'Speculation on Spoilers: *Lost* Fandom, Narrative Consumption and Rethinking Textuality'

Abstract

This paper studies the practice of "spoiler fans" of the TV show *Lost*, who seemingly short-circuit the program's narrative design by seeking out advanced plot points online. Drawing from an online qualitative survey, we examine what spoilers tell us about contemporary narrative and textuality in the digital age. Spoiler fans take some extra-textual pleasures, informing how contemporary mediated texts operate within everyday life. However, fans' survey responses focused on textual pleasures, painting vivid pictures of *Lost*'s "operational aesthetics," pleasures of the known, paratextual proliferation, game logic, and the phenomenology of anticipation and suspense. Ultimately, spoiler fans and the practice of spoiler consumption speak volumes about the changing nature of transmedia storytelling, serial textuality, and norms of narrative consumption.

Key words: television, online fandom, narrative, paratexts, viewer phenomenology, qualitative survey

The May 3, 2006 American broadcast episode of *Lost*, entitled "Two for the Road," ended with a series of bangs. Heroic character Michael shot and seemingly killed two members of the castaway community of plane crash survivors, Ana-Lucia and Libby, for reasons left unresolved on the episode. For many fans of the program, this ending was a first-class shocker, motivating water-cooler discussions as to why Michael did it, whether the characters were really dead, and what greater meaning might be extracted from this event. But a significant number of *Lost* fans were already speculating about why Michael did it, as his actions were completely expected, having been revealed via "spoilers" on the online forums that have cropped up around this and other programs. Spoiled viewers watched the episode to see how the story that they already knew would be told, but experienced little if any of the jaw-dropping surprise seemingly intended by the producers and enjoyed by other fans. Yet most of these so-called "spoiler fans" purposely sought out this information, looking to short-circuit the suspenseful design of *Lost* each week. Why? How might we account for this practice of narrative consumption that seems to contradict the very pleasures that a show like *Lost* offers each week? And what do spoiler practices tell us about the shifting dynamics of storytelling and popular pleasures in a digital age? To answer these questions, we offer both a theoretical exploration into spoiler practices and an empirical study of this particular incarnation of fandom.

Lost itself offers a particularly charged case study to examine spoilers. The global hit program debuting in 2004 may be the most elaborated example of the complex narrative strategies that Jeffrey Sconce (2004), Glen Creeber (2004), and Jason Mittell (2006) argue have emerged over the past decade. Beginning with a plane crash onto an unknown and mysterious island, *Lost* has weaved a dense web of mystery and conspiracy, science-fiction and mysticism, all told with innovative storytelling strategies of nested flashbacks, shifting perspective, and protracted seriality. Nearly every episode concludes with a cliff-hanger, often combining suspense with a mystifying ability to force viewers to question their assumptions about the diegetic world constituted by the show. The program offers such a complex apparatus of conspiracy and mystery that online fandom has embraced the show to demonstrate their collective intelligence in action, charting relationships, creating maps, and decoding minute clues on discussion boards, wikis, and blogs. Based on the facets of *Lost* that seem most innovative and successful, it would seem that mystery, suspense, and the parsing of mysterious clues are some of the show's chief pleasures – and that the best way to experience the complex narrative is for viewers to put their faith in the producers' ability to deliver the thrills and head-twisting revelations that the show regularly offers. Since the design of *Lost* seems predicated upon the serial form and strategic use of the unknown, the practice of spoiler fans appears to be a greater mystery for this program than for a show less dependent on complex narrative structures for its pleasures.

What might the research on fandom and textual consumption tell us about spoiler practices? The word *spoiler* comes fully-loaded with pejorative and aberrant connotations. Spoiling or spoils, after all, are most commonly associated with milk left out on a warm summer day, with ill-gotten gains from war, or with taking a woman's virginity under questionable circumstances. Hence, to spoil already connotes an aggressive, hyper-masculine, violent act of robbery, and a destruction of purity, leaving the smell of sour milk in our nostrils. As such, it is perhaps no surprise that spoilers have received little academic attention: they connote incorrect, cruel, and mischievous practices from the outset, and hence present themselves as oddities and aberrations. That said, aberrations and abnormality teach us of normality, or at least of the expectations that create normality, and thus a proper examination of why viewers seek out and enjoy spoilers could promise to tell us more about the process of narrative engagement, both "normal" and otherwise. While certainly not typical of the majority of viewers, spoiler fans are hardly a rare breed: the Internet is awash with fan sites, many of which contain spoilers; several dedicated spoiler sites have enjoyed considerable popularity, such as spoilerfix.com; and the spoilt milk regularly spills over into the mainstream press, whether *Entertainment Weekly* or *The New York Times*. Therefore, despite its etymologically ugly roots, spoiling is becoming acceptable and working its way into the mainstream, requiring a reevaluation of what "normal" narrative engagement might look like in the digital age.

The Epistemology of the Spoiler

Spoilers have arguably been most notable concerning books or films – Who Murdered Roger Ackroyd? Who is Kaiser Sose? Where is the Planet of the Apes? What is Soylent Green? Who dies in the newest Harry Potter book? From the act of reading a book's last chapter first to an overly revealing detail in a movie trailer or review, a number of spoiling practices and boundaries have developed surrounding the self-contained stories of novels and films. However, as television stories have become more elaborate and serialized in the past decade, television spoilers have begun to flow fast and free, complicating the ways narratives are consumed and promoted. The definition of "spoiler" varies somewhat in the eyes of the beholder, as any revelation of yet-to-unfold narrative developments could be viewed as a spoiler by some, ranging from a leaked script of an unfilmed episode to a network preview of next week's program. Spoilers can result simply from programs "time-shifting" across time zones and exhibition dates, whereby episode content is revealed hours or months before airing locally, or from information gleaned through back channels that stands to spoil *all* viewers other than cast and crew weeks ahead of time. *Lost* spoiler boards include photos of the *Lost* set in Hawaii and testimonials from passers-by, casting information, and leaks from production personnel. Furthermore, producers join in the game themselves, often revealing snippets of information about upcoming episodes, playing with fans by offering Nostradamus-like, cryptically worded clues, or even blatant misinformation in the guise of a real spoiler (dubbed "foilers" by fans).

How viewers wish to experience narratives unfolding can vary. Some viewers consider the "Next week on *Lost*…" previews following episodes as spoilers, wishing to experience each episode with as little foreknowledge as possible, while others are comfortable seeing any "official" advance information like previews and producer interviews as sanctioned and thus not bona fide spoilers. Some spoilers pop up in everyday fan discussion – though etiquette demands that spoilers be clearly marked as such ("SPOILER WARNING") – but many magazines like *Entertainment Weekly* and commercial websites like E! Online make a business of serving up spoilers. Most fansites have dedicated spoiler boards, where spoilers are not only circulated but exhaustively discussed, evaluated for veracity, and used for both community-building and group speculation. Importantly, though, while spoilers have spoiler fans, they also spread virally, "spoiling" non-spoiler fans and forcing advance information upon them; hence, their relevance extends well beyond the Internet enclaves that tend to circulate and even research them.

To explore the key questions of why people read spoilers, and what such consumption tells us about narrative texts, we entered the field in which such practices are carried out: Internet forums dedicated to the show *Lost*.[1] How might such pleasures and priorities become enacted through viewer habits? And how might viewers themselves conceive of their own practices – as aberrant or ideal, a game or a short-cut? These are empirical questions which warranted a closer look into the practices of a spoiler community. We designed an anonymous online qualitative survey addressing these issues (see Appendix 1 for full survey), and posted an invitation to participate on five discussion boards (televisionwithoutpity.com; lost-forum.com; thefuselage.com; abc.com; losttv-forum.com) and one listserver (LostGame@yahoogroups.com) dedicated to *Lost* and frequently the site of spoiler threads and discussions. Posted the week before *Lost*'s Season Two finale aired in the United States, the survey clearly attracted interest from the show's dedicated fanbase: within a week, 228 people visited the survey, with 179 completing at least half of its questions. Around 80% of respondents identified themselves as American, with 17 other countries represented in the survey. 60% of respondents were female, and respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 54, with a mean age of 29 and median of 27.[2] The survey combined open-ended questions with more guided choice questions, with topics ranging from the specific pleasures offered by *Lost* to the ethical implications of spoiling. While the invitation did not explicitly indicate that the survey focused on spoilers, as we wished to gather data from viewers both who consume and avoid them, the majority of respondents did indicate that they consume spoilers to some degree – 37% frequently consume spoilers, 32% sometimes read them, and 14% both consume and disseminate spoilers online, with only 16% of respondents indicating that they avoid spoilers as much as possible. Although this should not be mistaken for an accurate portrait of the spoiling tendency of all *Lost* fans,[3] or even those who frequent online discussion boards, clearly spoiler consumption is a central facet of a good number of active *Lost* fans.

The practices of spoiler fans come fully loaded with preconceptions about what it means to read spoilers, and judgments on the legitimacy of spoiler reading. For the spoiler avoiders in our survey, spoilers were seen as directly "ruining" the experience of watching *Lost*, and many expressed concerns of being accidentally spoiled by reading

improperly labeled material online or coming across revealing entertainment news, like the announcement that an actor is leaving the show. As one spoiler avoider wrote about watching an episode that had been accidentally spoiled for her, "I spent too much time waiting for 'the big moment' and not enough time enjoying the show." Some spoiler avoiders for *Lost* read spoilers for other shows, but find *Lost*'s presentation of suspense, surprises, thrills, and mystery so compelling that they wish to retain those pleasurable responses by remaining unspoiled. One respondent suggested that she only spoils programs that she doesn't particularly respect or think are clever in their storytelling; for shows like *Lost* or *House*, "if I respect a show I'm more likely to watch it the way I was expected to – as a naïve or ignorant viewer." While spoiler avoiders do not typically celebrate naiveté or ignorance per se, they do talk of suspense dramas like *Lost* as requiring that viewers give themselves over to creators to be manipulated and controlled through the storytelling process.

