OXFORD LECTURE 4 - FINAL MASTER

TOMORROW GOT HERE YESTERDAY

My first lecture began with credits. I need to start this one with a few, too. I'm indebted to wizards in the digital realm Joanna Shields, Ziv Navoth and Anthony Lilley for casting their eye over an earlier draft of this and providing some invaluable embellishments and observations.

I am also immensely grateful to my Chairman Elisabeth Murdoch, who gave me early access to a speech she made in this area not so long ago, and from which I have plundered more than a thought or two.

I am also grateful beyond measure for the patience and insights of my daughter Lena and wife Val. Both in their very different ways have shaped - more than they can know - the way I see the world in general and the future in particular.

One of the great things about futurology - from the point of view of this futurologist, anyway - is that it is a wonderfully inexact science. Well, OK, not really a science at all. But what it means is that, to the extent that I will today be talking about the future, I can't be wrong. And by the time I am wrong, you will all have forgotten what I said.

For the moment, though, let's just assume that no one knows anything. Including me. I know that much, because I've done some asking around. Among the folk I canvassed was internet visionary Edo Segal who kindly directed me to his website iWise, the first step in his project - to (in his words) "own wisdom on the web." He told me a search on this site would be more focused than Google. I typed in "the future." And it was indeed more focused. (Not least because if you do type "the future" into Google it offers you about 236 million possible outcomes.) The first quote that popped up on iWise was - as billed - very wise. Emanating from one William Ford Gibson were the words: "the future is not Google-able." Advice I could have done with earlier. Not to mention a bitter blow, because, to quote the second pearl of wisdom I came across - this one from Charles F Kettering - "We should all be concerned about the future because we will all have to spend the rest of our lives there. Now that could seem attractively distant as a prospect, were it not for a different William Gibson - this time the cyberpunk writer of Neuromancer - maintaining: "the future is already here, just not evenly distributed."

When I was first approached to give these lectures, the title I provided for my fourth and final talk was: The Future Got Here Yesterday. That might very well be true. But if so, I'm here under slightly false pretences. I'm the News International Visiting Professor of Broadcast Media here at Oxford. And one thing I'm absolutely certain of is that the future is not about "broadcast media." It's about the web. The only web my professorial successors will be engaging with in coming years will be spun by spiders. That's how relevant the **broadcast** bit of media is going to be.

Anyway, whatever this talk is called, it's an attempt to draw together some of the strands from the past few weeks, introduce some new ones and explore - against a background of rapid technological, sociological and demographic change - how the

world of TV drama series is being transformed.

This evening I will be talking about the impact on story-telling - the kinds of stories being told as well as the ways in which they are both told and experienced - of the radical shifts - some might say revolutions - that are taking place in everything. These changes are especially evident in audience behaviour - as a result of social networks in particular and the web in general.

This lecture is going to take a slightly different form to the past three. Futurology is the stuff of fantasy and sci-fi, a genre that in its literary, movie and TV iterations has always been a great space in which to play with ideas. So, I'm going to use extracts from a few of the recent best and do just that. Play with ideas.

I am not, of course, the first to juggle with notions of the future. In literature, for example, I have some immensely distinguished predecessors. Take George Orwell's 1984 or Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, where books were banned as part of a patchwork of measures designed to enforce future social control. Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and William Gibson's Neuromancer went further, dreaming up machines and devices that effectively enabled the user to escape reality altogether in a wholly imagined landscape. These, too, were set in highly repressive, authoritarian regimes. Dictatorships effectively. Nowhere are these technological advances in entertainment seen as benign. On the contrary they, too, are mechanisms of rigid social control.

Brave New World's "feely" is worthy of special mention. Conceived by Huxley in 1934, the "feely" is a substitute form of story-telling designed to delight and distract the masses. It's a medium capable of stimulating all the senses, creating as it does for the audience the sensation, say, of being touched or kissed.

In 1985, Neil Postman wrote a breathtakingly far-sighted study of media called Amusing Ourselves to Death. Having noted the liberal smugness greeting the failure of Orwell's Big Brother-controlled and bookless world to materialise, Postman had this to say: "But we had forgotten .....Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World.* Contrary to common belief, even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."

Postman's analysis was clear. "What Orwell feared," he wrote, "were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited,* the civil

libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions". "

Huxley, remember, was writing more than 70 years ago. He was not alone among my fellow futurologists in presenting a bleak prognosis.

Now, turning back the clock for a moment, when I started in TV - way back in 1978 - the broadcast media world was unrecognisable from the one we live in today. We may have always had "an infinite appetite for distractions," but in the UK back then there were just 3 channels - no cable or satellite - and none of them transmitted for 24 hours, or anything close. We had had BBC2 for 14 years, colour for less than a decade. The only way in which you could make a decision about what to watch was by reading the Radio Times or TV Times. Not only was there no internet, nobody had a personal computer. I typed scripts for news reports using an electric typewriter and made carbon copies using black paper that left marks on my hands. There were no photocopiers in our office. This was Granada TV in Manchester, one of the ITV big guns. Not only were there no mobile phones, there were no cordless phones. All phones - in the home and office - were attached to the base with a cord. There were no fax machines. Messages were sent electronically via telex or telegram. There was no way of copying or recording TV shows at home. Nobody had a video machine. If you missed a show on transmission, that was it. End of story. No way of catching up.

I made inserts for a topical daily local news programme using 16 mm film, which had to be processed in a lab. If you hadn't shot your story by early afternoon, it would miss the "bath" and it couldn't be on the news.

I sat at a desk at Granada with TV presenter Anthony H Wilson, who in his spare time would flick through the physical bible that was Yellow Pages, in search of quotes from plants who might press Factory Records' first release. This was an album by a new band called Joy Division, whose singer had not yet committed suicide. Tony had played me a demo on his car cassette player. There were no CD's or MP3's, only vinyl or tape. Punk had just happened. Chairman Mao had only been dead 2 years; China was pretty much impenetrable by westerners; Mrs Thatcher was about to become Prime Minister for the first time. David Cameron was 12. Not yet at Eton.

