III. The Fictional Institutions of LOST:

World Building, Reality and the Economic Possibilities of Narrative Divergence

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In 'Tricia Tanaka is Dead' (3.10), castaway Hurley (Jorge Garcia) happens upon a mysterious, run-down van in the jungle and endeavours to coax it back to life. While Hurley lacks appropriate tools – much less replacement parts – to complete this task, the decades-old case of beer that he finds in the back of the van provides him the perfect enticement with which to enlist the help of fellow castaways Jin (Daniel Dae Kim) and Sawyer (Josh Holloway). Like many television programmes of the past, *LOST* chooses to disguise the corporate origins and brand identity of the beer-filled van that Hurley happens across. Though its unique shape betrays the van as a classic VW Bus, the iconic Volkswagen logo is replaced by the stark, black and white octagonal imprint of the fictional Dharma Initiative, the mysterious research group whose presence on the island has yet to be fully explained. Similarly, the Dharma logo marks the beer in the van as an off-brand – just as unrecognizable, unidentifiable and unconsumable by the viewer at home as the generic bottles of 'cola' and 'breakfast flakes' that might have sat on the kitchen tables of previous television families like the Bradys or Huxtables.

And yet, in the real world, removed from *LOST*'s monsters, mysteries and magnetic fields, these fictional imprints have taken on a cultural and economic significance that transcends similar generic status. Real people walk down the street wearing Dharma baseball caps, headed to work where they might drink coffee out of a Dharma-emblazoned mug and procrastinate by exploring the web space of the fictional Hanso Foundation that supposedly funds Dharma. Meanwhile, other fictional brands of consumables established on the series have bled into the real world; like Hurley, *LOST* viewers can now buy and eat Apollo candy bars.

Of course, only a very few allow the fictional institutions of *LOST* to so permeate their experience of the real world – those devoted fans willing to spend time and money on *LOST* merchandise. These specialized nodes for experiencing the *LOST* world undoubtedly capture added merchandising revenues for its producer-distributor ABC, but as a niche market (not even inclusive of all hardcore *LOST* fans), products marked with fictional imprints like Dharma, Hanso and Apollo seem inadequate and counterintuitive in the current broadcast television economy. As the bread-and-butter advertising revenues paid to US networks like ABC by *real* corporations becomes increasingly hard to come by (due to increasing competition between media outlets), commercial comedies and dramas have, by and large, moved to foreground those real corporations within the story itself. On other contemporary US prime-time serials, a beer-filled van would surely have presented not just impetus for character action, but also lucrative opportunities for product placement. The producers of *24* (Imagine Entertainment, 2001–), for example, repeatedly enter into contractual relations with automakers like Ford and Toyota, agreeing to outfit heroes like Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) exclusively with their products each season. *Heroes* (NBC Universal Television, 2006–) made a similar arrangement with Nissan, allowing Hiro's (Masi Oka) preference for the Versa to become a plot point in an early first-season episode. Programmes like *The 4400* (Renegade 83, 2004–) and *Entourage* (HBO, 2004) strike like deals with alcohol distributors such as Budweiser and Skyy Vodka respectively. Automobiles and alcohol, therefore, comprise only two of the innumerable markets that might seem to be product placement no-brainers.

So while Hurley takes full economic advantage of the van and the booze, the producers of *LOST* miss a similar opportunity. Would not Budweiser or Miller Genuine Draft have been thrilled to cough up some cash to be presented as the beer with the everlasting flavour to make such a satisfying reward for Sawyer? What automaker would not have loved to see a popular character like Hurley take so much interest in their van and ultimately use it to stage a heroic rescue in the subsequent season finale? Nevertheless, instead of building content around sponsors' brands, *LOST* emphasizes the assumedly less lucrative project of showcasing the fictional Dharma logo. Despite its non-existence in the 'real' world of global capital, Dharma has been emphasized diegetically as a brand of its own, with its imprint appearing throughout the second and third seasons of the series on consumable goods like wine, macaroni and cheese, cornflakes and composition notebooks. Apparently, Dharma makes and packages its own brands of durable and consumable goods, shutting out corporate suppliers from the real world. In the world of *LOST* the Dharma brand, not those of sponsors, takes priority.

Viewed with rose-tinted glasses, this failure to cater to real-world corporate sponsors could be ascribed to the producers' greater artistic commitment to establishing the enigmatic Dharma Initiative's prior presence and continuing impact on the island. Supposedly founded in 1970 by University of Michigan graduate students and the similarly fictional Hanso Foundation to conduct interdisciplinary scientific and social research across the globe, Dharma studied the castaways' island until the early 1990s, when a group of as-yet-unidentified hostiles violently drove them off. The series has used its trademark flashbacks to introduce a few characters that worked under the Dharma banner (like the mysterious name-changing doctor in the orientation films and Roger, the workman Hurley later finds dead in the van). Yet the castaways' interactions with the Initiative occur primarily at the institutional level: not through characters, but through the Dharma-constructed infrastructure of mysterious hatches, communication towers that promise contact with civilization, and food and supply provisions (that, as the episode 'Lockdown' (2.17) suggests, Dharma may continue to deliver, if only by automation).

