by no means need to be fanatics. Beyond that, an enthusiasm to follow and dissect the show from many different points of view is crucial.

Spoilers: By taking this class, you agree to limit any talk of spoilers to a minimum. If you have read an interview with the creators or a news article that describes future events in the series, please keep that knowledge to yourself. Taking this class should enhance the viewing experience, not detract from it.

Assignments: Students will be expected to watch the show each week, responding with a weekly reaction paper. The guidelines for these reaction papers are loose, and they can contain the student's thoughts on any elements or effects of the week's episode (thematic elements, marketing, responses of the online community, etc.), in-class discussions, or readings. 1-2 pages each. These response papers may be posted to a Blackboard-equivalent site, stay tuned for details.

Students will prepare themselves for discussion on the theme of the week with a variable reading assignment. Readings will come from a variety of sources, from sources within the show's production to critical analyses. In addition, students should actively seek new writings about the show as they appear in the media.

A **2-4 page paper** will be assigned on the first night of class. This will help the instructors get to know the students first and foremost, and also help the students collect and express their thoughts on the show.

The **first project** will be due roughly halfway through the course. Students will take on an element of literature that has been alluded to or referenced in *Lost* and examine the influence of this work of "past media" on *Lost*'s example of "present media."

The **second project** will be due on the final day of class. Students will design their own drama, sitcom, or other media production using the elements of media that have been pioneered by *Lost* and examined in the course.

There are opportunities to lead part of the discussion for a majority of the readings. If any of you are interested, let us know and we can work it so you are able to create a lesson plan in place of other assignments.

Also, traditional papers can be done in place of the first or second project. Again, talk to us for details.

We also strongly advise that the students listen to ABC's official podcast, which features the executive

producers discussing hidden nuggets in each episode.

Grading: This is a full-credit, Pass/Fail course. Assignments will not be letter-graded. There will be commentary on your efforts, but it will be in the interest of capitalizing on the effort you put into your work.

Texts: There will be two reading packets for the course. Each will cover 6-7 weeks of course material. They'll be available at Gnomon Copy.

Also, you'll need to grab Everything Bad is Good for You by Steven Johnson. It's in the Book Store. You may also be asked to buy one other book by the end of the semester.

Please note that the readings on the syllabus may change. We're going to do whatever is best for the class, and that may mean switching some things around.

Classes: Classes are conversations, and students will be expected to participate. Some classes will start with a recap of the episode that aired the previous night, and a dissection of the episodes from the three angles of production, the surrounding economics, and the community built around the show. These three angles will serve as a loose guideline for discussing the societal effects of *Lost*.

Each class will then revolve around a specific topic to govern the conversation for the week. Readings in the syllabus are to be read for the week they fall under.

Leveling the playing field

Week 1: Theories and mysteries

This week we'll enter the universe of the show. *Lost* can be seen as a serial mystery. How have the theories about the show evolved in the last three years? How have your personal theories changed? Does the fact that some of these mysteries (e.g. how Locke goes from "box man" to mountain man) are being solved or explained ruin their meaning? Does it ruin repeat viewings? How does the show take advantage of (or shun) cliché? Many say the mysteries of the show have turned into mountains of questions that will never be answered. We'll take a look into that criticism and how *Lost* uses the technique.

Readings: IGN's 50 Mysteries.

"Dickens, Challah, and That Mysterious Island..." New York Times, 5/25/06

TV Industry Roots and Deviations

Week 2: Influences

Lost launches off and alludes to many other shows and films: *Twilight Zone*, *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *The Prisoner*, and *Planet of the Apes* to name a few. What shows made the existence of *Lost* possible? Is this show science fiction, and what does that mean for marketing? What was the target demographic initially, and what is it now? Could *Lost* exist if ABC wasn't in the gutter 3 years ago? Why did *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* have such an impact on *Lost*? Could *Lost* exist 10 years ago, without the technology we have available today? Could *Lost* exist in a pre-9/11 world? Was *Lost* a gamble for ABC and its creators, or a sure thing? This week we'll visit the foundation that the show has been built upon.

Readings: "Behind the secrets of *Lost*," *Nightline* interview transcript with *Lost*'s creators.

"Magical Mystery Tour" The New Yorker 5/23/05.

"If we're not being rescued, let's all start new lives" New York Times 9/19/04.