There are many who would like the world to have stayed like that. But that would be to indulge in what digital media strategist Adam Singer dubs "nostalgic fundamentalism."

Because now? Well, much has changed and change is happening faster by the week.

Here are some facts, figures and trends: (I'm indebted to The Economists DID YOU KNOW 3.0 for much of what follows. You can see the whole thing on YouTube):

- China will soon contain more English speakers than anywhere else on the planet

- The top 10 in demand jobs this year didn't exist 6 years ago

- The amount of new technical information is doubling every 2 years, which

means that for students embarking today on a 4 year technical degree, half of what they learn in year 1 will be out of date by year 3.

- 4 exabytes of unique information will be generated this year. Don't ask me what an Exabyte is. But know this. 4 of them is more information than has appeared in the past 5000 years put together.

- The first commercial text message was sent in 1992. Today, the daily number of text messages sent every day exceeds the population of the planet

- It took television 13 years to reach a global audience of 50 million. It took Face Book just 2 years to reach that same level of penetration.

- Still only just 6 years old, Facebook has 400 million registered users. If Face book was a country it would be the 3rd largest in the world, behind China and India, but a long way ahead of the USA, Indonesia and Brazil.

- Face book is the #1 site in terms of global minutes devoted to it - more than 6 Billion minutes are spent on Face book each day

- More than 5 Billion pieces of content are shared by its users every week

- Facebook pages have created 5.3 billion fans for cultural artefacts ranging from bands to movies, via books, TV shows, plays, people, works of art, lines of clothing, gadgets, foods and much, much more besides

- 47% of European viewers aged 12-17 watch TV while using their laptops

- 89% of Internet users share content

- YouTube, which celebrates its 5th birthday this week, is the #2 site in global minutes; there are more than 1 Billion video views each day and more than 20 hours of video uploaded each minute

Here are a few trends and headlines we can pull out of this data, and I'll be exploring some of it over the coming hour.

- "Social" is everywhere - it's no longer confined to "social networking". Set-top boxes, consoles, desktop clients and hand-held devices all enable content to be consumed in a social experience.

- This "stream" - on Twitter, Face book, YouTube, and the rest - of ideas, emotions, thoughts and conversations is evolving in real time.

- It's increasingly not broadcasters and schedulers who are programming our experiences, but our friends. Their recommendations, as well as those from other trusted sources.

- This makes Ashton Kutcher and Stephen Fry, whose "tweets" help shape the tastes and cultural choices of their huge number of followers, substantial media

players.

- This activity is what you might call "social syndication." If you make something good enough, other people will effectively distribute it for you.

- Real time interaction and commentary are transforming existing media.

- For example: how audiences are behaving - they watch what they want to watch, when and how they want to watch it

- **Who** tells them **what** to watch is as much a factor as their decision as **what** it is they choose to watch

- Audiences can no longer merely be described as viewers - there is now increasingly a level of participation and engagement that is not just active rather than passive, but **inter**-active

- Sometimes this engagement is so all-consuming that it is better described as "immersion."

- And audience involvement is here to stay: according to leading US consultants Forrester Research: "Media companies will embrace the new role of the audience in co-creation, distribution and promotion of content across a range of platforms".

Story-telling - which is what I'm really interested in - is about to undergo a revolution. It's already happening. Users not only create their own media but they modify and share almost every type of media. And sometimes, they create something new that is often more informative, interesting or entertaining than its original source. Here's just a short burst from one of the tens of Spooks mash-ups you can find on YouTube, generated by fans of Spooks in general, and of the unrequited love story between Harry and Ruth in particular.

Here's the link for this clip - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHgj2zuWSgo *– You don't need to watch the whole thing to get the idea.....*

It's fun, of course, and oddly moving, but as far as the future of TV drama series is concerned, that's not really the exciting stuff. Something is happening in the melting pot - a recipe that combines audience fragmentation, the convergence of media and fandom - that is allowing a new kind of story-telling to come to the fore. Like any good recipe, this is a dish that adds up to far more than just the sum of its parts.

I alluded to audience fragmentation last week in my discussion of cable dramas like The Shield, that are able to punch above their weight with audiences far smaller than anything that could sustain a network. But driving a business based on diminishing audiences is not unique to cable. It is something the US networks have been living with for some time.

There is no meaningful equivalent of the BBC in the USA, no well funded public

service provider. The networks - ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox - are commercial animals, their funding entirely derived from advertising revenue. Back in the 50's and 60's life was good. They were able to carve up a vast country between them and had no need to do anything but appeal to mass, undifferentiated audiences with the broadest possible programming. It was a time when **broad**--**cast** meant just that. They cast their nets wide. But as competition toughened, the networks started to shift their focus away from rural viewers in favour of the better-heeled urban markets.

Then in the 90's and early "noughties" they began to narrow their focus further still. This reflected as Henry Jenkins writes, in Convergence Culture, "a shift to loyal viewers," which meant that "smaller groups of loyal fans were seeing more shows reflecting their tastes and interests." Why could this seemingly niche model work? Well, quite simply, for advertisers, the model had evolved. Long gone were the days when the holy grail was simply about seducing the maximum number of eyeballs. Global ratings have been replaced by the need to target advertiser gold-dust - the elusive and commercially far more valuable 18-49 year olds. That doesn't sound like a tough target to hit. But according to a recent article in Variety, the average audience of the US networks is, wait for it...51. Oddly the networks' problem lies with their most successful shows. Procedural dramas such as CSI, Law & Order and Greys Anatomy are, as Variety mischievously calls them, "catnip" to older viewers. So the networks are stuck with a declining and aging audience.