Because Dharma manifests itself primarily as an institution, Dharma-brand products as shown in 'Tricia Tanaka is Dead' prove integral to the producers' plotting and world-building efforts. Marked goods like automobiles and alcohol render the faceless Dharma visually tangible as a narrative agent; the integration of real-world products instead would superficially trade story-world depth for a quick buck. Nor could producers easily have their cake and eat it too by stocking those Dharma hatches with name-brand products for the castaways to consume; while producers may have indeed recognized the potential for product placement inherent in the second season introduction of the hatches, the contingent, indefinite nature of the Dharma Initiative would mitigate its attractiveness to potential sponsors. The institution might seem a benevolent, utopian research group one day, but later plot developments could make it a villainous cabal bent on world domination – and few corporations want to be recognized as the official sponsor and supplier of evil. Dedication to deep transmedia storytelling and world-building ambitions, therefore, could rationalize *LOST*'s dismissal of product placement strategies embraced by other television series.

That explanation, however, ignores the economic realities of contemporary television, and the increasing extension of television and displacement of advertiser interest into the digital realm of the Internet and viral video. If so many other narrative series have taken on product placement as a means of funding production, how could *LOST* afford such dedication to the story alone? How were economic needs in a depressed advertising market alternatively met if, given the story the producers wanted to tell, product placement could not be relied upon as it has been in other narrative series? Could the generation of fictional, branded institutions like Dharma actually serve to satisfy those economic exigencies in another way?

To explore these possibilities, this chapter first investigates the economic factors driving *LOST* to experiment with new forms and strategies of promotion, storytelling and extension of fictional brands. What kind of revenue models prove necessary in a weakened broadcasting market in the USA? How do different television genres and modes of storytelling collaborate or confound those economic needs? Second, this chapter examines how branded fictional institutions on *LOST* like Dharma and Hanso have been constructed by producers and engaged with by audiences, both on television and across media platforms. How has the narrative divergence of *LOST* across a range of media introduced fictional brands within the spaces and experiences of everyday life? How do these fictional entities become truly *institutionalized* as structures with which audiences, not just characters, interact? Lastly, this paper explores how *LOST*'s institutional focus on fictional corporations could serve a counterintuitive economic end in an industrial moment where programmes must increasingly foreground real brands within their stories. How might institutionalized fictional brands be developed into alternative revenue models? Why would fictional corporations prove advantageous in making narrative series like *LOST* attractive to real corporate interests?

Ultimately, *LOST* strikes a unique relationship between fictional storytelling and 'reality' – both in the lived realm of everyday life, and the television genre in which non-traditional revenue models have thrived. By refusing to use real corporations in lieu of fictional institutions within the story, *LOST* erects a diegetic boundary that prevents it from following reality TV's lead in designing content around sponsors. In extending those fictional institutions across media and into the real world, however, everyday life overlaps the narrative of *LOST*, allowing real corporate institutions like Sprite and Jeep to become both producers of content and content themselves. *LOST* eschews the product placement of reality TV, but it has proven attractive to advertisers for offering fictional institutions with which real corporations can interface in the mediation of everyday life.

The Economic Challenges of Broadcast Television

The US television industry has undergone considerable transition in the last decade, with the networks increasingly reliant on the reality genre and, as a result, decreasingly investing in narrative properties like *LOST*. As Chad Raphael argues, reality television emerged in the 1990s as 'a cost-cutting solution' at a moment when media conglomeration changed the economics of production. Although the debt incurred by corporate expansion made conglomerates leery of heavy investment and deficit financing, the relaxation and eventual 1995 repeal of the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (which had previously prohibited networks from owning the series they distributed in prime time and sharing in subsequent off-network syndication revenues) incentivized increased in-house production. Cheaper reality programming thus fulfilled both needs.[1]

Similarly, Ted Magder suggests that the reality genre has introduced entirely new economic models to the television industry. Concerns about viewers skipping commercials via digital video recorders (DVRs) have required networks to respond to the changing needs of skittish advertisers: 'what reality TV and formats reveal most of all is that the traditional revenue model used to produce commercial television is becoming anachronistic. We are entering a new era of product placement and integration, merchandising, pay-per-view, and multiplatform content.'[2]