Our respondents all participate in online fan forums, so they are quite familiar with spoiler culture. When asked about how they regarded or explained spoiler fans, the avoiders generally seemed mystified and dismissive of the practice. A number of responses infantilized the practice, comparing spoiler fans to "kids on Christmas Eve who sneak a look at their presents," or called them "bad sports." Others suggested that spoiler fans lacked the maturity and patience needed to follow a slowly-evolving show like *Lost* "properly" as designed, regarding their consumption of narrative spoilers as character flaws. One respondent thought that spoiler fans were interested in the power spoilers give them, as "people get a bit of an ego-boost by thinking they know information sooner than everyone else." While many avoiders had a live-and-let-live attitude toward spoiler fans – as long as they properly label spoilers online – there certainly was a sense of judgmental uncertainty as to why such viewers would undermine what they saw as the central pleasures of suspense and mystery that *Lost* offers.

We approached this research with a similar sense of uncertainty – both of us are dedicated *Lost* fans who avoid spoilers to the best of our abilities. Because we both explore and participate in the online fan communities around the show, we have seen the engagement around spoilers among hardcore fans, and wish to understand how such practices fit into larger norms of narrative comprehension, fan community, and textuality. Additionally, one of us is married to a dedicated spoiler fan of *Lost*, and thus the conflict and disconnect between spoiler avoiders and consumers plays out each week in front of the television. As academics trained to view texts as creative works within particular consumption norms, we certainly carry some degree of judgmental skepticism toward spoiler fans, regarding such practices as aberrant violations of normal viewing protocols. But as cultural scholars trained to examine fan practices not as a stigmatized "other," but as legitimate forms of cultural participation and engagement, we turn to the practices and self-descriptions of spoiler fans to understand this alternative viewing practice within our midst. By asking spoiler fans to explain themselves, might we gain greater understanding of their practices? Might our own practices of narrative consumption be made a bit more strange and less of an unspoken norm? Might we too want to be spoiled?

Reading Spoilers and Extra-Textual Pleasures

In the most in-depth study of spoiling to date, Henry Jenkins (2006) discusses numerous extra-textual pleasures to be obtained from spoiler consumption. Indeed, given that *Lost* spoilers are separated in time, space, and industrial context from *Lost*, it may seem logical to posit that many of the key spoiler-reading pleasures are extra-textual themselves. Jenkins focuses on *Survivor* spoilers, examining fan community responses to information that would seem to tell them who gets voted off next week, who will have a medical emergency, and so forth. Unlike fictional narratives like *Lost*, spoiling reality programs like *Survivor* entails rooting out what has already happened in "reality" (or at least its made-for-TV incarnation), rather than unveiling the elaborate machinations of a still-to-be-written scripted serial. Jenkins frames the act of spoiling *Survivor* as a move in "a giant cat and mouse game that is played between the producers and the audience" (2006: 25). Eager to work out what will be revealed next on the program, audiences draw from leaks with cast or crew members, satellite images of potential filming locations, and tales from travelers returned from the filming location, ultimately hoping to piece together the already-enacted reality before primetime beats them to it. Meanwhile, producer Mark Burnett and CBS play their own hand, bluffing by way of throwing out fake spoilers.

Jenkins sees spoiling in largely communal terms, drawing on Pierre Lévy's (1997) concept of "collective intelligence" to argue that fans enjoy the camaraderie and groupwork of solving *Survivor* together. Interestingly, many of Jenkins's spoiler fans speak of *Survivor* itself in disinterested or even hostile terms, as many of them are lapsed fans who think the show has gotten worse, and so their enjoyment as "consumers" comes largely from the act of spoiling, whereby watching the show serves to confirm or reject spoilers, rather than from the pleasures of "the text itself." Indeed, we surround "consumers" and "the text itself" with quotation marks to signify the degree to which a markedly different model of textual consumption seems to be in place, whereby the text is already spoiled, and so the game of spoiling replaces the act of consumption for consumption's sake. As Cornel Sandvoss points out, the objects (and let us add, practices) associated with fandom can become their own fan objects (2005: 90), supplanting the supposedly "primary" text – in this case, *Survivor* fans shift their dedication from the televisual text to the spoiler paratexts. How might Jenkins's account apply to the spoiler fans of *Lost*'s fictional narrative? We can extend his approach to offer four hypotheses regarding the potential extra-textual pleasures of *Lost* spoiler consumption:

·   Spoiler fans consume spoilers as a game in and of itself, a contest between fans and producers

·   Spoiler fans are anti-fans, resisting the pleasures of the text in an oppositional manner

·   Spoiler fans seek the communal relations of the spoiler-circulating community

·   Spoiler fans regard the spoilers themselves as enjoyable texts to be studied and parsed

Each of these hypotheses point to differing ways in which spoiler fans can enjoy spoilers and participate in a spoiler community outside the practice of watching *Lost* directly.

Spoiler fans consume spoilers as a game in and of itself, a contest between fans and producers

Jenkins suggests that the game between *Survivor* fans and producers, whereby fans try to solve Mark Burnett's puzzle and "crack" *Survivor*, is a primary motivation for spoiler communities. By contrast, we found very few *Lost* spoiler fans who conceived of spoiling as an oppositional game played with the producers. Certainly, many wished to "crack" *Lost* – 66% of spoiler fans responded that they would read a hypothetical "master document" revealing all of *Lost*'s secrets if they had access to it. However, most felt they would do so guiltily, or out of undying curiosity, and far fewer wanted to share this document with others. On the whole, these fans seemed to exhibit considerable respect for *Lost*'s production team, and it was extremely rare to hear anyone voice a desire to "beat them" at any game. A few fans like spoilers because ABC (or their own national broadcaster) was seen to transmit the story at a snail's pace, and thus we might see their interest in spoilers as a direct response to network scheduling practices – "I only read spoilers when I am really *starved* for *Lost* info," wrote one respondent. But for the large part, our respondents were not oppositional fans nor engaged in battles against the production team (whether out of dislike or for fun). Rather, many spoiler fans repeatedly offer praise for the producers, the show's writing, and its storytelling – a few outright "blame" the show's quality for their spoiler addiction, as they want to extend their narrative experiences beyond their weekly installments rather than thwarting the show. This suggests that producer-fan "games" may be more prevalent in reality television shows with outcomes that have already taken place in the lived universe.[4] Nevertheless, we should note that our own study failed to attract any actual spoiler *generators* who infiltrate sets or leak preview copies, and so the differences between our data and Jenkins's may also correlate to differences between spoiler readers and producers.

Spoiler fans are anti-fans, resisting the pleasures of the text in an oppositional manner

Alongside the notion that fans are locked into a game with producers is the suggestion that spoiler fans may actually be anti-fans or non-fans of the show. Jonathan Gray (2003) uses these terms to contrast, respectively, viewers with an active (and frequently paratextually productive) dislike of a text, character, or personality, with those who casually consume a text. One could certainly imagine those who do not watch a program but feel the need to keep up with the

story via spoilers to participate in watercooler buzz; who view the show only occasionally and with marginal interest, thus using spoiler boards to stay up-to-date; or who, in a more malicious anti-fan vein, use spoilers as a way to thwart the pleasures of "real" fans by circulating "foilers" (fake spoilers) or spoiling other people's pleasures by copying actual spoilers onto boards or conversations designated as "spoiler-free." In all of these hypothetical scenarios, spoiler fans are seen as consuming, and interacting with, a text at its extra-textual margins, in order to avoid or actively reject its textual core; and they are contrasted with actual fans who consume *Lost*'s narrative "correctly," following the designs of the show's creators. Alas, the data in our survey do not point toward this reading of *Lost*'s spoiler fans in the least. A rare few wrote of spoiling other, "weaker" shows either so that they need not watch, or, as one respondent noted of *Seventh Heaven* spoilers, "to torture myself with how bad it is." However, regarding *Lost*, 87% of surveyed spoiler fans claim they never miss an episode, and nearly half of them frequently rewatch episodes, while only 21% cited the ability to relate to other *Lost* fans among the many reasons they watch the show, with nobody selecting this as their primary reason. Although literature on anti-fans suggests that oppositional viewers often create meanings and engage with programs they dislike (Gray 2003; Mittell 2004), it would seem quite odd for anti-fans to be so dedicated to, effectively, researching a narrative they actively dislike. Only a few respondents suggested that they had an adversarial role toward *Lost*, engaging in parodying or mocking the show – but these comments actually came from fans who avoided spoilers! Throughout the surveys, spoiler fans made it quite clear that they were highly invested in *Lost* as a positive object of enjoyment, with some even noting that they would be less likely to read spoilers if the show were less pleasurable. While perhaps the specific pleasures that spoiler fans get from *Lost* might differ, this is clearly not a case of either anti-fandom, non-fandom, or the use of spoilers as a way to gain compensatory information – spoiler fans are passionate and engaged in their appreciation of *Lost*.

