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Jason Mittell

*Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*. 2012; 6 (1), pp. 5-13

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# Playing for Plot in the *Lost* and *Portal* Franchises

JASON MITTELL

As an outsider to the game studies field, I am intrigued by how the topic of narrative exists in an almost quantum duality, both as the catalyzing question that galvanized the emerging field a decade ago, and as a marginal topic within ongoing research. This seminal “debate that never took place” seems to have unified game studies by isolating a major topic that is now deemed off the field’s research agenda (Frasca 2003; Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin 2003; Simons 2007). While I’m probably overstating the absence of recent work, when it comes to scholarship on games and narrative, it seems to me more likely to come from scholars outside of game studies (like myself) than established game scholars, further entrenching the split (real or perceived) between ludologists and narratologists. And thus we are left with the scenario where a scholar from a related field, in my case television studies, publishes in a game studies journal to discuss narrative.<sup>1</sup>

So I apologize in advance for making such a predictable move. However, I think that sometimes games themselves demand that we talk about narrative. Additionally, it becomes increasingly limited to analyze a game solely as a bounded textual object, as transmedia techniques have led to interesting overlaps in cultural norms, textual design, and fan engagement across normally distinct media, highlighting the need to think across ludic and narrative modes. Specifically, television programs such as *Alias* (ABC, 2001-06) and *24* (Fox, 2001-10) have used transmedia extensions to embrace a playful mode of engagement drawn from (and often directly through) videogames, while game franchises like *Halo* (Bungie, 2001) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) have employed transmedia to extend their storyworlds by expanding character depth, backstory, and world-building. Yet scholars typically treat such media as separate realms, with game studies and television studies isolated in distinct academic silos, despite the increasing blur between the media themselves (Evans 2011; McGonigal 2008; Örnebring 2007). In this paper, I attempt to traverse this scholarly divide, examining how gameplay and storytelling co-mingle in two very different franchises: the television series *Lost* and the game series *Portal*. Although certainly other case studies would point to different insights, these two examples are both regarded as innovators in both user/viewer engagement and narrative technique, and both were mainstream hits that fostered a cult-like devotion. In analyzing these two disparate transmedia franchises, I believe we can see a number of ways where issues of both play and narrative are foregrounded both textually and experientially, and that taken together we can begin to chart out a mode of ludic storytelling that transcends the false dichotomy between game and narrative.

Transmedia storytelling is a broad and debated realm of media practice, and space does not permit me to delve too deeply into those definitional nuances. In short, it is a realm of interrelated paratexts working together to create a narrative universe. In Henry Jenkins’s (2011) comprehensive and influential definition of the form:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get *dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels* for the purpose of creating *a unified and coordinated entertainment experience*. Ideally, each medium makes its own *unique contribution* to the unfolding of the story.

This definition of transmedia storytelling problematizes the hierarchy between text and paratext for our dual case studies: in a more balanced example, all texts would be equally weighted rather than one being privileged as “text” while others serve as supporting “paratexts.” However in the high stakes industries of commercial television and game design, financial realities demand that a franchise’s core medium be identified and privileged, typically emphasizing more established industries like television studios or game developers over newer modes of online textuality. Thus in understanding transmedia extensions based on a so-called “mothership” franchise from an established medium, we can identify the originating television or videogame series as the core text, with transmedia extensions serving as paratexts (Gray 2010).

### **Lost at Play**

We can see the centrality of the mothership in my first case study. *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) is one of television’s most groundbreaking serials, pioneering a mode of narrative complexity and innovative storytelling that has rarely been matched in any medium (Mittell 2006b; Mittell 2009a). The core premise, focused on a group of airplane passengers stranded on a remote island with hostile inhabitants and a mystical and conspiracy-laden backstory, lent itself to a wide-ranging storyworld with character backstories illuminated through flashbacks. *Lost*’s approach to transmedia storytelling is expansionist, extending the narrative universe not only across media, but introducing many new characters, settings, plotlines, time periods and mythological elements. While few viewers would accuse the television incarnation of *Lost* of being too simplistic in its narrative scope, the show used transmedia to extend itself into tales that surpassed the wide scope of the series itself. This expansionism led *Lost* to add to its six seasons of television with four alternate reality games, four novels, a console videogame, multiple tie-in websites and online videos, DVD extras, live events, and an array of collectable merchandise. Both due to its fantasy genre and its storytelling commitments to a create rich mythological universe, *Lost* is suited to this expansionist approach to transmedia, using paratexts to extend the narrative outward into new locales and arenas.