Just to give you a sense of how their lot has worsened over the years, Jenkins writes: "in the 1960's, an advertiser could reach 80% of US women with just one primetime spot on the three networks. Today it has been estimated that the same spot would have to run on 100 channels to reach the same number of viewers." Forrester Research put it bluntly: "monolithic eyeballs are gone. In their place is a perpetually shifting mosaic of audience microsegments that forces marketers to play an endless game of hide and seek."

Broadcasters and advertisers alike have spent billions on research to discover that spending further billions in an increasingly futile pursuit of so-called casual viewers - viewers, in other words, who hop from channel to channel, show to show, who evince loyalty neither to channels nor to programmes - is not a sound business model.

There are two other kinds of viewers, on the other hand, the pursuit of whom can reap huge rewards. The first is the so-called "devoted" viewer, someone who will make a date with their favourite show and endeavour to watch every episode. Soap viewers in this country fall into that category, so too, the huge audiences for reality shows like, well, anything with Simon Cowell sitting in it. And the second group, a subset of devotees, are the avid fans.

In an essay on the X-Files, Reeves, Rodgers and Epstein have this to say about our third group: "avid fans will not only take special pains to watch every episode of the show, but today will (record) the episodes so they can review them, perhaps even archive them. The show is not only a special event but a major source of self-definition, a kind-of **quasi-religious experience...**"

In the US, Fox's American Idol (very much like our own X-Factor) delivered massive ratings, but what was game-changing about it was that a huge component of that massive rating comprised people who fell into the third category. The avid fan, previously thought of as the idiosyncratic and quirky consumer of cult fare, had suddenly entered the mainstream. The question was could the same trick be performed with drama?

And then, along came LOST. For those of you who have been hiding in the Bodleian Library for the past 5 years, Lost is a heavily serialised American drama series. It follows the lives of a group of plane crash survivors on a mysterious tropical island after a commercial passenger jet flying between Sydney and Los Angeles crashes somewhere in the South Pacific. Here's a clip from the beginning of series 2:

This clip comes from season 2, episode 1 of Lost; the clip begins at 12 minutes 11 at the beginning of the scene where Hurley is explaining what happened to him before the plane crash and finishes at 13 minutes 51. It contains references to "the others," "the numbers," "the smoke monster," as well as other bits of LOST "mythology."

Don't worry if you didn't follow what was going on. Not many do.

Lost is the TV equivalent of a Russian doll - it's a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, hiding at the end of a labyrinth, inside a puzzle, which is itself an enigma. It may or may not be there. And if it is, it may not be now, but instead be a flashback or a flash forward. Or both. It's a blend of so many different genres - action/adventure, thriller, love story, science fiction and fantasy - that it defies the usual hyphenates. But one of the many things that is remarkable about it is that it appeared on a network (ABC), in primetime, 5 and a half years ago - and is still going. Its 6th and final season launched a couple of weeks ago. The fact that it survived for 6 years meant that it had worked. There was no precedent - as I mentioned in past lectures in the context of shows like Life on Mars or 6 Feet Under - for anything as defiantly non-naturalistic and complex as this to live and breathe outside the narrower confines of cable and the specialised genre channels like Sci-Fi.

Sci-Fi, by the way, has just changed its name from S-C-I- HYPHEN -F-I to Sy-Fy - that's S-Y-HYPHEN-F-Y. Apparently this would make it feel less blokey, less geeky, more appealing to women. No doubt on the basis that women can't spell. I'm happy to report that it's worked. More women are indeed now watching this respelled channel.

I said that Lost was unprecedented. Well, that's not quite true. The networks had flirted in the past with things that go bump in the night or in space (or both), and there are three antecedents worthy of discussion.

The first, as Trekkies here will know, is the grand-daddy of cult TV - Star Trek. A child of the 60's, Star Trek began in prime time, but in an age of cosy mass fare largely comprising sitcoms, cop shows and westerns, its vocal fan-base was not large enough to save it from relegation to the late night armpit of the schedule, where it sustained not quite 80 episodes before disappearing into a televisual black hole. Back

then, there was no Facebook, no Twitter, no way beyond those antiquated things we used to call letters, for fans to make themselves heard. Even roomfuls of letters, written as they were in red biro with key words and phrases underlined in green, could not save the Starship Enterprise from extinction.

But off network, in syndicated reruns, sustained by a growing fanbase, Star Trek lived on, eventually becoming the most successful and lucrative TV series of all time. As a movie franchise, too, Star Trek's stock has grown by the decade. It is no coincidence that the latest and most successful Star Trek movie was written and directed by one JJ Abrams, the co-creator of a TV show called...Lost.

For the 70's and '80's the US networks remained resolutely naturalistic. Cops and docs largely ruled the world of television drama. But then, at the beginning of the 90's, ABC threw onto primetime a series so dark, so surreal, so plain weird that it looked as though the rulebook was about to be torn up. The show was David Lynch's Twin Peaks and I mentioned it a couple of weeks ago as one of the dramas that had inspired David Chase to create The Sopranos. Using the Trojan Horse of a police investigation into the murder of a smalltown girl, Twin Peaks was also a challenging fusion of dreams, fantasy and myth. It was a critical and ratings success. That was until early in its second season, when the killer of the girl was revealed and audiences, feeling that there was no longer any need to wrestle with its complex riddles, puzzles and serial elements, deserted Twin Peaks in their droves.

Shortly after Twin Peaks' demise, the still fledgling network, Fox, introduced The X-Files. For those of you who've been hiding in the Bodleian for nearly 20 years, FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully are the investigators of the X-Files, which are marginalized, unsolved cases involving paranormal phenomena. Mulder is a believer in the existence of aliens and the paranormal, while Scully, a sceptic, is assigned to make scientific analyses on Mulder's discoveries.

This was, in terms of building audience loyalty, a far cleverer construct than Twin Peaks. While its disguise was once again that of a quasi-criminal investigation, most episodes shunned the single serial, single mystery arc of Twin Peaks, in favour of self-contained, episodic stories. You could use a shorthand of "monster-of-the-week."