That said, some spoiler fans use them to manage their smaller disappointments with the text, and general apprehension regarding *Lost*'s potential fall from grace, suggesting another mode of fandom that may be termed *cautious fandom*. Watching a serial television drama is a huge time investment, especially with a show like *Lost* which seems to demand a degree of "processing time" outside of the viewing experience to research, theorize, and discuss its mysteries. For fans of such an ongoing series, there may be a question as to whether the temporal investment will be worth it – will I get the narrative payoff I desire? In numerous interviews and commentaries, *Lost*'s producers have frequently cited both *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files* as influences, both for their clear precedents in narrative complexity and paranormal mysteries, and for their noted failures to deliver upon and sustain their initial promise. Producers recognize that with the ambition of crafting a highly complex puzzle narrative comes the curse of high expectations, noting that the payoff to the mysteries will inevitably be a let-down to the fans who devote hours each week to theorizing and speculation. Both *Twin Peaks* and *X-Files* succumbed to this curse – *Twin Peaks* resolved its central mystery with a less-than-satisfying revelation that left fans disinterested in what would come next, while *X-Files* dragged out and shifted its conspiratorial mythology beyond the point of most fans' engagement and comprehension. *Lost* producers use the paratextual realm of interviews and commentaries to assure fans that they learned the lessons of earlier failures, promising that the mysteries will resolve without ambiguity or anticlimax. However, some cautious fans remain worried, hiding a touch of fear behind their pleasures, a tinge of apprehension that their show might start to decline or take an undesirable narrative turn to break their fannish hearts. For such cautious fans, spoilers work as a form of narrative insulation, revealing potential miscues in the less emotionally charged medium of online text. As one fan wrote, "You can prepare yourself for things you normally wouldn't like. By reading spoilers, you will have the time to adjust to them by the time the episode airs (hopefully)." Another similarly suggested, "When episodes begin pointing towards a future plotline but take more time than necessary to unveil it, I'll read spoilers to confirm the direction of the story before I start disliking the show." While such practices do not fully eliminate disappointments from fan experiences, they shift the experience to both assess the worth of remaining a loyal viewer and to prepare for the eventual let down of watching the episode. A few respondents reported knowing other people who have grown disenchanted with the show, but still used spoilers to see if an episode would be worth watching, but this rationale was far less prevalent than explanations that assert that spoilers allow them to make a show that they love even more enjoyable.

Spoiler fans seek the communal relations of the spoiler-circulating community

Overall, opposition or even skepticism toward the text and/or producers proved extremely rare in our study, exhibiting little evidence of anti-fandom, viewer-producer games or battles, or fan caution; however, spoiler fans clearly enjoyed the utility of spoilers in informing their *Lost* speculation games and debates within fan communities. A commonly noted "added pleasure" of spoilers was that spoilers offer special status (via special acquired knowledge) to spoiler fans. "I'm a gossip – love to be the first to tell people what's going on," stated one respondent; another offered that "I know what's coming up before my offline friends do and am better equipped to discuss the episode"; another "get[s] to tease my friends about knowing what happens when they don't!"; while a fourth notes the "thrill of being one of the first to know what will happen." *Lost* offers its viewers countless mysteries and puzzles, and several respondents, like these, enjoyed accumulating narrative capital, and gaining an "advantage" over spouses, friends, or online discussants, that spoilers gave them. This advantage was social, ensuring that spoiler fans would be respected either as those in the know or as savvy speculators; additionally, to a few, it was an internal pleasure, allowing them the personal feeling of supremacy. For instance, one man admitted that he liked reading spoilers, "telling people your 'theories' and then people saying wow, what a great guess, when it ends up being true," while another's desire for narrative capital appeared wholly internal, when she stated that she liked spoilers, "honestly so I can sit back and laugh at people making stupid posts and stupid theories." Or, as another noted of spoilers' added pleasures, "The only pleasure I feel is internal, and it's not very strong. All I feel is 'Ha-ha I knew something you didn't know.'"

Some spoiler fans clearly enjoy being part of the specific community dedicated to circulating spoilers. The wealth of fan studies (see, for instance, Bird 2003; Brooker 2002; Harrington and Bielby 1995; Hills 2002; Jenkins 1992) have suggested that a considerable motivation of fandom is the social pleasure of being part of an often warm and accepting community that shares one's passion. Our data revealed less overt statements of fealty to a fan community; nevertheless, many spoke of the joys of using spoilers to energize open and friendly speculation discussions with others, beyond merely "competing" with spoiler-informed discussion, as described above. Nearly all respondents engage in some social activities regarding *Lost*, whether online or face-to-face, as summarized in Table 1. It is clear that many spoiler fans specifically enjoy the communal speculation that goes hand in hand with spoiler circulation. Few sentiments were as uniformly stated as the notion that speculation with others is fun, and a rewarding part of watching *Lost*, signaling the degree to which spoilers in particular situate *Lost* and its mysteries at the center of considerable fan discussion, debriefing, and debate. One respondent, for instance, noted, "I love reading about all of the many theories and speculations out there. It doesn't matter to me whether spoilers turn out to be true or false; I just enjoy the discussion," while another stated directly that *Lost* spoiler boards can be "a good source of online community." Such community interaction extends to face-to-face interactions, as one fan wrote, "[Spoilers] give me more to discuss with friends and family who also watch the show." The puzzle nature of the narrative was singled out as generating a committed viewership for one respondent: "This fosters a community of watchers, and thinkers, and speculators, then spoilers." While few respondents offered lengthy paeans to fan community building, the pleasures discussed tended toward participatory and interpersonal practices rather than the act of solitary viewing. Through spoiler-board discussion, then, *Lost* becomes a communally consumed text, and many spoiler fans appreciated spoilers for their role in this expansion of the text.[5]

Table 1: Spoiler fan practices – post-episode activities and how they communicate about Lost

Post-Episode Activities		**Fan Communications**	
Read discussion forums about the program	92%	I speculate about mysteries and future episodes	86%
Discuss the program in a face-to-face conversation	73%	I compare newly revealed information to previous episodes	71%
Visit other websites dedicated to the show	59%	I analyze specific dialogue, images or sounds from episodes	52%
Post in online discussion forums about the program	56%	I compare newly revealed information to spoilers I have heard about	51%
Read articles about the show online	55%	I ask questions to clarify confusing points	46%
Watch the episode or parts of the episode again	49%	I evaluate the quality of the episode	44%
Discuss the program using email or instant messaging	43%	I do not communicate with other people about episodes	9%
Read articles about the show in newspapers or magazines	33%	Other (please specify)	1%
Visit the official ABC.com site	27%		
Discuss the program on the phone	25%		
Post *Lost*-related material to websites besides forums	12%		
Other (please specify)	3%		

Spoiler fans regard the spoilers themselves as enjoyable texts to be studied and parsed

Speculation regarding *Lost*'s narrative mysteries is a central textual pleasure, but another extra-textual game seems to be played amongst spoiler fans – a considerable number of viewers were quite skeptical of the veracity of many spoilers, attributing them to either mischievous foiler posters or savvy producers trying to lure them off the scent, an increasingly prevalent strategy in today's television environment. Thus respondents enjoyed a secondary game of speculation regarding the spoilers themselves. Many respondents had no experience of foilers, praising vigilant board moderators, and some hated foilers (leading to most boards' stated policy that foiler posters would be excommunicated). But many others either adopted a "buyer beware" policy, or even saw foilers akin to "red herrings" in mystery novels (and on *Lost* itself), part of the fun of speculation and requiring thoughtful deconstruction and skeptical analysis. Therefore, for instance, one respondent noted that a foiler "keeps things very exciting and interesting, because you never know what you should believe or not. Speculating about the reliability of a spoiler can be as much fun as speculating about the show itself!" Another wrote, "I think fake spoilers are just as fun as ones that turn out to be true, especially if they're well thought-out and believable. I love unraveling the mysteries and discussing the possible explanations with other people, and I'm never upset if any of it turns out to be false." Clearly, for some spoiler fans, the foiler game is an active and motivating pleasure for their fandom – as one wrote, "I actually enjoy fake spoilers more than the real ones, because I think I know everything and then I'm shocked when something completely different happens." Surprisingly, fully half of respondents who answered our question about fake spoilers described a positive or benignly neutral attitude toward them and how they add even more meta-mysteries on top of *Lost*'s already ample collection of enigmas. The presence of foilers renders all spoilers potentially false, hence demanding careful analysis and viewership, which only plays into *Lost*'s games of mystery and speculation.[6]

Admittedly, foiler speculation is often inherently *intra*-textual, forcing the viewer deep into the *ur*-text for corroborating evidence. However, in parsing through and discussing the veracity of spoilers versus foilers, spoilers also become separate objects of textual consumption and pleasure, important in their own right as texts, and in the ways in which they question the very binary of intratextuality and extratextuality. As a few respondents noted, watching *Lost* without spoilers might make it, for them, less "interactive." For this and other reasons, spoiler fans talked of spoilers as entities that add layers to the televisual text. Certainly, the logic behind naming spoilers as such is a faulty logic behind many media studies examinations of the text, whereby textuality is confined to the flickering images on the screen. Many of

these responses contradict such a notion by posing the idea of spoilers as themselves viable texts, that create or at least extend meaning outside the "primary text," and that offer, as one respondent noted, "a puzzle, a fun game on its own merits." Much as a young child, for instance, can consume a media text by playing with its licensed action figures, adding layers of meaning and salience to the text; or much as any "paratext" (see Genette 1997; Gray 2003) – from a spinoff to an interview, a review to DVD bonus materials, an item of merchandise to synergy advertising – can construct the text away from the text, so to speak, so too do spoilers continue the work of creating *Lost*. As C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby (1995) and Matt Hills (2002) argue, media fandoms often adopt the tone and character of their beloved texts, and so it stands to reason that *Lost* fans would be especially interested in mystery-style paratexts such as spoilers, more so than fans of other genres like family dramas would – hence explaining in part why *Seventh Heaven* spoilers are less plentiful in the fanosphere. But to acknowledge that spoilers are texts, or at least textual, in their own right, is to accept that they generate their own meanings and pleasures, independent of the "primary text." Few of our respondents felt they "needed" spoilers, and many were aware of the tradeoff of sacrificing surprises at the moment of transmission by consuming them earlier, but our data suggests the increasing importance of such paratexts as a vital component of contemporary textuality. In the time between episodes, whether a week or a summer hiatus, spoilers fill the lull with active textuality.