One of *Lost*’s chief storytelling strategies in crafting its transmedia narrative is positioning its fans as players instead of viewers. Games are a central theme and underlying story structure that runs throughout the show, ranging from the long con games played by Sawyer, Ben, and numerous others (and Others), to the ongoing game revealed in the final season between the island’s mythological entities Jacob and The Man in Black, embodied by a senet board but comprised of centuries of elaborate role-playing and strategizing with other people as pawns. The show created puzzles and games for its viewers to play within its diegesis, asking us to parse out meanings and decode narrative information from images like a hidden map on the back of a blast door in an underground bunker, or identify names written in chalk within a mysterious cave; such puzzling moments were embraced by what I have termed “forensic fans” who collectively worked to parse out answers (2009a).

Throughout all of these ludic moments within the show, there was an implied narrative payoff: the puzzles would uncover information that would heighten our narrative comprehension and reveal hidden truths about the storyworld. Thus while the show offered ludic engagement, it was framed within the narrative drive for mastery of the story (Jones 2008; Mittell 2009b).

*Lost*, in large part due to its expansionist use of transmedia, offered a wide range of genres, styles, and appeals simultaneously: a puzzling science-fiction mystery, a dimension-spanning romance, a rip-roaring outdoors adventure, and a religious parable about letting go of the past and finding fellowship and community. In the end, the show downplayed the puzzlebox trailheads it had left throughout its journey, and in doing so betrayed the expectations of many of its most hardcore fans. One of *Lost*'s biggest challenges has always been managing the rabid fanbase's divergent expectations. Fans were invested in a wide range of the show's narrative facets, from the complex mythology to romantic relationships, heady time-traveling sci-fi to adventure-driven action sequences. While at times fans split on the relative merits of particular plot lines, episodes, or characters, as a whole the show did an admirable job of servicing such a broad array of appeals and fanbases. A key strategy for accomplishing this storytelling breadth was to center the core television show around characters, their adventures and dramas, and how they encounter the mythology, and allowing the more in-depth mythological explorations and explanations to flower in transmedia properties.

Showrunners Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse have discussed in interviews and podcasts that they had a specific litmus test for what mythology to reveal and explore on the show itself versus in the transmedia extensions: if the main characters care about it, it will appear on the show; if the characters don't care, it will not.<sup>2</sup> While we can quibble as to how precisely they followed their own edict, it is instructive in establishing the show's orientation toward character-centered drama rather than mythological fantasy. The blast door map is a telling case: in the aftermath of "Lockdown," the episode where it appeared, the character John Locke cared deeply about the map, attempting to recreate the image and discover its secret. But by the end of the second season, Locke had seemingly moved on, we saw the origins of the map in a flashback, and the underground hatch was destroyed; the blast door map would not be directly referenced on the television series again. However, it would reappear in four subsequent paratexts, including the *Lost* jigsaw puzzles, the videogame *Lost: Via Domus*, a hidden poster in a DVD set, and in the official *Lost* magazine, each offering slightly different details and encouraging further forensic fan decoding. But to what ends? The transmedia versions of the map detach it from Locke's character motivations and the core island narrative events, making it a potentially fun puzzle to play with, but offering little storytelling payoff despite the promise of hidden mysteries and revelations.

The majority of *Lost*'s transmedia extensions prioritize storyworld expansion and exploration instead of building on the show's emotional arcs and character relationships, and in doing so, the franchise fails to create effective tie-in media properties designed to stand independently from the core series itself. This approach to transmedia is what I would call "playing for the plot": creating ludic moments of engagement that are primarily motivated by the promise of narrative information, but lacking the intrinsic pleasures of the tie-in medium. Thus console/PC game *Lost: Via*

*Domus* works to offer fans an opportunity to explore the island and play in the margins of core plot points from the series, but doesn't create its own compelling ludic experience—it's hard to imagine anyone who didn't actively watch *Lost* playing more than an hour of the dull gameplay. Likewise the show's four ARGs all promised some revelations or rewards to hardcore *Lost* fans, but all fell short of what ARG fans expect from the genre, lacking clever design, effective pacing, or engaging roleplay (Mittell 2006a).