But this would be to do the X-Files an enormous injustice. It was a huge ratings success, but it also built a substantial base of core fans, who became increasingly obsessed with its carefully and brilliantly constructed mythology. In this new kind of storytelling, mythology is key. I'll explain what I mean by that after this extract from the X-Files' 4th season, an episode called Momento Mori. Together with a group of women with whom she was abducted by aliens at the end of the first season, Agent Scully has developed cancer:

Momento Mori comes from season 4 of the X-Files and this clip starts at 39 minutes and finishes at the end of the scene around 41 minutes. Here Scully tells Mulder she's going to return to work, despite her cancer, and fight it. As they embrace Mulder assures her that "the truth will save you Scully. It will save all of us..." This is a classic episode and there's a fabulously insightful DVD

commentary from Frank Spotnitz.

Frank Spotnitz, the lead writer of that episode, is here in the audience tonight. It was thanks to a number of conversations with him about these lectures that I was drawn to this episode.

The first crucial bit of X-Files mythology you saw there is the relationship between Mulder and Scully. It remains the best example of URST in the history of television drama - URST being Un-Resolved Sexual Tension - the glue of so many of the quintessential relationships that underpin TV drama. Spooks' Harry and Ruth is another, as you saw earlier, so too Gene Hunt and Alex Drake in Ashes to Ashes. X-Files creator Chris Carter regarded it as part of the canon of the show that his two heroes should never resolve that sexual tension. In that he was as one with the show's vociferous fans - who by the mid 90s, with the aid of a maturing web, were now able to make their feelings known through a growing array of fan-sites, blogs and chatrooms. That said, (show runner) Frank (Spotnitz) mentions in the DVD commentary for the scene you've just witnessed that in one of the many takes actually shot there was a mouth-to-mouth kiss. Shock, horror. Rightly, this remained on the cutting room floor.

But there is more intriguing X-Files mythology buried in this extract. A little earlier than the moment you just witnessed, we have passed through a room filled with tanks containing bodies. These tanks were not new to the show, but had last appeared 3 years before at the end of the X-Files' first season. And the glass phial in Mulders hand? This phial had not been seen before, but would reappear 4 years later in season 8.

You might wonder how you are supposed to keep all that in your head. The truth is ordinary viewers probably can't. But it doesn't matter. This episode is relatively self-contained, and easily makes enough sense to the casual viewer to reward a dip-in, dip-out relationship with the series.

But for the avid fan, these pieces of mythology are like crack. This is what keeps them engaged, keeps them loyal, not just to the individual TV viewing experience, but to the debates and speculations that rage on the web, investigating the meaning and relevance of every little detail. You may have heard the line "the truth will save you." One of The X-Files catch phrases was "the truth is out there." That's what the fans believed, and they would leave no stone unturned to find it.

Both the tanks and the phial were rooted in Scully's abduction by aliens at the end of the first season. That single, staggering departure from anything connecting this drama series with the dogged naturalism of its procedural cousins, put The X-Files on the map. It is at the core of all the show's subsequent mythology.

But like many of the events I described in my first lecture, charting the success of our own series at Kudos, the alien abduction was an accident. Gillian Anderson, the actress playing Scully, became pregnant and was therefore unavailable for a key filming period. How better to explain her absence from a few episodes than an alien

abduction? Not the sort of thing you can do on The Bill or Silent Witness. And so it came to pass, that for 5 or 6 seasons, The X-Files was a huge hit with mainstream audiences and cult fans alike.

But it couldn't last forever. The combination of an X-Files movie that messed with the integrity of the mythology, and David Duchovny's Mulder leaving the series, caused the internal logic of the show to crumble. By the time The X-Files came to an end, fans were left feeling cheated, with a strong sense that an over-arching mystery had been dangled before them never properly to be explained. This was a different kind of URST - unresolved SERIES tension, the cardinal sin to be avoided by all involved in the crafting of complex stories.

So, this then was the landscape into which Lost was launched, just 3 years after the once brilliant and still inspirational X-Files had fizzled out. As Charles Taylor wrote in Truth Decay, his study of post Reagan sleuths, "the most unsettling thing about The X-Files is how inviting this slightly alien world looks. The curtain of what we accept as reality seems to have torn, allowing Mulder and Scully to search for meanings usually obscured. Week after week, this elegant twilight zone beckons like the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Could Lost be similarly inviting and avoid the mistakes of Twin Peaks and The X-Files? Could it tear the curtain of reality without alienating a mainstream audience? And could it also satisfy avid fans?

Wikipedia, the font of all knowledge, documents Lost's development as starting in January 2004, when Lloyd Braun, head of ABC at the time, ordered an initial script from Spelling Television based on his concept of a cross between the novel *Lord of the Flies,* the movie *Cast Away,* the television series *Gilligan's Island*, and the popular reality show *Survivor* (like our I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here, but without celebs). ABC had also premiered a short lived series about plane crash survivors in 1969 called *The New People* with the opening episode by Rod Serling.

Unhappy with the result of an early draft by another writer, Braun contacted J. J. Abrams, who had a deal with Touchstone Television (now ABC Studios), and who was also the creator of the TV series *Alias*, to write a new pilot script. Although initially hesitant, Abrams warmed to the idea on the condition that the series would have a supernatural angle to it, and collaborated with Damon Lindelof to create the series' style and characters. Together, Abrams and Lindelof also created a series "bible, and conceived and detailed the major mythological ideas and plot points for an ideal five to six season run for the show.

Abrams was already a fan of Rod Serling, best known as the creator of another huge influence on Lost, The Twilight Zone. In Abrams' own words: "fundamentally, he understood that amazing combination of <u>pure pulp</u> and <u>deep character</u>. And the respect he had for character and the audience was enormous. He would write about things in allegory, tell tales about aliens and monsters, but they were almost always about subjects that mattered to him - whether it was the terror of the Russians, whether it was the mystery and fear and hunger for space travel, whether it was

racism or politics, or whatever it was he was always grappling with."