As such, spoilers are texts to be enjoyed, studied, interpreted, and consumed like any other text. Given that 80% of participants who indicated how often they visit spoiler boards said that they read spoilers once a week or more, and that some checked multiple times a day, it would appear that many fans spend more time reading spoiler texts than watching *Lost* itself. Moreover, a casual perusal of popular spoiler discussion boards reveals long and involved commentary specifically addressing and analyzing spoilers, even outpacing non-spoiler discussions of the show itself at times. Such a perusal also reveals that many spoilers are enigmatic and oblique, begging interpretation and analysis rather than casual consumption. For instance, when Hawaiian board members post photographs of *Lost*'s sets, these photographs rarely tell a straightforward story; instead, they must be studied and discussed as intently as episodes of *Lost* itself, and the general excitement that follows this process speaks volumes regarding the textual pleasures of spoilers. At first sight, spoilers may seem nothing more than snippets and factoids designed to ruin *Lost*'s textual pleasures, but upon further examination, they appear as densely packed with meaning and their own pleasures as spinoff novels, comic books, official web sites, or DVD bonus materials. However, our research clearly showed that any extra-textual pleasures of anti-fandom, game-playing, fan community, or spoiler textuality were dwarfed by the specific ways that spoilers enhance the direct engagement with *Lost*'s textual and narrative pleasures.

Pleasures of the Spoiled Story

Spoilers, we have shown, offer a multitude of extra-textual pleasures, but as much as our research told us about activity and meaning outside of the text, it told us more about the text's own internal pleasures. After all, while Jenkins's (2006) interest in spoilers lies in examining the ensuing democratic form of communal consumption, both his close study of these fans and our own study reveal the degree to which "the text itself" is considerably more layered and multivalent than has often been presupposed in textual research. As Jenkins's earlier work (1992) and that of many fan researchers (see Brooker 2002; Harrington and Bielby 1995; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005) has underlined, the pleasures of the text are numerous. At the core of the stigmatized perceptions of spoiler fans is a central assumption: spoilers disrupt storytelling and ruin the narrative. But might we need to reconsider exactly how spoiler fans envision the pleasures of the text, as well as their own narrative consumption and comprehension in the light of their preferred mode of reading? As Martin Barker has argued (see Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath 2001; Barker 2000; Barker and Brooks 1998), media studies (and film studies in particular) have been wholly biased toward the specificities of plot, as if this is the only element that matters to viewers, when in fact texts operate on many layers. The preeminence of plot in textual studies' assumed hierarchy of narrative pleasures casts a long shadow over spoiler practices, yet Laura Carroll reverses the evaluative terms that lie behind much discussion of spoilers, provocatively wondering why spoilers are posed as a problem in the first place. She argues, "the underlying assumption doesn't imply much respect for anything that a fiction might offer you except abrupt and sensational narrative developments, or much long-term durability of a story. […] A well-constructed story will stand up to decades of use and abuse, won't

it?" (Carroll 2005). Carroll reasons that literature professors have long "spoiled" texts in their classes without concern for actually ruining the text, precisely because a text is about more than just surprises and plot-twists. In fact, the long history of storytelling suggests that unspoiled narratives are far less common than spoiled ones – traditional drama and literature often retells well-known source material like myths and history, and many published works were preceded by summaries of each chapter or the entire narrative, ensuring that readers knew what to expect before encountering it.

Thus, conceptualizing narrative and textuality as entailing much more than plot exposition led to our final set of hypotheses regarding the narrative pleasures of spoiler consumption – and to spoil our upcoming analysis, the most provocative and powerful set of explanations for the practices of spoiler fans:

·   Spoiler fans seek the pleasure and comfort of viewing the known, enabling the enjoyment of a familiar text even upon its first viewing

·   Spoiler fans see the revelatory aspect of the plotline and pleasures of suspense as relatively unimportant, obscuring more enjoyable textual qualities that they seek out such as narrative mechanics, relationship dramas, and production values

·   Spoiler fans view *Lost*'s narrative practices differently from traditional stories, using spoilers to participate in a puzzle-solving quest apart from typical storytelling

·   Spoiler fans aim to take control of their emotional responses and pleasures of anticipation, creating suspense on viewers' own terms rather than the creators'

All of these ways of understanding the experience of watching *Lost* as a spoiled text weave together to suggest a mode of textual experience running counter to many of the assumed norms of media fandom and narrative consumption.

Spoiler fans seek the pleasure and comfort of viewing the known, enabling the enjoyment of a familiar text even upon its first viewing

Instead of a plot-centric, "what happened" model of narrative consumption, we might look at a more phenomenological approach, which posits the text as an ongoing *experience* (see Fish 1980; Gray 2006; Iser 1978). Lisa Kernan notes the seeming conundrum of movie trailers: if a story must be revealed in order to be advertised, why doesn't this risk spoiling or ruining the same story? Her answer, simply, is that trailers sell "the movie event," offering "an atmospheric sampling" of a text (Kernan 2004: 54, 60). Thus, she suggests that not only the trailer, but the movie itself is as much a feeling and experience as it is a plotline. In this light, Gray (2005) has examined *Blade Runner* fan desire for and discussion of a "true" director's cut DVD. Gray notes the oddity that these long-time fans have operated with the assumption that their beloved text isn't the author's chosen one, or even the best one possible; he concludes that they are fans more of an idealized environment and atmosphere of *Blade Runner* than of a set narrative. Carroll suggests a similar model of text as multi-level experience when she argues that spoiler fear "overvalues the first impression of a text – which often as not is rather superficial" (Carroll 2005), reasoning that a good text should offer much more than plot. Carroll underrates the importance of the plot, particularly to certain genres such as mystery or suspense – and to narrative forms that are offered serially and structured to create weekly installments of suspense and mystery, like *Lost*. Nevertheless, her insistence on the importance of the second reading – a reading, of course, where plot-as-revelation is de-centered – provides a window into understanding how spoiler fans may use spoilers: as performing a short cut to the second reading, getting the plot out of the way so as to concentrate on other issues and pleasures.

If such a strategy sounds odd, we should realize the remarkable power and centrality of reruns, particularly to American television (see Kompare 2005). Admittedly, many reruns are watched by those who missed the first airing, but whenever viewers watch the same episode of *Law & Order* or *The Simpsons* yet again, they are already "spoiled." Examining the "different phenomenologies" of reruns, Jenny Nelson has argued that plot, suspense, and character

development all give way to an interest in "codes" (1990: 86), as one concentrates more on *how* the story is put together, and on significance and signification. To this end, Steven Johnson (2005) notes that in an era of reruns and DVD releases, American television has been forced to get smarter and more complex, precisely so that shows can bear up to this sort of analysis and repetitive viewing – think of the endless background events in *The Simpsons*, purposeful use of imagery in *The Sopranos*, or subtle clues dropped throughout *Lost*. Similarly, Barbara Klinger's (2006) recent examination of repetitive film viewing underlines the importance of familiarity in viewing. Experiencing otherness and difference may well be hallmarks of artistic viewing, long idealized in art and literature (see Horkheimer, Adorno, and Schmid Noerr 2002; Iser 1978; Marcuse 1991; Sandvoss 2005), but the pleasures of the familiar are also key to many viewers – from watching *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* or *Star Wars* two hundred times, to owning a painting and hanging it in the living room for endless repeat viewings. With so many viewing options at their fingertips, many individuals enjoy and welcome the "mastery and solace" (Klinger 2006: 155) of familiarity in viewing.

Consumption of the familiar, as Klinger (2006) and Derek Kompare (2005) remind us, constitutes a considerable portion of our film and television viewing, and media such as music and video games are even more repetitive for many consumers. We watch, listen, or read again, though, because of the pleasures of the familiar: knowing what will come next. Klinger, Nelson, and Kompare's work on reruns and repetition stand out as exceptional and rare in media studies, due largely to the field's focus on the first viewing, but they highlight the rich and common pleasures to be gained from a second viewing. Sandvoss (2005) draws an instructive distinction between "literary" strategies of reading and "fan" strategies, regardless of the texts themselves: literary reading brings us into contact with otherness and difference, whereas fan reading reverts to the familiar. Fandom, as such, can become a refuge from difference and the new. Might spoiler fans provide an exaggerated example of fan reading, whereby the difference of plot development is encountered before reading the text, at the level of the spoiler, in order to ensure a predictable, comfortably familiar reading experience of an episode itself? Might the act of spoiling be a clever way for impatient viewers to short-circuit the out-of-control experience of being taken for a narrative ride and go directly to the pleasures of repeated viewings on the first go round?

Our data offered no easy answer. Nearly half of spoiler fans claimed to watch *Lost* episodes more than once, suggesting an enjoyment of the familiar, and similarly, many fans discussed episodes online and consumed all manner of *Lost*-related products and paratexts, also suggesting a certain desire for the known. However, as has been mentioned, a clear majority of viewers loved the show's suspense and surprises – as one respondent noted, when rewatching an episode, "you can remember how much you loved the episode the first time, and how shocked you were by the storyline. With a spoiled show, you almost feel cheated." Spoiler fans highlighted how some surprises remain no matter how spoiled they may be, and a spoiled episode still offers new insights into the show's mythology, mystery, and character development, all pleasures of newness and originality. Additionally, three-quarters of respondents highlighted *Lost*'s uniqueness compared to other programs, suggesting distinct pleasures of the unknown and unfamiliar. Thus, in Sandvoss' terms, spoiler fans experienced *Lost* as both a literary and a fan text, exhibiting considerable pleasure in its difference, newness, and failure to conform to the predictable, as well as comfort in its familiarity and known narrative. While they may not have explicitly stated their pleasures in the terms of rereading these otherwise "new" episodes, many of the specific pleasures of rereading, such as being able to concentrate on background minutiae or knowing what to look for, were appreciated by spoiler fans.