TV Drama in Transition, Nelson ("Framing the real").

Screenings of *Twin Peaks* and *The Prisoner* in the library.

Week 3: Execution

Lost's marketing strategy has been unorthodox. Has it succeeded? Is *Lost* a textbook example of viral marketing, with books and Web sites tied into the official plot? *Lost* was first show to be sold on iTunes and appears (legally) on the ABC Web site immediately after it airs. Its storyline is directly affecting the air schedule for its third season. How are story and production affecting each other? Which holds more influence over the other? Is this changing the way television shows make money? How much of the *Lost* stuff that goes out into the world has the blessing of the producers? We'll take a look into Disney's conglomerate and what increasing amounts of vertical integration and synergy have to do with *Lost*'s economic success.

Readings: "Ipod DealRocked TV's World," TVWeek 10/9/06
"Networks work with the Net," USATODAY 10/29/06
"Running The Really Big Show: 'Lost' Inc." New York Times 10/1/06
"Vertical Vision: Deregulation, Industrial Economy and Prime-time Design," Holt

Week 4: Writing room

Lost isn't a procedural. Some say *Lost* is resurrecting the character-driven drama, and it's important to note that it's happening in an era of user-created content. It's well-known that the series creators actually created some of the characters around the actors playing them. Is this content-by-committee? Who writes the show: the fans, the actors, or the writers? How is *Lost* being affected by the Internet culture of user-demanded collaboration: *Snakes on a Plane*, citizen journalism, and *Current TV*. The serial format goes all the way back to the roots of horror with Wilkie Collins in the mid 19th century. How has it evolved since then, and is it done? How does the serial format affect syndication rights or the survival of the procedural drama and the sitcom? How does it affect narrative elements, such as character development and character deaths? Does it alienate new viewers or reward viewer loyalty? We'll examine the inherent obstacles to building a framework without using much precedent and evaluate whether *Lost* has succeeded.

ASSIGNMENT 1: LITERARY CONNECTIONS is handed out

Readings: "Lost soul mates," USATODAY, 10/4/06
"All who wander are not lost," Writtenby, Sep 2006
"On TV as in Hollywood, Little Breathing Room for the Modest Success
"New serials, now you see them, now you don't," New York Times, 1/10/07
"Is Serial Programming a Format or a Genre?" MIT Convergence Culture
TV Drama in Transition, Nelson ("Flexi-Narrative from Hill Street to Holby City")

Art Imitating Life/Relationship between show and societal issues

Week 5: Mechanical complexity

Is *Lost* highbrow or lowbrow? Do audiences care, or even notice the difference anymore? Is a single production house simultaneously producing a slick highbrow network television show and a lowbrow Internet counterculture phenomenon? Or has the line between these two been destroyed? Steven Johnson seems to think that *Lost* typifies entertainment media's ever-increasing complexity. Moreover, Johnson suggests it might be altering our mental makeup. We'll see if his argument holds up. Is *Lost* an intellectual endeavor or the most primal kind of pulp? Stephen King and his influence on pop culture may be discussed.

Readings: Everything Bad is Good for You, Johnson

Week 6: Thematic complexity

Deeper social issues have been elements of *Lost* since Sawyer took a swing at Sayid. The issues in the show echo within its reality and within our own. How is *Lost* a product of a post-9/11 world, and the notion of us vs. them? Is there a good and evil on this show? How is it a post-apocalyptic allegory? How is it a referendum on science versus religion? Is redemption ever possible? Is *Lost* just more explicit with these themes than other shows have been? Is *Lost* really a grandiose love story between Desmond and Penny? **What is *Lost* about?** We'll avoid delving into the philosophical and literary territory of the show and instead focus on the thematic content and its atypical presence in the primetime lineup.

Readings: "Flashbacks, Memory, and Non-Linear Time on ABC's *Lost*," Berger
"Is the island a body without organs?," Cory and Cory
"Lost de la Lettre: messages, mistaken identities and the other who really believes," Bauer.

Week 7: Literary references

ASSIGNMENT 1: LITERARY CONNECTIONS DUE THIS WEEK

What do these books have to do with *Lost*? *Of Mice and Men*, *Carrie*, *Third Policeman*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Watership Down*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Heart of Darkness*, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. You'll tell us and the rest of the class. More info on this week will be handed out in Week 4. Expect it to be a whole lot more than just a 4th grade book report.