And what Abrams liked most about the Twilight Zone was that Serling would - Abrams' words again: "...take these characters that you'd want to watch anywhere and put them in these ultimate, extreme, crazy, often supernatural, paranormal situations that would take the audience with him - so that the relatable characters were in extraordinary situations."

So, from Sterling: pure pulp, deep character, relatable characters in extraordinary situations.

And appropriately enough for this hallowed academic institution, Abrams brought another influence into the mix. As those of you who are already keen students of Lost will know, that other influence was Aristotle. Abrams identified the great Greek as the architect of (in Abrams' words) "structure, the paradigm of storytelling - the beginning, middle and end. The most fundamental rules...You can color it and decorate it and complicate it and talk about it," Abrams continues, " but it comes down to What is your story? What is the beginning? Where are you going?"

Interestingly, these are precisely the questions its vast global audience has been asking since Lost began.Because what Abrams and his colleagues set out to achieve from the get-go was a new multi-layered story, one that would play out simultaneously across - not just broadcast TV but all media, and which therefore had to be sufficiently complex and rich to deliver narrative satisfaction over a number of different platforms over many years. This is what Henry Jenkins in Convergence Culture calls "transmedia storytelling," which he defines as **"the art of world-making**."

He then talked about the way a transmedia story would change the audience's relationship with the material. As Jenkins says: "To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating, *to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience."*

The planning that went into Lost made it the first drama series truly designed to be transmedia, to fully take account of a games literate, web-savvy audience, hungry for stories that did not simply unfold in linear fashion on the single medium of broadcast TV. And, to rephrase Abrams' own Aristotelian question, could he ensue that everyone who invested time and effort in Lost **would** come away with a richer entertainment experience?

There were no paradigms for this transmedia strategy in TV drama, but there were in the movies. The best and most high profile example of this was The Matrix trilogy, which began in 1999 and played out over 4 years. The Wachowski Brothers planned the whole project in advance. The Matrix started with just movie one on its own, then the brothers released some Web comics to keep attention alive, then a Japanese style anime, then movie two. The computer game was released at the same time as movie two, then the third movie of the trilogy emerged; and finally the mythology of the

franchise was handed over to fans by allowing them freely to engage in a mass multiplayer online game (or MMOG, as they are known).

This all sounds great, in theory, but for a growing majority, Matrix iterations, after the opening movie, became increasingly impenetrable, with nothing making sense without reference to other pieces in the puzzle. That's not how trans-media storytelling is supposed to work.

For Jenkins, in an ideal world, trans-media storytelling: "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole...so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through TV, novels, and comics (then) game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole." Easy for him to say; really hard to pull off.

Before the first episode of Lost launched, its creators sowed the seeds of a multi-layered puzzle, and continued - off air - to add to the mix. Among other things, the "Lost Experience" website encouraged avid fans to follow trails not available to mere TV viewers. This included the opportunity to forage amongst the wreckage of the plane to pick up clues relating to the identity of the survivors. This was just the beginning of a journey to penetrate one of the lingering mysteries of Lost: who are these people, why are they here, and are they who they pretend to be?

As the series progressed, websites emerged seemingly testifying to the real-life, real world integrity of Lost's fictional organisations like The Hanso Foundation and the Dharma Initiative, both of which are at the heart of many of Lost's mysteries. On a genuine talk show called Jimmy Kimmel Live, there was an intervention from a journalist called Rachel Blake, a self-styled anti-Hanso blogger, denouncing the Hanso-Dharma conspiracy. She turned out to be an actress.

On YouTube it's possible to track down a novelist called Gary Troupe giving an interview on a book programme about his latest novel The Bad Twin. It's broken into 40" fragments. Each one teasing with the promise of something meaty in the next, inspired as it is by real people connected to Hanso and Dharma. Gary Troupe doesn't exist...

Type "The Shark Video" into YouTube and you'll find a zoom into a grainy still image of a shark on the beach (we assume on Lost Island). Just visible as a branding on its carcass is the word "Hanso."

The list goes on, but this plethora of additional sources, references and story fragments is for a new breed - not so much of "avid" fans - as a group who have come to be known as " forensic fans." They're not unique to Lost, but can be found trawling a range of media for fragments, clues and meaning on any and all complex pieces of TV story-telling. Here in the UK, the best examples are Dr Who, Torchwood and our own Life on Mars/Ashes to Ashes duo. In the US, as well as Lost, there was Buffy and Babylon 5; there's now Heroes, Flash Forward, Abrams' own Fringe and Battlestar

Galactaca (replaced this year by its new prequel Caprica) with hordes of their own forensic fans - and many more besides.

Remember, advertisers love these shows, too. Loyal fans are loyal also to brands connected with them. The Alternate Reality Game (or ARG as they are known) that appeared between seasons 1 and 2 of Lost, blurring the boundary between reality and fiction in its portrayal of Hanso and Dharma as real entities, was aided in its deliberate obfuscation by real world sponsorship from Jeep and Sprite.

It's worth noting, too, that these games are not for children. According to Will Brooker, in his essay Television Out of Time, tools required to solve the Lost ARG included- among other things - "a working knowledge of trigonometry", "Korean language fluency", and "a subscription to People Magazine".

This is clearly only possible if the fans worked together. If they created a "collective intelligence", as Henry Jenkins calls it, worked together like bees in a hive.

For Pierre Levy this is a "participatory culture." Whatever you call it, this is not TV viewing as most of us grew up with it. This is TV viewing as sophisticated group detective work. Miss Marples need not apply.