Spoiler fans see the revelatory aspect of the plotline and pleasures of suspense as relatively unimportant, obscuring more enjoyable textual qualities that they seek out such as narrative mechanics, relationship dramas, and production values

Clearly the pleasures experienced by spoiler fans watching episodes in which they know what will happen are somewhat different from conventional viewers. How might this shift in experience account for the motivations of spoiler fans? As discussed above, *Lost* as a text seems particularly dependent on the emotional response of suspense – the entire series is predicated on an elaborate web of mysteries triggering suspense, surprise, and the desire to solve puzzles. One explanation for spoiler fans seeking out information is to lessen the experience of suspense throughout an episode, decreasing the emotional unease that most fans of suspense narratives find

pleasurable. While a few respondents suggested that spoilers helped them enjoy episodes by eliminating feelings of tension and suspense that they found unpleasant, the majority of spoiler fans still find suspense to be a primary appeal of the show. The survey asked respondents to select all of the relevant reasons why they watch *Lost* from a long list, as well as to choose which single reason was most important. As summarized in Table 2, 90% of respondents selected "I enjoy the suspenseful plot" as one important motivation and 24% chose it as the primary pleasure of the program. Other similar emotional responses were noted as among the numerous motives for watching the show, including "The show surprises me" and "I find it exciting," among the five most frequently cited pleasures of *Lost*.

Table 2 – Why do spoiler fans watch *Lost*?

Pleasures of Spoiler Fans (n=150)	*Reasons to Watch*	*Primary Reason to Watch*
I want to discover the answers to the island's mysteries	91%	28%
I enjoy the suspenseful plot	90%	24%
The show surprises me	77%	1%
The show is unlike anything else on the air	75%	9%
I find it exciting	71%	3%
I enjoy the innovative way the show tells its story	68%	9%
I am interested in the philosophical issues raised by the show	60%	5%
I like to discuss the show on websites or with people I know	59%	1%
I find some of the actors attractive	54%	0%
I want to solve the show's puzzles before they are answered	51%	3%
I am impressed by the show's production values	43%	1%
I am invested in the relationships that exist or that could form between characters	38%	4%
The show makes me laugh	37%	0%
It's a ritual that I watch with friends or family	33%	5%
It reminds me of playing a game	31%	1%
I find the show to be a good distraction from my own life	31%	1%
I want to see the characters escape the island	22%	1%
I want to be able to relate to other people I know who watch it	21%	0%
I find it scary	18%	0%
The show makes me cry	13%	0%
The show reminds me of other programs I enjoy	10%	0%
It teaches me something useful about the world	9%	0%
Other (please specify)	2%	3%

Spoiler fans recognize that learning about narrative events can potentially lessen these pleasurable responses of suspense, surprise, and excitement. A number of respondents discussed how much they enjoyed *not* being spoiled for big twists, like Michael's shooting of Ana-Lucia and Libby, or having only partial knowledge (like knowing that the characters would die, but not knowing how) to create an additional layer of anticipation and suspense. When they do know the details of such events, spoiler fans can feel the sting of regret, wishing that they hadn't known what was coming – although many suggest they cannot resist the temptation to seek out the spoilers for the next episode regardless.

Even though spoilers can undermine the surprises of an episode, most spoiler fans suggest that there are more pleasures within the text than to be found in the twisty plotting. Echoing the commentary of Carroll (2005), one spoiler fan writes, "The initial shock value may be ruined, but if a drama has nothing else to offer then it isn't worth watching in the first place." While such outright dismissal of shock is rare among respondents, many clearly allow their foreknowledge of events to attune their viewing to other pleasures of the text. Spoiler fans note that knowing what will happen does not take away from their enjoyment of the show's performances, dialogue, production values, humorous

moments, and focus on character relationships and development. As one fan wrote, "the words of a quickly written spoiler don't do justice to the actual episode." For some, the reduction of suspense enables greater attention to these details, and even enables a level of emotional connection with characters – one fan writes that he uses spoilers to avoid investing his attention to relationships or characters who are doomed. Thus, for some fans, learning the events of an episode in advance can yield greater access into the show's other pleasures, allowing them to avoid being distracted by the moment-to-moment suspense.

One key pleasure of *Lost* involves its innovative storytelling strategies, taking nested flashbacks and limited narrative perspective to imaginative heights. As part of a larger trend of increasing narrative complexity in television, Mittell (2006) has argued that a key pleasure for fans of such programs lies in the "operational aesthetic," encouraging viewers to watch the gears of the storytelling machinery while being taken for a ride, and thus balancing pleasures between the diegetic stories and their formal plotting. While viewers of narratively complex programs like *Alias*, *24*, *Arrested Development*, and *Scrubs* maintain part of their focus on the stories being told, they also look beyond the question of "what will happen?" to consider "how is it being told?" For spoiler fans, having already discovered what will happen frees them to concentrate on the formal pleasures of innovative narration and inventive presentation – as one respondent wrote, "It's like reading a book and then watching the movie even when you know the ending." Spoiler fans were often quick to point out that spoilers reveal the "what" but not the "how," and in doing so sidestep the risks of "ruining" the plot, at the same time as they increase anticipation. As one respondent offered:

> When the Losties are going to discover something new about the island, and I already know about it, I still want to know HOW they find out. It's still just as exciting, if not more so, to see how they're going to come upon it. For instance, I knew about the Black Rock, and that it was a boat, before they found it. But that didn't really TELL me anything about it, or why a boat would be in the middle of the jungle. It was even MORE mysterious to KNOW the "answer." That's why *Lost* is so fun, even with some spoilers. [emphasis in original]

Here, this respondent reverses commonsense logic regarding spoilers, arguing that they improve, rather than ruin, his experience of the text by focusing his attention on the unfolding story and its telling. For over two-thirds of spoiler fans, *Lost*'s innovative storytelling techniques are an active textual pleasure, and it ranked third among the choices offered as the primary motivation for watching. While such pleasures are not exclusive to spoiler fans, for many respondents the use of spoilers allowed them to concentrate on the process of revealing the plot, not just comprehending the story.

In this way, spoilers work to help fans concentrate on what they consider the most important elements of the show. *Lost*'s flashbacks, large cast size, complex narrative, and multiple concurrent mysteries clearly confuse – or at least run the risk of confusing – many viewers, and these viewers spoke of spoilers as focusing their viewing. Spoilers are enjoyable, notes one woman, "because you can pick up on subtle hints and clues between characters, and know what it means," while another talks of the "peace of mind of not having to take all info in at once." Here, then, we might draw a parallel to another established form of spoiler: study guide summaries of literary texts such as CliffsNotes, York Notes, and SparkNotes. Like *Lost* spoilers, CliffsNotes allow a window into future narrative occurrences, so that the individual reader can follow ongoing events more easily – once you know that Hamlet will kill Polonius, for example, you can pay closer attention to their dialogue together and how Shakespeare foreshadows these events.[7] Thus spoilers fans may not use spoilers to "skip ahead" as much as they use them to "catch up" as they are watching – "they give me an idea," writes one fan, "of what to look for in an action filled show like *Lost*." Although television programs have been traditionally considered by many as simplistic mass entertainments for passive viewers, even the most dismissive critic would have to acknowledge that the complexity of *Lost* demands an engaged and active mode of viewing that potentially exceeds the boundaries of each episode. For some, this leads to analytical discussions amongst friends and family; for others, websites like LostPedia.com or televisionwithoutpity.com allow for collective examinations to exhume details seen each week. But for spoiler fans, these resources and others allow information about the narrative *future* to inflect their ongoing viewing, providing a clarifying framework to understand and analyze the show's complex storytelling.

In the act of consuming spoilers in advance of viewing a new episode, spoiler fans undertake a borderline practice between viewing an episode for the first time and re-watching it. Matei Calinescu's (1993) study of rereading is

instructive here, suggesting that a first-time reading is typically a forward-moving diachronic process, while rereading focuses on a text's structural elements in a synchronic fashion. Calinescu does suggest the possibility of a "double reading" the first time through a text, as readers simultaneously experience the narrative's pull forward through time, as well as a meta-reflection on the text's construction and design – for literature, Calinescu attributes such reading techniques as typical of professional readers like scholars and critics whose expertise attunes them to the elements of design and authorship that more commonly become the focus of rereading. Aptly, he warns of potential drawbacks in such double reading: "the sharpened attention it demands may *spoil* the more naïve pleasures associated with a first, linear, curious, engrossing reading, which certain fictional texts keep in store for the happy 'ordinary' reader" [emphasis added] (Calinescu 1993: 19). While television programs may be subjected to such a double reading by professional media scholars, they are more commonly consumed by fans whose expertise enables simultaneous reading and rereading. The texts of narratively complex television often invite such consumption practices – as Mittell (2006) writes, "these programs convert many viewers into amateur narratologists, noting usage and violations of convention, chronicling chronologies, and highlighting both inconsistencies and continuities across episodes and even series." If typical fan consumption practices for programs like *Lost* straddle the experiences of first and subsequent viewings, then spoiler fans are taking this process one step further, increasing their expertise to more fully embrace the logic of rereading, and, as one respondent noted, "allow[ing] for a deeper analysis while you are viewing it."