Readings: Students' choice of literature alluded to in the show
"Is *Lost* a literary enigma?" USATODAY 10/4/05

Week 8: Philosophies

Locke. Rousseau. Hume. Some of the main characters on the show are named for pioneers of modern

Western philosophy. Early theories about the show couldn't ignore the most fundamental existential questions. More recently, Eastern philosophical elements such as Dharma have worked their way into the show's mythology. We'll need a brief primer on all of these philosophies, and then we'll examine their interactions within the media and *Lost*. Are they contradictory or complementary? Are we reaching for straws by following all of these high-minded bread crumbs? This week, we'll try and wrap our heads around what an 18th century Scottish philosopher and 21st century Scottish soldier have in common.

Readings: Various readings from the philosophers mentioned in the show.

Purchasing power of a fanbase

Week 9: Fanboys

Online message boards emerged with the Internet as far back as Usenet, but when did they become a driving influence within Hollywood? What is causing this shift of power to the viewer? Did it start with *Lost*, or something more basic? How long have tributes and shout-outs to fans been part of entertainment. Is there an economic reason to take care of the fanbase? If so, then where does that economic benefit clash with a thematic path? We'll discuss the impact that new media's user-created ethos has had on *Lost*. As far as *Lost* is concerned, is this factor at all balanced out by the fact that the writers say they have a master plan? This week, expect to think like a fan again, but also expect to delve into a world many of you may never have experienced: the message board.

ASSIGNMENT 2: SERIES PITCH IS HANDED OUT

Readings: "Web Wars: Resistance, Online Fandom and Studio Censorship," Jones
Convergence Culture, Jenkins (excerpts).
Jonah Adkins' map (via email).

Week 10: The Lost Experience

Why did the producers feel motivated to create an "Alternate Reality Game" chiefly for the fans? Is *Lost* the first of its kind to create a fully thriving world outside of the prime medium of entertainment? Who ran The Lost Experience? What steps did ABC take to ensure that it had maximum appeal in the United States and abroad. What issues of reality-within-reality did the game bring up? This week, we'll look at the extraordinary steps ABC took to involve fans in the summer between Season 2's finale and Season 3's premiere. We'll center our discussion around what benefits ABC reaped in undertaking a side project that served only the die-hard fan.

Readings: Bad Twin, Troup (excerpts).
Convergence Culture, Jenkins (excerpts)
Mittel, "Lost in an alternate Reality."

Week 11: Content vs. advertising

Is *Lost* a wise investment? Why do American Express, Verizon, Monster.com, and Jeep want a part of the *Lost* puzzle? Webisodes: what are they, entertainment or advertising? A little of both? Are writers wasting their time by putting time and effort into advertising materials? Is *Lost* blurring the line between the two, or simply a victim of a shifting market and demanding audience? Is *Lost* redefining what used to be the "Happy Meal" tie in for the adult viewer? This week, we'll look at the economic side of ABC's full-court press to try and capitalize on a popular TV show and what kind of staying power that approach yields..

Readings: "Marketers play off the plot with multi-platform 'Lost Experience,'" Advertising Age 9/11/06
"Interactive Television and Advertising Form in Contemporary U.S. Television," Boddy

Week 12: The future of television is *Lost*

How has *lost* changed the network economic landscape? Is this good for storytelling? Will *Lost* burn out on top, like *Seinfeld*, or fade away, like *The X-Files*...and do the creators have any control of this? We'll take a look at the copycats, and examine why they emerged when they did and what elements they took away from *Lost*. Are they succeeding? Will *Lost*'s legacy be shaped by what shows are successful in its wake? Have we over exaggerated *Lost*'s importance in the entertainment medium? What do *Lost*'s declining ratings suggest about the long-term viability of a show of its kind? Expect a week of synthesis and culmination, where we try to make sense of *Lost*'s place in the realm of revolutionary media.

Readings: "The Future of Television is *Lost*," TIME, 10/2/06
"Lost Generation," The New Yorker, 10/16/06

Week 13: The future of media is *Lost*.

ASSIGNMENT 2: SERIES PITCH IS DUE.

Students will pitch the series they have created to a room full of potential greenlighters. Students will be expected to challenge their classmates' series ideas, flesh out innovative elements, and zero in on potential pitfalls.