And it's not just the ancillary off-air content that's tricky. The mythology in the broadcast TV show itself - mysteries involving a grey smoke monster that roams the island, a mysterious group of inhabitants known as "the Others", the sequence of numbers you saw referenced in the earlier clip and so far unexplained synchronicities between characters, are themselves mired in references to religion, ancient myths, recent cults, science, literature and philosophy. One character is called John Locke. His alias is named Jeremy Bentham. Other characters have surnames spanning Hawking, Faraday, Hume, Rousseau, Lewis (after CS), Bakunin and Burke.

For many ordinary viewers - casuals as well as dedicateds - these are many bridges too far. Even with the ability via downloads, home recording, DVD or piracy to watch and re-watch, freeze and re-wind, Lost has haemorrhaged viewers over the years. And for fans - avids as well as forensics - there is a scarier possibility. As illustrated in this spoof documentary sketch called The Writers of Lost:

Here's the link for this sketch - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdTfkpHDZ0k ***– I showed the first 58 seconds of the sketch.***

The media academic Ivan Askwith wrote an essay called "Do You Even Know Where This is Going?" What rightly intrigues Askwith about this sketch is the fact that it is not so much a satire on the show as on (his words) "the creative planning process - or lack thereof - that occurs behind the scenes. In general, television writing rarely generates discussion, except among a show's most devoted fans.

Yet (in this sketch) the humour is derived from an open acknowledgement of a growing fear: that Lost's writers and showrunners have no long-term plan, or - even worse - that they might be making it up as they go along." Terrible idea, isn't it? That storytellers might be making it up?

But in the case of stories as complex as Lost and Heroes, stories like a detective mystery that are entirely based on puzzles to be solved and resolved, the idea that a joke might be being told with the punchline unknown is not funny at all. If audiences lose faith in the story telling, they will not stay the course. Lost's writers sought to restore faith by ending season 3 with this flash forward.

This clip was taken from the last episode of season 3 and I showed a section that ran from 38 minutes 17, up to 40 minutes 20. Here Jack and Kate have met up again, having escaped from the island, and Jack tells of his desperate desire to go back.

Everyone clear? We knew then 3 years ago - that at least 2 characters get off the island, with one of them believing they should never have left and wanting to go back. So, the challenge for the writers and producers becomes not so much "what happens?" as "how does what happens happen?" And "how will they tell us?"

Season 5 ended last year with a nuclear weapon seemingly destroying the island back in 1977 and everyone on it. (Don't ask me how the Losties found themselves back in 1977). Season 6 - the last - started a couple of weeks ago.

We're about to find out how Lost ends. Judging by the blogs, it's going to require some patience and more than a little attention. Here's an extract from a blog that appeared just after that episode went out. The grammar is theirs not mine:

"The opening sequence to which we find the plane flying over the island but not affected by it due to the island being sunk by Juliet blowing it up, to then seeing that although a alt. universe exists, our Losties still exist in their Universe, this episode was just EXCELLENT! Seeing the temple, seeing that man in black is smokey as a formless self (which i said it was) EVERYTHING! I cant even make sense by the awesomeness that was this episode!"

And another blog :

"Ok, so classic scifi time stuff, 2 timelines emerge from the blast. The crew blown back into the present on the island, and also a timeline where the crash never happened."

For those of you who do want to dive into Lost for its final fling, the critical piece of information from the blogs is that we are back in the present but with 2 identical sets of characters in 2 parallel time lines - one in which the plane crashed and one in which it didn't. Is this really what they had in mind all along?

Fears of no game plan were compounded by ex-writer David Fury, talking to Rolling Stone Magazine after leaving the show: "there was absolutely no master plan on Lost," he maintained. "Anybody who said that was lying. They keep saying there's meaning in everything, and I'm here to tell you no - a lot of things are just arbitrary. What I always tried to do was connect these random elements, to create the illusion that it was adding up to something."

The counter-argument, and one closer to our own experience with Life on Mars and Ashes to Ashes, comes from another Lost writer Javier Grillo-Marxuach: "the truth

about all television shows...is that they are slightly amorphous living beings. They develop over time and things that work or don't work are discarded accordingly...that's how good television is made - if some part of your plan doesn't work, you rework it until it does." He went on (in rebuttal to Fury) "does (the act of) making these adjustments, accommodating new ideas that enrich our series, and letting our show be a creative process that allows for a new development, mean we are lying when we say we have a master plan? You tell me."

Frank Spotnitz, a long term showrunner on The X-Files, bears this out. He believes - and the alien abduction story supports this contention - that if you are consistent and do what you do in crafting a story with integrity, you will discover jewels down the line that you can put to good use, even if you didn't know to what use you might put them at the time. These he likened to the buried treasures of storytelling. (I hope I've quoted you correctly.)

Even Stephen King entered the fray in an interview in Entertainment Weekly: "the chief attributes of creators are faith and arrogance: faith that there is a solution, and the arrogance to believe that they are exactly the right people to find it."

Abrams himself has tacitly acknowledged that the 4-dimesional complexity of Lost may be an issue. His latest series, Fringe, takes a slightly different path. "*Lost,*" he says, "has garnered a certain reputation for being a very complicated show and one that you have to watch every episode." You can say that again, JJ. He continues "*Fringe* is in many ways an experiment for us, which is, we believe it is possible to do a show that does have an overall story and end game, which *Fringe* absolutely does... We can do a show that has that, so that there's a direction the show is going and there's an ultimate story that's being told, but also a show that you don't have to watch episodes one, two and three to tune into episode four."

It's the great writers who recognise the continuing need to learn. And have the ability so to do.

One interesting question attaching to all of this, of course, is this: are these multiform stories being judged by the wrong criteria? Because shows like Lost, Heroes and Battlestar Galactaca have as much in common with the narrative conventions of computer games as they do with the narrative conventions of TV drama series. The writer of Everything Bad Is Good for You, Steven Johnson, even maintains that Lost is only possible **because of gaming.** Their makers are increasingly of the generation that have grown up with computer games. So too their newer, younger audiences.