Spoiler fans view *Lost*'s narrative practices differently from traditional stories, using spoilers to participate in a puzzle-solving quest apart from typical storytelling

This tendency to watch new episodes with foreknowledge of events makes more sense when considering *Lost*'s narrative mode as a puzzle. A typical story uses its techniques of storytelling and narration to create suspense, emotional engagement, and pacing – to break its narrative design by gathering advance information is to violate well-established storytelling norms. But if we think of *Lost* less like a conventional story and more like a puzzle or game, spoilers seem much more legitimate. In attempting to solve any large-scale puzzle or game, players are encouraged to gather as much information and research as possible, not relying on one limited source. Additionally, as Mia Consalvo (2007) discusses, the culture around videogames, a dominant form of play in contemporary culture, has legitimized so-called "cheating" practices of using strategy guides, walkthroughs, and online databases full of tips for circumventing the game's ideal design for the naïve player. Consalvo suggests that the paratexts comprising the realm of game cheats and walkthroughs are constitutive of the game experience itself, whether individual players use them or not – the presence of cheats and walkthroughs shapes the practices of both game designers and end-users directly. Although *Lost*'s spoiler avoiders take great pains to remain "pure," arguably the entire game-like experience of theorizing and speculating about the show is colored by spoiler culture, as producers release foilers, pepper interviews and podcasts with teasing red herrings or clues, and extend the discursive web of the show's paratextual universe to match the passionate clue-gathering techniques of spoiler fans.

Lost inhabits an expansive media environment, with "official" narrative information distributed via television broadcasts, DVDs, talk show appearances, novels, websites, online video, podcasts, alternative reality games, cellphones, jigsaw puzzles, and voicemail recordings, as well as dozens of fan-created resources spanning across media. Given this cross-media information saturation, it seems odd to think that seeking out advanced knowledge of events to be presented on the television show would seem illegitimate – such information would be just another additional bit of data used to solve the larger mysteries. Yet *Lost*'s television series is certainly at the center of its narrative universe, with nearly every cross-media incarnation existing solely for its diegetic or meta-reference to the series. Spoilers, both as officially released by producers and unofficially posted on discussion boards, inhabit the same sphere as fans cataloguing information on LostPedia.com, players exploring the alternative reality game The Lost Experience, and people reading the meta-diegetic novel *Bad Twin* – as one fan wrote, spoilers are "one more piece of the puzzle." Thus spoilers meld into a larger paratextual web that augments what fans see each week on ABC, all in service of solving the larger enigmas within its narrative universe.

There is no doubt that the chief reason that *Lost* fans consume the show and its cross-media experiences is to crack its secrets. Discovering the answers to the island's mysteries was our respondents' most commonly shared reason for

watching the show and most cited primary rationale, and also factored significantly in their motives for consuming spoilers. By adding useful information concerning the island's mysteries, most used spoilers as fuel for speculation and theorizing, both face-to-face and online. While for some viewers the end goal of solving the mystery is paramount, many revel in the process of puzzling and problem-solving – as one respondent wrote, "I am fascinated by figuring out the island's mysteries, and I love reading about all of the many theories and speculation out there…. This is the kind of show where hearing possible speculation ahead of time makes it all more intriguing." Such speculation does not necessitate consuming spoilers, as most of our spoiler-avoiding respondents expressed equal interest in puzzle-solving and theorizing, but spoiler fans see such spoiler information as quite useful – one wrote, "Spoilers intensify the mystery-solving aspect of the show"; another offered, "Spoilers make the difference between informed speculation and crackpot theories"; and a third said that they read spoilers "to find clues to the game." While most viewers did not explicitly suggest that watching *Lost* reminded them of playing a game, it is clear from their broader responses that there is a ludic sense of imaginative speculation and problem-solving that motivates most viewers' fandoms.

For some spoiler fans, spoilers *only* make sense in their utility for speculation and theorizing the answers to puzzles. One respondent suggested that after disappointment of events late in the second season, she might forego future spoiler consumption – she noted, "I feel somewhat betrayed by the writers' use of retroactive continuity; it is hard to speculate, based upon both spoilers and past events, when they change the facts at a whim." She went on to note two very specific continuity shifts between episodes, involving the casting of a woman in a background photo and the format of numbers on a computer printout, as evidence that the show is less "meticulously planned" as assumed, and thus frustrating her practices of speculating with spoilers. For most programs, such continuity errors would be the most trivial of nit-picking and irrelevant to narrative pleasures. But given *Lost*'s structure as an elaborate mystery in which clues are interspersed into the show's minute details and scattered across the internet via an alternate reality game, fanatical continuity is a prerequisite. For this fan, spoilers are a tool toward a greater goal of solving the puzzle – as she wrote, "If they're pulling it out of their arses as they go, and failing to take note of what has already been shown, what point is speculation?" If the producers refuse to follow the puzzle rules that they have created, she will decrease her dedication to the text – ironically, by following the more typical narrative protocols of spoiler avoiders.

For most spoiler fans, spoilers rarely foreclosed the text's meaning, much less its mysteries; instead, many talked of spoilers *adding* to the mysteries, so that "You find out one thing, but there are 10 new things that pop up from it." Typical spoilers may point to little pieces of the show's major enigmas, but rarely provide information that would reveal the larger mystery of the island (which still appears to be "unspoiled" in the fanosphere); furthermore, as one fan noted, "You might know a bit of a plotline, but watching it you usually find it doesn't go down the way you expected." Spoiler fans are mixed as to how much detail they like in their spoilers – almost half have no limits as to how much should be spoiled, but many like to insulate themselves from too many specifics or major plot points. As one fan wrote, "I like to know what questions or puzzles will be solved, but not what the *answers* will be." Thus most spoiler fans did not see spoilers as about explicitly solving mysteries, but rather as offering teasers, creating as many questions as they answer, and enhancing the terrain for speculation about the general puzzle surrounding *Lost*. When combined with the game surrounding foilers, spoilers make viewers think about the text, requiring extra reflection and unpacking; because these viewers enjoy *Lost*, they enjoy the added opportunity to engage analytically with the object of their fandom.

A useful comparison is with other programs that spoiler fans consume, either with or without spoilers. Not surprisingly, many spoiler fans view spoilers for a range of other programs, including highly complex televisual narratives like *Alias*, *24*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, other less complex but still serialized programs like *The OC*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Grey's Anatomy*, and reality programs like *Survivor* and *Amazing Race*. Most indicated that *Lost*'s spoiler community is more intense and clever, tuned into the larger narrative scope of the program rather than just revealing major plot points. One fan wrote a lengthy and thought-provoking comparison between *Lost* and *24*, speculating on why he happily stopped reading *24* spoilers but still enjoys *Lost* spoilers:

> Some differences do exist between *24* and *Lost* spoilers though; spoilers can kill a lot of *24*'s good times, since it's all plot based. If I knew that President Palmer was going to be killed when Season 5 first started, I would have lost out on that surprise and it would have not been as enjoyable. I look at *Lost*, however, as a

sort of experience. I know Desmond's on that boat [as not yet revealed on the show upon writing the survey], but still that begs the question of "why?" This whole show's about the "why." *24* may also try to explain why Palmer was killed, but since it's primarily a plot-driven show the meaning will probably be negligible. Yes, I'm aware of the irony that the island's mysteries are also plot-based, but I can't tell you why I care about knowing them so much. I guess I'm like the pre-"Lockdown" Locke: I have faith in the island.

While to casual observers, *24* and *Lost* might appear quite similar – suspense-driven serials with innovative storytelling techniques and high production values – this fan seems to intuit a key difference. *24*'s plotting focuses on action-based suspense, creating tension about what will happen next – a suspense that spoilers can easily dispel – only to be replaced by the next adrenaline-fueled cliffhanger. On *Lost*, tension about what will happen is secondary to the "why?" factor he emphasizes – each moment of tension and revelatory event ties into a larger underlying set of mysteries that cannot be spoiled just by knowing who will be shot. For *Lost*'s spoiler fans, it is this quest for deeper knowledge of "why?" that leads them to seek out all pieces of the larger puzzle, whether they have been incorporated into the main television text or stem from paratextual online circulation.

Spoiler fans aim to take control of their emotional responses and pleasures of anticipation, creating suspense on viewers' own terms rather than the creators'

Ultimately, the practices of spoiler fans are tied directly to the emotional responses of fandom and narrative consumption. *Lost* fans, whether spoiled or not, watch the show and participate in online communities for the pleasures these experiences provide; the use of spoilers is one primary way that fans take control of their pleasures and customize their narrative experiences to fulfill their fan desires. As discussed above, suspense and surprise are central among *Lost*'s pleasures, as the narrative both offers possible events that suspensefully confound expectations, and generates expectations that are surprisingly thwarted by actual events. By reading spoilers, it may seem that both suspense and surprise are eliminated, but suspense is complex. While surprise is seemingly impossible when the revelation is already known, suspense can still occur – Seymour Chatman (1978) quotes Alfred Hitchcock to argue that suspense derives less from mysterious secrets than the tension in how events will play out. Hitchcock suggests that suspense generates from the audience's inability to reveal crucial information to empathetic characters, and offers what might be a mantra for spoiler fans: "For that reason I believe in giving the audience all the facts as early as possible" (quoted in Chatman 1978: 60). Spoiled fans can still feel suspense in the moments leading up to Michael shooting Ana-Lucia and Libby, for they know what will happen, but must powerlessly watch the violent betrayal play out. Thus, even though the exact protocols of suspense for spoiled fans are altered, the emotional engagement remains central to their viewing experience, as borne out by our survey.