As to the goal of revealing narrative mythology for the ongoing television series, the show's first and most extensive ARG, *The Lost Experience*, proved to be more frustrating than rewarding – the canonical narrative content was not sufficiently integrated into the television series as a whole, making some players feel like they had wasted their time on “trivia,” rather than getting a head-start on what was to come during *Lost*'s next seasons. No matter how enjoyable such games and extensions were to fans, they often fell short in rewarding the core edict of adding to the franchise's storytelling without taking away from the main television experience. One of the great contradictions of *Lost* is that the series built as robust of a mythological universe ever devised for television, but then undermined the importance of its own mythology by relegating many of its mysteries to transmedia extensions that it deemed as “bonus content” rather than core storytelling. The show was unmatched in its ability to posit mysteries and encourage fans to immerse themselves expansively into clunky alternate reality games and poorly paced videogames and novels with the hope of uncovering answers. Yet by the final season, the show offered emotional character resolutions and thrilling adventure storytelling, but left many mythological questions unaddressed within the television series itself or ambiguously vague in its answers. On its own, I think the emotional payoffs and sweeping character arcs suffice in the show's mission to engage and entertain a mass audience; however its use of transmedia and cultivation of a forensic fanbase encouraged us to expect more, leading many fans to revolt against the show in its final hours for not delivering its answers in a clearly marked package (Nussbaum 2010).

The show's producers seem to have anticipated this reaction, as they did create a package of answers for transmedia fans—the final season's DVD set included a much-hyped “mini-isode” serving as an epilogue to the series. The 12-minute video “The New Man in Charge” follows Ben in his role as Hurley's assistant, looking to “tie up loose ends” from the show; as Ben goes to Guam to shutdown a DHARMA Initiative supply station, one of the workers insists, “You can't just walk out of here. We deserve answers!” While this reflexive plea was filmed before the show ended, it mirrored the outcry of fans who felt their puzzles needed explicit solutions, which the epilogue provided in the form of another DHARMA Orientation video that explicated backstory about lingering mysteries including the “Hurley Bird,” the island's polar bears, and the mysterious Room 23. But despite the epilogue's playful tone, this information dump felt more like looking at the back of a puzzle book for solutions rather than rewarding revelations for good puzzle-solving. Thus we have the ultimate double-bind of *Lost*: the show's transmedia extensions foregrounded a mode of ludic engagement that celebrates puzzle solving, storyworld exploration, and vicarious participation, while the show's narrative resolution on television ran counter to these impulses by focusing the finale on its more typical storytelling realms of resolving character and relationship arcs, with a transmedia epilogue that did not seem to

satisfy forensic fans. Such divergent appeals and modes of engagement point to a danger of transmedia franchises in establishing wide-ranging appeals for fans with endings falling short of meeting all of their expectations.

What can game scholars learn from the transmedia experiments of the *Lost* franchise? While I don't think any of the show's ludic extensions can be seen as truly successful from either a gameplay or storytelling perspective, they do highlight the potential for coupling play and plot as a motivating factor to justify the inevitable tie-in games that most successful entertainment franchises are likely to generate, and potentially maximizing viewer engagement across media by creating ludic opportunities for fans. And perhaps they point to another way of assessing transmedia storytelling—instead of foregrounding the logic of plot coherence, transmedia can embrace gaming's pleasurable possibilities of immersive exploration of story spaces, providing opportunities for fans to inhabit fictional worlds without looking for clues to a larger narrative payoff (Jenkins 2003). Although *Lost* is an exceptionally broad and complex example of transmedia storytelling, it is typical in its structure of building ludic extensions off of a narrative core. But my second example reverses that hierarchy, with narrative branches coming from a game franchise.