Janet Murray, in Hamlet on the Holodeck, her extraordinarily prescient 1997 book on the possibilities of what she called cyber-drama, described the pleasures to be derived from games in this way: they "demand hundreds of hours of play, of mostly frustrating trial and error, to discover the way forward. Sometimes their secrets must be discovered outside the game, from magazines or by trading information with fellow players or perhaps by finding one's way over the internet to the right website or newsgroup. In the solutionless rhizome or the solvable maze, we are confronted with a world that lures us in with the promise of treasures, but that is chiefly designed to

resist our efforts."

And she goes on: "the labyrinth is tricky, full of dead ends, uncertainties, questions that do not resolve...the pleasure lies in the sustained engagement, the refusal of climax."

That process, and the games-based pleasures it provides, is one that would now be familiar to forensic fans of Lost and Heroes. But what about the narrative pleasures? Murray cites a game called MYST, which she regarded as the "most artistically satisfying of early '90's games".

The player's task was to rescue 2 brothers, each of whom warns us (the player) about the wickedness of the other. The player makes a choice as to which brother to rescue. He then follows clues in order to rescue the chosen brother.

But certain clues, skilfully interpreted, would have told you that their father, a good wizard was alive. Rescuing him, it transpires, is the only successful outcome of the game. Both brothers are in fact evil and rescuing either brother results in you, the player, swapping places with him. You are trapped forever in a dungeon. As a player you are immobilised.

As Murray points out, this speaks to the potential conflict between **story** satisfaction and **game** satisfaction. Being imprisoned is - from a game point of view - the "losing" ending. But from a narrative point of view (going back to my celebration of ambiguity a couple of weeks ago and stories that reflect an unjust and unpredictable world) it is arguably the most satisfying.

If games and TV drama are going to fuse - they're going to have to find a way of eliding their narrative satisfactions. The cul-de- sacs of games have no place in TV drama. Or do they? Take a look at this scene from The X-Files.

This comes from season 5 of the X-Files from an episode called Humbug . This clip starts at 22 minutes 43 and runs up to the end of the scene at 24 minutes 06. Here Scully is shown an old Barnum and Bailey exhibit...It is set up to be suspenseful and revelatory. At the end of a corridor is a trunk. Scully moves towards it slowly, opens it. Scary. It's.....empty.

That's fine for a gag in the middle of a single episode. But you wouldn't want to get through 5 or 6 series of a Lost or Heroes and find an empty box as your ultimate and long fought for solution to a "great unknown."

For those who don't know computer games well, the assumption in the world of TV drama has been that a possible convergence between TV drama and games would simply entail an offering to the viewer of narrative choices. Along the lines of should the X-Files' Mulder and Scully kiss; should Spooks's Adam Carter get blown up in a car bomb; should Life on Mars' Sam Tyler turn out to have really travelled back in time; should the Losties get off the island?

But games potentially offer something far more interesting than that, something much

more in keeping with the storytelling traditions of the novel, of theatre, of cinema and of TV drama itself. Think, for example, of a novel like Faulkner's As I I Lay Dying, with its multiple narrators; or plays like Ayckbourn's The Norman Conquests or Frayn's Noises Off, each with their 3 very different perspectives on the same sequence of events; or Kurosawa's movie Rashomon, each witness to a rape and murder having a slightly different take on the actions involved.

And then there's TV's very own 24, with its impression of parallel stories unfolding within a single, very tight timeframe.

This clip showed the split-screen effect used throughout the series of 24. You can see it in any episode, but this moment was taken from season 2, episode 1 from 48 minutes 41 to the end of the show where the clock comes up and continues its countdown. 4 screens, 4 characters, 4 separate, simultaneous bits of action.

In 24 the viewer has a strong sense that these character's lives are intertwined in a simultaneous, over-arching narrative, but as currently constructed that sense is all there is. Peep behind the arras, and in true Wizard of Oz fashion, there's nothing there. What you see is literally what you get, because that's all there is. Nothing else was ever filmed.

But forgetting the expense for the moment, what if you could choose which of the 4 or 5 strands you glimpsed there to follow at any given time? Stay with Jack Bauer? Shift your focus to the terrorists? To the US President? Or stay at the house with Bauer's daughter? The ultimate outcome would be the same; you would just take a different route.

And in so doing, you would be obviating Umberto Eco's fear that an interactive narrative (one offering choices) could never be satisfying because, in his words, "the charm of the text is that it forces you to face destiny."

In other words, its inevitability. But your journey through the story, a unique journey of your choosing to the same unalterable and therefore still inevitable endpoint, would be slightly different to anyone else's.

Mike Figgis made a movie a few years ago called Time Code. He shot it "live", in one take using 4 cameras, 4 parallel stories that converged on one another. He presented the film, like the clip you've just seen, locked into 4 equally sized screens for the entirety of the film. For cinema release, there was one fixed sound mix, so one narrative to follow. Figgis has subsequently given live shows of TimeCode, where he plays with the sound mix according to whim. Anyone watching that will see a quite different tale unfold to the original cinema release. It's exactly the same story, but with a different audio perspective. So, the story is both the same and very different.

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned a phrase Joseph Campbell had used, describing some of the constituent parts of great stories. He used the phrase "shape-shifting." I think this is what is happening to the best television stories now. They are changing shape. I believe this partly to be possible because of what I was talking about last

week, the fact that protagonists are needing to be more multilayered, so as properly to reflect a malleable and morally ambiguous world.

As James Woods observes of the modern novel in How Fiction Works: "this new approach to character meant a new approach to form. When a character is stable, form is stable and linear - the novelist begins at the beginning...But," he continues, "if character is changeable, then why begin at the beginning?" In other words, the nature of your characters impacts on the nature of your narrative structure.