Another key term might be even more central to the narrative pleasures of spoiler fans: anticipation. All narratives play with anticipation, as viewers form hypotheses as to what will happen, and anticipate resolutions to diegetic situations. *Lost* offers numerous opportunities for anticipation within each episode, as viewers anticipate resolutions to suspenseful situations and await clues that will add pieces to the show's larger puzzle. The show also features particular storytelling norms that create additional opportunities for anticipation – for instance, nearly every episode features the back-story of one character via flashbacks, so viewers anticipate who will be the focus of an episode and how their past will resonate with the situation on the island. Additionally, the show has a reputation for ending each episode with twists or cliffhangers – as discussed often on fan boards, the final five minutes of each episode are always the most anticipated amongst viewers waiting for a big surprise or shock. Spoiler fans bring additional anticipations into their viewing experiences, awaiting the plot developments that they know will occur but often lack significant details about, as well as generating curiosity and interest in how the narrative will unfold toward this spoiled future. Curiosity into the diegetic past is a core part of narrative comprehension according to Meir Sternberg (1978) – spoiler fans effectively exchange the suspense about uncertain narrative futures as designed by producers, into uncertain futures for anticipatory curiosity connecting the dots to the spoiled event. This anticipation heightens the emotional experience for some viewers, as they tensely wait for the critical moments they expect to occur – or await the revelation that their spoiler was actually a foiler. The experience of watching *Lost* for spoiler fans is not one of

relaxation or disengagement, but clearly involves the similar emotional experiences of suspense and anticipation as non-spoiled fans.

Here, we reiterate the parallel between spoilers and trailers, especially since many trailers notoriously risk spoiling that which they advertise. Kernan discusses trailers as their own "cinema – of (coming) attractions" (Kernan 2004: 2) that creates a space for viewers to imagine, dream, and constitute the text as it will be. Trailers, she notes, are "charged with excess signification" (Kernan 2004: 10), each scene or clip opening itself up to multiple interpretations, and to intense *and pleasurable* analysis by viewers. Kernan sagely reminds us that a great deal of pleasure occurs *before* the text, as one's mind treads over infinite scenarios of what might happen (see also Barker and Brooks 1998; Chin and Gray 2001). Trailers are a ritualized part of the movie-going experience, so perhaps spoilers are rapidly becoming their televisual equivalents – and one-quarter of our respondents consider the actual televised previews for future episodes to function as spoilers. Following Hills's observation that fan and cult texts tend always to be those with "endlessly deferred hyperdiegesis" (Hills 2002: 142) – huge textual universes with always another mystery around the corner – those texts most likely to be spoiled are filled with excess signification, always acting as built-in advertisements for their future episodes and seasons, yet always allowing room for further mystery. In a complex narrative like *Lost*, future episodes and revelations are internally previewed within the show itself, peppering clues to suggest future discoveries and twists; for spoiler fans, external spoilers exist on an acceptable continuum with such internal previews and teasers, all functioning to trigger and manage their experiences of narrative anticipation.

Certainly, serial fiction offers another layer of anticipation outside the diegetic narrative, as the form of seriality itself is predicated on anticipating the next episode. The producers clearly mine this anticipation through their use of cliffhangers and mysterious revelations within the episodes, and seeding their fanbase through teasing comments on online boards and podcasts during the weekly gaps between episodes. Sean O'Sullivan (2006) suggests that gaps in both serial literature and television are productive spaces to negotiate and interpret between the old and the new, previously consumed and forthcoming installments. For fans, these weekly (or longer) gaps are not barren periods devoid of *Lost*, but serve as times to focus intently on the program – rewatching episodes, contributing to websites, writing fan fiction, and consuming paratexts. But for spoiler fans, these anticipatory gaps seemed unpleasant problems to be overcome by spoilers. More than half of the respondents who indicated why they read spoilers mentioned motives like "impatience," "curiosity," "can't stand to wait," "addiction," and needing "a fix." While spoilers do not outright cure the often desperate desire to reach the next episode, they help reduce anticipation between installments by reducing narrative suspense and giving fans a focus for their speculation, theorizing, and anticipation – rather than obsessing over this week's cliffhanger, spoiler fans can attend to larger narrative issues and work on piecing together the big picture.

The relative importance between managing anticipation between episodes and maximizing the pleasure of watching *Lost* varies among respondents. We asked a follow-up question to a number of respondents – if all episodes of *Lost* were available on DVD, thereby eliminating the necessary gaps within weekly and seasonal schedules, would they still read spoilers before watching an episode?[8] Of the ten spoiler fans who answered the question, six imagined they would remain unspoiled – one noting that "it probably wouldn't occur to me to even look for spoilers because I'd be so engrossed in the show" – while four would read spoilers or summaries of episodes to help orient their attention within episodes. One respondent noted that she actually read recaps of every episode before watching the Season One DVD, as the spoilers helped her to watch for relevant clues and details. Others found the prospect of immediate access to the series as liberating them from the temptations of spoilers, as they could eliminate their anticipation between episodes and watch the show unspoiled without anxiety. Thus motivations for spoiler fans are hardly uniform, as they can be either the preferred way of experiencing the narrative or a necessary device to take control of the experiences of serial anticipation. Some spoiler readers even expressed significant uncertainty in their own desire to know what will happen; for instance, amusingly, a respondent from the general sample wrote appreciatively of foilers that they let her know that "I might not be ruining it for myself when I start reading them."

The act of reading spoilers clearly alters *Lost*'s complex calculus of anticipation, curiosity, surprise, and suspense. Spoiler fans attempt to eliminate their undesirable anticipation for the next episode by reading spoilers, thereby creating a new form of anticipation for the pre-viewed events while watching each show. Suspense maintains an

active role among their pleasures, focusing on the tension of watching the inevitable outcomes play out among the characters, and attuned to the curiosity of *how* and *why* rather than *what* will happen. Surprise may be greatly reduced, but can be reintroduced through foilers and programmatic elements that remain unspoiled. Spoiler fans are thus enjoying the same emotions that typical viewers may feel, but shaping them to their own needs and expectations – clearly they feel that the loss of much surprise is worth the shift from inter-episodic anticipation to diegetic anticipation and suspense for the spoiled plot's payoff. Just as fans who rewatch episodes, spoiler fans feel the emotional pulls of the text while anticipating that which they know is coming, enjoying the moments leading up to events they have never seen, but feel known.

Is such a shift in viewing practice a "misreading" of the show? Certainly it violates traditions of authorial control and passive readership, and for many feels like it breaks the contract between audience and creator. But in the media environment of the 21st Century, stories exist beyond a single mediated stream – the fan boards, podcasts, and alternate reality games are all part of the broader narrative experience. Spoilers disrupt the boundaries around the well-made text, but those boundaries are already in flux, breaking down via innovations from a range of sources including contemporary television storytellers, industrial media expansion, and fan created networks of participation.

Understanding the Others

We began our analysis of spoiler fandom out of an effort to understand that which seemed aberrant and counter-productive for fans of a tightly constructed suspenseful narrative like *Lost*. Through the survey responses, we are less sure of both the abnormality of spoiler fans and the seeming normality of the privileged mode of narrative consumption as traditionally defined by passive viewers being controlled by crafty producers. Of course, the passive enjoyment of a good story remains one of the textual world's greatest offerings for many readers, a point that needs reiteration in the face of media and cultural studies' past work and celebratory hoopla surrounding the concept of "active audiences" that has at times almost suggested that we *should* always resist all stories. We received comparatively few survey responses from spoiler avoiders, but if we were to focus instead on their commentary, we could paint a vivid picture of audiences who enjoy surrendering many of their powers to *Lost*'s array of author figures. However, our data suggests that at least some complex narratives, such as *Lost*, offer multiple pleasures, shapes, and reading formats, even within the seemingly unified well-constructed text. Furthermore, our data suggests that many "active" forms of reading take place within the text proper. Textual activity does not occur only in the margins, via fan discussion, activism, or reading against the grain; rather, significant and substantial meaning rests in the various registers and trajectories of a text. 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.

Most importantly, a well-told tale lives *and thrives* after its telling, and in the gaps within its telling. Any given reader's path through this story may bring the reader into contact with only a small portion of what it has to offer, and hence textual studies have often been too quick to assume a unitary, unified text, nailing one textual path down as "normal" or even "the text itself," and marginalizing other paths as extra-textual or abnormal. Instead, we might more properly conceive of the text as an active space with a varied terrain and numerous potential pathways. Akin to the enigmatic, multi-faceted island of *Lost*, the text is its own "hyperdiegetic," mysterious, and multifarious entity. Thus while spoilers may, like the Lostaway's hatch, lay hidden beneath the lush jungle of our more usual reading strategies, it is by voyaging down and by exploring such hatches into other reading strategies that we step closer to understanding the entire nature of the "island" – of narrative and textuality themselves. And on the journey, we may encounter co-inhabitants whose practices seem foreign and threatening to our own norms and customs – when confronted with such "Others," we should think of one of the more enigmatic and memorable lines from *Lost*'s season two finale, considering that the Others may be, in fact, "the good guys."

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Appendix 1: Online Survey

***Lost* and Online Fandom**

This is an online survey designed by Professors Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell to explore how viewers of the television program *Lost* use online forums and sites. The sole purpose of this survey is to inform academic research on television fandom, and the results will only be used for scholarly publication or presentation. Any quotations or information obtained via this survey will be reported anonymously, with no attribution to specific individuals – any identifying information will be held solely by Professors Gray and Mittell.

This survey will take between 15 and 30 minutes to complete, depending on the depth of your answers and scope of your activities. You may refuse to answer any question, and may abandon the survey at any point. At the end of the survey, you have the option of providing your email address if you wish to make yourself available for follow-up questions or interviews, but you may complete this survey without any self-identification.