### Plotting *Portal*

*Portal* (Valve, 2007) did not debut like a typical game franchise, as it was first released by Valve as a bundled extra in their *Half-Life* package The Orange Box. The game itself seems to avoid franchise logic, as it first appears to be an example of one of the least franchise-able genres, the puzzle game, with little narrative material—early gameplay is focused on the unique mechanic of the dual portal guns that allow the first-person avatar to navigate a generic lab space to accomplish clearly demarcated tasks. In the scholarly arguments over narrative and games, the puzzle genre is frequently hailed as the proof that gameplay trumps story via examples like *Tetris*, as the compelling mechanics of such games need no narrative frame to engage players. Evoking sports, another frequently cited genre of non-narrative games, Markku Eskelinen (2001) famously and provocatively staked out the extreme anti-narratological position by writing, “If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories.” But I would argue that this dismissively pithy phrase captures much of what makes *Portal* such a compelling experience on both ludological and narrative terms: midway through this puzzle game, the ball starts telling a story.

This unexpected shift in *Portal* is what elevates the game beyond just an engaging puzzler into a landmark of the medium: you slowly begin to realize that the game has been presenting a narrative throughout, even while you were primarily focused on the mechanics and puzzles. Even the most hardcore ludologist would (hopefully) admit that *Portal's* storyworld, characterization, and plot is more than just set dressing on a set of physics puzzles, but that the surprising integration of ludic and narrative experiences is the game's true genius and why it grew beyond its first release as a bonus extra into a top-flight transmedia franchise. And yet as Valve looked to extend *Portal* into the inevitable realm of sequels, it faced the challenge that its best twist was impossible to replicate, especially in the face of heightened

player expectations—*Portal 2* (Valve, 2011) was not about to take anyone by surprise.

For the sequel, Valve doubled down on the game's narrative elements, creating parallel narrative media experiences. The game of *Portal 2* itself is far more narrative-driven—protagonist Chell is back in the Aperture Science labs, looking to escape while foiling demented AI GLaDOS's quest for revenge. The first game was a simple head-to-head match between silent Chell and chatty GLaDOS, while the sequel adds two other characters to monologue at Chell; additionally, *Portal 2* offers a far more expansive exploration of Aperture Science's facilities and beyond, and many more plot twists and revelations in both past and present tense. Most interestingly for me, the game establishes character relationships where the first game had almost none—there was little explanation why GLaDOS wanted Chell dead aside from some faulty programming, so Chell herself was effectively a blank slate avatar with little motivation beyond escaping her captivity. In *Portal 2*, GLaDOS remembers Chell's previous crimes against Aperture, and far more is revealed and hinted at to suggest that Chell is not just a random test subject, but someone with deep ties to characters from Aperture's past. However, these relationships and backstories are not the ludic point of the game, as gameplay is still dominated by elaborate physics puzzles humorously undercut by mocking voiceovers.

*Portal's* second narrative thread as a transmedia franchise focuses directly on this backstory, filling out the history of Aperture and the assorted characters who appear in the games. This is most directly explored in the web comic *Portal: Lab Rat*, which introduces the character of Doug Rattmann, a mentally-unstable Aperture scientist who is revealed to be the author of the first game's graffiti informing us that the cake is a lie.<sup>3</sup> *Lab Rat* fills in narrative gaps between the two games by explaining how Chell got pulled back into Aperture and put in deep stasis, and foreshadows some of *Portal 2's* later narrative by introducing the morality core and highlighting elements of Aperture's history that are explored in the game. There is nothing essential about this narrative material, as both games can be fully enjoyed as stand-alone experiences without delving into this backstory, and as such, *Lab Rat* functions as a typical transmedia paratext that offers interesting but ultimately secondary storyworld depth.<sup>4</sup>

Even more interesting to me is how fans have taken to *Portal's* narrative universe to explore its gaps and mythology, creating a rich site of alternative gameplay. *Portal 2* and *Lab Rat* contain hints toward a backstory where Chell was the daughter of an Aperture employee, imprisoned at the lab after a disastrous Bring Your Daughter To Work Day, but the details are left vague and unspecified. A number of players, embracing the forensic fan approach common to *Lost* viewers, have analyzed and parsed the game and its transmedia paratexts to theorize about the storyworld's mythology, positing elaborate theories. For instance, reddit.com user Ryuker920 posted a lengthy illustrated theory that aimed to prove the following claim: "I believe that Chell was abandoned by her biological parents, Cave Johnson and Caroline, and adopted by the Ratman (Doug Hopper). Oh, and Doug's on the moon."<sup>5</sup> This post was followed by dozens of commenters engaging with these ideas and attempting to resolve the mysteries and ambiguities of the game's storyworld, and reconcile the numerous other theories circulating online.