Transmedia storytelling is multi-layered and multi-dimensional, and replete with thrilling possibilities. And they don't have to be confined to sci-fi or fantasy. They would work just as well for a soap. Or a domestic drama. Imagine, for example, a drama series telling the story of an extra-marital affair, its evolution and impact on those involved and those affected by it. Different pieces of its transmedia narrative might include the separate, but inter-connected and over-lapping points of view of the cheating husband, his very tricky lover and the understandably unhappy, betrayed wife. On YouTube could be the video diary of a child of the marriage who knows what's going on, but pretends not to at home. On Facebook the wife maintains a merry facade wholly at odds with the hideous reality of her crumbling life. A website offers the opportunity for viewers to interact - live and in real time - with the lover, an artificial intelligence construct called "psychotic girlfriend." I've talked to her friend Eliza. Quite a strange experience. That's just the beginning.

As Janet Murray observes: "The kaleidoscopic power of the computer allows us to tell stories that more truly reflect our turn-of-the-century sensibility." Because, she continues, "To be alive in the 20th century is to be aware of the alternative possible selves, of alternative possible worlds, and of the limitless intersecting stories of the actual world."

That said there are, naturally, some questions and dangers.

I've spent quite a lot of time over the past 4 lectures - yours and mine - extolling the virtues of writers, creative people who tell us these stories, which are themselves the products of immense talent and vast imaginative leaps. Are we, with all these opportunities for audience intervention, in danger of blurring the distinction between author and audience? Would that matter?

And 2 weeks ago I wrote in praise of ambiguity. Clearly there is a point where the sheer volume of available stories guarantees a level of ambiguity that may be deeply frustrating and anti-creative. Multi-layered drama opens up the possibility of stories with an infinite number of strands, with no beginning and no end. No amount of layers will ever be enough. No experience of it on the part of the audience can or will ever be satisfying. There's ambiguity and then there's just mess.

Great stories work because we are swept away by them, we lose ourselves in someone else's vision. How can we offer all these layers of additional experience without overwhelming the audience altogether, so defeating the purpose of the story, which is ultimately to entertain and engage?

The flipside is that, as with the fear-mongers of computer games, this fusion of drama and gaming becomes Huxley-esque: so immersive that it erodes what little sense the participant might have had of the boundaries between the real world and an imagined one.

Take a look at this extract from a short film made by a self-confessed video game addict.

The addict talks about games making him emotional, about the blurring of reality and fantasy, his immersion in an imagined world. The whole piece is only about 8 minutes long and is well worth watching in its entirety. Here's the link from which I took a clip which ran from 2 minutes 39 up to 5 minutes 02 - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IznAvaJb5Q

Those of you who have experienced Avatar in 3D will recognise that the immersive events he describes, stories that are capable of engaging the emotions as part game, part drama are not so very far away. They are certainly possible technically. A number of people have even reported feeling suicidal after seeing Avatar, so overwhelmed were they by the experience, and their inability to visit the planet Pandora. A common symptom reported by fans was the inability to separate fiction from reality. Type Avatar and suicide into Google. I'm not making this up.

We are rapidly training new generations to process information and sensory experiences, as well as cultural stimuli, in ways quite different from our own comfort zones.

Margaret Robertson gave a lecture 3 years ago called Games That Make Me Cry. It was in direct response to those who argued that games were somehow an inferior form of storytelling because they were incapable of generating emotional responses in their players that in any way equated to what novels, films or TV drama could do with their readers and viewers. She talks about playing a game called Okami. "It's uncommonly beautiful," she writes. "It tells the story of the sun god, Am-at-er-asu, who takes the form of a wolf ..." And she continues: "the bit I cried at had nothing to do with the story. Am-at-er-asu, as a god, has the trust of the other animals he meets. And the smaller animals, he can carry in his mouth.

It doesn't really do anything, it's just something that's possible. So a small water rat he'll pick up and carry like a puppy. But a bigger animal, like a small deer, he'll pick up by their back leg.

And that's it. That's all it took to make me cry. No narrative, no gameplay implications, just the wonder and beauty and delicacy of being in control of this extraordinary creature in this extraordinary world."

But it still comes down to the fact that we need stories that satisfy, that engage and entertain their audiences. And not everyone, now or in the foreseeable future, is going to want to take time away from work and family in order to be able to throw themselves down the infinite number of rabbit holes that transmedia storytelling potentially has on offer.

Maybe Janet Murray has it right when she says that stories will have to work for 2 or 3 kinds of viewer in parallel: as she puts it, "the actively engaged real-time viewer who must find suspense and satisfaction in each single episode and the more reflective long-term audience who look for coherent patterns in the story as a whole" and a third, emerging: "the navigational viewer who takes pleasure in following the connections between different parts of the story and in discovering multiple arrangements of the same material."

Good and bad news for Orwell, perhaps, but books may be going the same transmedia storytelling way. Good news, books are still here. Bad news, thanks to the iPad and related technologies, many of them will start to resemble the magical books in Harry Potter stories - complete with hypertextual links, multi-layered, 3D audio-visual content and music. When cameras enter the fray in the next generation, Big Brother won't need to ban books; Big Brother will **BE** the book.

Speaking for myself, someone with one foot at least still firmly in broadcast media, I have spent much of these past few weeks celebrating the virtues of ambiguity, of television fictions that are at least in part open-ended.

This new kind of transmedia storytelling, pioneered in TV drama series by a handful of visionaries seems entirely consistent with those values.

I look forward to more occasions when, to quote Janet Murray again, "the ending of a hyperserial would not be a single note, as in a standard adventure drama, but a resolving chord, the sensation of several overlapping viewpoints coming into focus." And as for whether we're immersing ourselves in this story on a TV screen, a computer, a phone, an iPad or something that isn't here yet, that's not really the issue.

Janet Murray again: "eventually all successful story-telling technologies become transparent: we lose consciousness of the medium and see neither print nor film but only the power of the story itself. If digital art reaches the same level of expressiveness as these other media, we will no longer concern ourselves with how we are receiving the information. We will only think about what truth it has told us about our lives." That seems a fine idea on which to end.