If you have any questions about this survey, its procedures, or your participation, please contact:

XXXX

Do you agree to the following statement?

I am at least 18 years old, have read and understand the information on this page, and am willing to participate in this survey.

Background Information:

Gender:

Age:

Country of Residence:

How do you watch *Lost*? [Check all that apply]

Live Broadcast

Recorded on tape / DVD-R / TiVO

Online at iTunes

Online at ABC.com

Online using file sharing software

DVD purchase

DVD rental / borrow

On my television

On my computer monitor

On my portable video device (like iPod or pocket DVD player)

Other

How frequently do you watch *Lost*? [Check all that apply]

I never miss a new episode

I often watch an episode more than once

I miss some episodes but try to keep up with the series

I wait to watch a group of episodes in a row

I rarely watch episodes of *Lost*

Other

Which of the following accurately describe reasons why you watch *Lost*? Which of these is the main reason you watch the show? [Check all that apply, select one as primary]

I want to see the characters escape the island

I find the show to be a good distraction from my own life

I am interested in the philosophical issues raised by the show

I am impressed by the show's production values

I enjoy the suspenseful plot

I find some of the actors attractive

It reminds me of playing a game

The show makes me laugh

The show surprises me

I like to discuss the show on websites or with people I know

The show is unlike anything else on the air

I want to discover the answers to the island's mysteries

I am invested in the relationships that exist or that could form

I find it exciting

I want to solve the show's puzzles before they are answered

I want to be able to relate to other people I know who watch it

It teaches me something useful about the world

I enjoy the innovative way the show tells its story

It's a ritual that I watch with friends or family

The show makes me cry

The show reminds me of other programs I like

Other

What *Lost*-related media do you consume beyond the show itself? [Check all that apply]

DVD extras & commentaries

Websites dedicated to *Lost* [indicate names of sites]

General television sites [indicate names of sites]

Official *Lost* podcast

Official *Lost* magazine

Official tie-in novels [indicate names]

Fan fiction

Games [indicate what games]

Other

Which of the following do you typically do within a few days of watching a new episode of *Lost*? [Check all that apply]

Discuss the program face-to-face

Discuss the program on the phone

Discuss the program using email or instant messaging

Read discussion forums about the program

Post in online discussion forums

Read articles about the show in newspapers or magazines

Read articles about the show online

Visit the official ABC.com site

Visit other websites dedicated to the show

Post *Lost*-related material to websites besides forums

Watch the episode or parts of the episode again

Other

In your personal discussions or forum-postings following new episodes, which of these accurately describes your communications about *Lost*? [Check all that apply]

I do not communicate with other people about episodes

I evaluate the quality of the episode

I speculate about mysteries and future episodes

I compare newly revealed information to previous episodes

I ask questions to clarify confusing points

I compare newly revealed information to spoilers I have heard about

I analyze specific images or sounds contained in episodes

Other

For you, what constitutes a *spoiler*? [Check all that apply]

Information about future episodes coming directly from producers

Information about future episodes from people who claim "insider knowledge" or are reliable sources (like people living near the set, etc.)

Speculation about future episodes using information from outside the show (like news about future cast members or cast departures)

Speculation about future episodes based on "official" non-episode information (like novels, ABC website, online games, etc.)

Speculation about future episodes based on "in-depth" analysis of material from the show (like audio analysis of whispers or manipulations of map images)

Televised previews of upcoming episodes

Any information not clear to me while watching the show

Other

Based on your definition of spoilers, how would you best describe your attitude toward *Lost* spoilers?

I avoid spoilers as much as I can

I occasionally will read spoilers, but do not seek them out

I read spoilers frequently

I contribute or pass along spoilers to websites, but do not read other people's spoilers

I both read and contribute/pass along spoilers

[Based on this last answer, survey forks to "Avoiders," Contributors" and/or "Readers"]

Spoiler Avoiders:

Why do you avoid spoilers? What strategies do you use to avoid spoilers?

Do you read spoilers for any other television programs? Do you read spoilers for other media, like films, novels, and videogames? If so, why are these other forms different from *Lost*?

What aspects of watching *Lost*, if any, do you believe would be "ruined" by knowing information about future episodes? Why?

What aspects of watching *Lost*, if any, do you believe would still be enjoyable after knowing information about future episodes? Why?

Have you ever accidentally read or heard spoilers for episodes? How did it change your reaction to the episodes? How might you react if you encounter such spoilers in the future?

Do you know people who seek out spoilers for *Lost*? Why do you think they do it? What do you think of people who read or share spoilers?

[Go to survey conclusion]

Spoiler Contributors:

Describe how you contribute spoilers to websites. What type of information do you post? Do you have any "rules" that you follow as to how you post the information, such as how much you provide, how explicit you are, how you describe your sources, etc.?

What type of sources do you get your spoiler information from? Do your sources know that you post the information online? How do they feel about sharing this information?

Why do you think people read the spoilers you post?

Do you ever provide spoilers to people without "bracketing" it as a spoiler (such as posting spoilers in a live chat, or without spoiler fonts in a non-spoiler forum)? Why have you done this or avoided doing it?

Have you ever posted fake spoilers? If so, why? If not, why not?

[Go to survey conclusion if not also reader, otherwise continue]

Spoiler Readers:

How frequently do you read *Lost* spoilers? Where do you read your spoilers?

Do you read spoilers for any other television programs or types of media? If so, what are they?

Are there particular limits to what you want to read spoilers about, or topics you don't want any advanced knowledge about?

Why do you read spoilers?

What aspects of watching *Lost*, if any, do you believe are "ruined" by knowing information about future episodes? Why?

What aspects of watching *Lost*, if any, do you believe are still be enjoyable (or more enjoyable) after knowing information about future episodes? Why?

What pleasures do spoilers add to watching *Lost* that you couldn't get without reading them?

If you could not read spoilers, do you think you would still enjoy *Lost*? Would you enjoy it more or less?

Do you tell other people that you have advance knowledge of *Lost*? How do they react? Are your interactions with "non-spoiled" viewers part of why you read spoilers? If so, why?

Have you ever read spoilers that turned out to be untrue? How do you feel about fake spoilers?

Survey Conclusion: [all surveys end here]

If you somehow came into possession of a document detailing the answers behind the major mysteries of *Lost*, what would you do with it? Would you look at it? Would you share it with other people? Why or why not?

What differences do you see between spoilers for an ongoing television series like *Lost* and other media, like videogames, films, and novels?

Do you think spoiling raises ethical issues? If so, what are they?

Do you have any other comments about *Lost* and/or spoilers that you have not addressed in this survey?

Thank you for your time in completing this survey. Would you be interested in discussing this topic more via email or instant messaging? If so, please fill-in your email address, which will not be used beyond this purpose and will not be used to identify your responses. If you would rather not be contacted, please simply click Submit.

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[1] For early guidance into the world of *Lost* spoiler fandom, and for assistance and thoughtful discussion on what spoiling is all about, we extend heartfelt thanks to Monica Grant. Additionally, the authors would like to thank Martin Barker, Mia Consalvo, Christy Dena, Marie-Laure Ryan, Clarissa Smith, and Angela Werndly for their productive feedback on this essay.

[2] In collecting this demographic data, we hoped to see any substantial differences between genders and consumption practices. Some trends confirmed what might be assumed gender norms: men are more likely than women to watch the show online or via their computers, listen to podcasts, play The Lost Experience game, and watch episodes multiple times, while the only practice significantly more common for women than men was reading fan fiction. Concerning their reasons to watch, women definitely emphasized relationships and solving the show's mysteries more than the men's priorities of suspense, production values, game-play, philosophical issues, useful teachings, and puzzle solving, however there was significant overlap in all categories. We are reluctant to offer these findings as anything more than casual observations, however, as the sample was neither random nor large enough to offer firm statistical significance.

[3] Indeed, given that our survey was posted a week before the season finale, we suspect that some die-hard spoiler avoiders might have been avoiding the sites – and hence our calls for survey participation – for fear of being spoiled (even one of the fan sites' moderators had stepped down for this period, so that he would not be spoiled!).

[4] Fictional producers would always hold the upper hand in such a game, since plotlines can be changed more easily than can the winner of *Survivor* after it has been shot – if advance spoilers about a character's death circulated to such a degree that the plot was ruined, writers could potentially reconstruct the narrative to foil the spoilers.

[5] Lest spoiler fandom seem wholly generative of community, though, one spoiler avoider's comment suggested the ways in which they might at times restrict community, when she noted that, "If I weren't so concerned with spoilers, I would be more likely to engage in discussions about various TV shows, books, and movies."

[6] Curiously too, some respondents who had been fooled by foilers expressed admiration at how they had thus been completely surprised "for a change" by some textual developments, further suggesting the degree to which, as one woman stated, spoilers keep spoiler fans "on their toes," and hardly in the position of comfortable foreknowledge that one might expect of them.

[7] Granted that reception research on CliffNotes would probably suggest that the vast majority of readers use these paratexts to *avoid* such close reading rather than enable it; however, our survey suggests that spoiler fans do in fact follow their spoiler consumption with attentive viewing of *Lost*.

[8] Surveys were completed anonymously; however, respondents were invited to include email addresses if they were willing to be contacted for follow-up questions. Of the 35 spoiler fans who provided their email addresses, ten responded to follow-up questions emailed approximately ten weeks after the survey was completed.

Contact (by email): [Jonathan Gray & Jason Mittell](#)

Biographical Note

Jonathan Gray is Assistant Professor of Communication and Media Studies, Fordham University, 441 East Fordham Road, Bronx, New York 10458-9993.

Jason Mittell is Assistant Professor of American Studies and Film & Media Culture, Middlebury College, 204 Adirondack House, Middlebury, Vermont 05753

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