Tellingly, the first comment after this lengthy post raises a key issue: “Interesting theories... I missed most of the significance of this in my playthrough.”<sup>6</sup> This question of gameplay significance is crucial. The *Portal* games do not demand that we master the narrative universe, but rather ask us to master the micro-spaces of each test chamber using our portal gun. Aperture’s mythology is often enjoyable but inessential window dressing on the gameplay, emerging at times to motivate powerful shifts in Chell’s mission but not part of the ludic puzzle logic, as the games provide their own essential narrative drive without requiring forensic fandom to parse out buried mysteries and ambiguities. *Portal*’s gameplay offers a type of puzzle logic that is bounded and tight, always requiring completion before advancing to the next level with singular, non-ambiguous answers. The mythological puzzles that Valve may have created in the game’s storyworld are fully optional, highly ambiguous, and ultimately not significant to the core ludic experience of the franchise. They are fun playgrounds for fan speculation, but enact a very different ludic experience from the games themselves; such playful excavation of the franchise’s storyworld can feed back into the core game for some players who play (or replay) the game for plot, discovering clues to the narrative puzzle more than solving the level’s physics puzzles and thus adding a layer of participatory engagement to the franchise. But they also potentially create frustrations for fans who want the definitive elegance of the game’s puzzle logic to carry over to its transmedia storytelling, instead of offering ambiguous mysteries with no clear payoff within the core game franchise—*Portal*’s transmedia extensions play for the plot in a manner similar to *Lost*, yet with different expectations and contexts for forensic fans.

So what do these dual case studies teach us about the intersection between storytelling and gameplay? These issues certainly need to be explored more broadly around both media, but I’ve identified a few key points to develop further out of these case studies. They both highlight a mode of ludic storytelling where playfulness is an important facet of narrative comprehension. They both demonstrate the lengths that fans will go to in the name of exploring the transmedia storyworlds of a beloved franchise, extending the time spent engaging with texts with forensic detail and ludic imagination. They also show the limits of attempting to play for plot, as the competing logics of gameplay and storytelling can fail to coalesce, especially when one mode is clearly privileged in the franchise’s mothership. Interestingly, either ambiguity or clarity can connect to each mode—for *Lost*, the television storytelling is more definitive and canonical than the transmedia play, while *Portal*’s puzzle logic seems more certain than the narrative ambiguities parsed out by transmedia fans. But despite each franchise’s limited success in merging the two modes, both highlight the intersection of storytelling and play as mutually reinforcing and potentially coordinated aspects of a transmedia franchise, often working in tandem to encourage fan engagement in a way that suggests the importance of thinking about narrative and gameplay as intertwined rather than competing impulses in media texts, and hopefully within media scholarship as well.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This essay was originally delivered as a talk at the FROG conference in Vienna, October 2011. It is written more as a work of critical analysis of games and television, rather than the more formal academic style typified by Eludamos.
- <sup>2</sup> Cuse and Lindelof made this statement frequently on their ABC-sponsored podcast, as well as in a personal interview with me, conducted 23 March, 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> *Portal: Lab Rat*, 2011, <http://www.thinkwithportals.com/comic/>
- <sup>4</sup> The other main transmedia elements, particularly an ARG promoting *Portal 2*'s release are less story driven, as they create puzzles for players to solve in order to be rewarded with the early release of the game rather than narrative revelations. Thanks to Alex Leavitt for sharing his expertise about *Portal*'s transmedia strategies.
- <sup>5</sup> "Theory on, well, everything. (With pretty pictures!)", [http://www.reddit.com/r/Portal/comments/gxr35/theory\\_on\\_well\\_everything\\_with\\_pretty\\_pictures](http://www.reddit.com/r/Portal/comments/gxr35/theory_on_well_everything_with_pretty_pictures), posted 26 April 2011, accessed on 12 October 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> Comment from username489, [http://www.reddit.com/r/Portal/comments/gxr35/theory\\_on\\_well\\_everything\\_with\\_pretty\\_pictures/c1r3iav](http://www.reddit.com/r/Portal/comments/gxr35/theory_on_well_everything_with_pretty_pictures/c1r3iav).