As feminist media critic Jennifer Pozner argues, product placement, or brand integration, 'is largely responsible for the reality-TV genre as we know it today, and not vice versa'. The networks followed the course set by programmes like *Survivor* (Mark Burnett Productions, 2000–), in which castaway contestants compete for products like Mountain Dew in immunity challenges, when they realized that instead of 'the network paying actors, advertisers would pay the network for a starring role'.[3] Though spot advertising persists for reality television in the USA, these programmes recall the days of single sponsorship prior to the quiz show scandals in the late 1950s; sponsors, their products and their iconic logos have literally becomes a part of reality TV programmes. On the ratings behemoth *American Idol* (Fremantle Media North America, 2002–) for example, judges drink from Coca-Cola glasses and sets feature Coke iconography. Simultaneously, finalists produce weekly music videos promoting Ford automobiles that appear during the episode. In exchange for this product visibility, Coke, Ford, and third major sponsor AT&T have paid the Fox network over $20 million each per year.[4]

In the wake of this reality wave and its new economic models, *LOST* must have seemed like a disadvantaged relic – it had all the castaways and tropical trimmings of something like *Survivor*, but with a diegetic boundary to keep sponsors products out of the story and confined to traditional ad spots. When Matt Roush praises

LOST in his review for *Broadcasting and Cable*, he singles out the programme for its lack of a franchise brand, lack of a formula, lack of big stars in a huge ensemble cast, and its very existence outside of the reality genre – all qualities that made *LOST* a *less* attractive product in the changing industrial climate.[5] The critical enthusiasm mustered by Roush followed in large part from *LOST*'s rejection of the strategies currently being experimented with to appeal to advertisers. However, in a new world where the resources needed to support traditional, more expensive fictional television had become increasingly scarce, *LOST* seemed like a dinosaur, albeit a narratively compelling one. Consequently, advertisers looked at *LOST* in its initial, single-platform configuration with disdain. As late as September 2004, just prior to the series' premiere, the trade journal *Adweek* lumped *LOST* among several scripted series described by media buyers as 'clunkers,' including such short-lived examples as *Father of the Pride* (Dreamworks Television, 2004–05), *Listen Up* (Regency Television, 2004–05) and *Center of the Universe* (CBS Television, 2004–05).[6]

While the report does not explicitly state how *LOST* earned this dubious distinction, shifting industrial attitudes and discourses over the past few years might account for the lack of advertiser interest. As one *Advertising Age* editorial puts it,

> Video is Killing TV … the ad industry is undergoing a semantic shift that's ousting broadcast TV as its central organizing principle. In its place, a more flexible notion of video is emerging … every ad agency is trying to structure itself to produce more digital content and escape the box of the 30-second-spot.[7]

Analysts predict heavy revenue losses in television's future as advertisers increasingly turn to media forms that enable them to connect with viewers outside the broadcasting context of the spot advertisement.[8] To stem this tide, broadcasting would have to adapt its operations to the new economic reality by sweetening the opportunities available to advertisers on television. The flood of reality shows that dominated network television development and scheduling prior to the scripted revival that arguably followed in *LOST*'s wake, therefore, can be seen as part of an industrial attempt to provide more flexible options to media buyers during this time of change. To advertisers in 2004, however, *LOST* offered not more flexibility, but more of the same.

World Building as Institution Building

Given the networks' increased doubts about the economic viability of scripted programming, *LOST*'s rejection of brand integration in favour of developing in-world fictional institutions like Dharma appears all the more bold – even counterintuitive – in the face of marketplace demands. Contextualizing *LOST* within larger creative and economic trends as well as in a longer history of world building, however, puts into historical perspective the series' attempts to create fictional institutions and then install them within the everyday realms of the real world.

LOST is certainly not the first television series to expend a great deal of energy extending elements of its narrative not just across media platforms, but also into the spaces and experiences of everyday life. Christopher Anderson argues, for example, that the *Disneyland* television series (Walt Disney Productions, 1954–90) worked to enhance Disney's theme park operations by blurring the line between programme and place to create an inhabitable textual space coterminous with consumers' everyday lives:

> Whereas traditional notions of textuality assume that a text is singular, unified, and autonomous, with a structure that draws the viewer inward, Disney's television texts were, from the outset, fragmented, propelled by a centrifugal force that guided the viewer away from the immediate textual experience toward a more pervasive sense of textuality, one that encouraged the consumption of further Disney texts, further Disney products, further Disney experiences.[9]

Disney characters and stories were not confined to closed texts, but began to seep into the lived spaces of consumption and tourism. Rather than draw the consumer into the Disney world, the Disney world was propelled outward into the real world of the consumer.

More recently, Jeffrey Sconce has identified in the television industry of the 1980s and 1990s an increased attention to what he calls 'world building', the construction of complex narrative universes that use the relative diegetic depth of episodic television to cultivate new forms of audience engagement in an increasingly fragmented and competitive media marketplace.[10]

Examining similar trends in the 1990s, Kurt Lancaster examines how the series *Babylon 5* (Babylonian Productions, 1994–98) manifested itself as a concrete universe, or 'imaginary entertainment environment', where television textuality spilled not only into ancillary markets, but also into the spaces of everyday life. The diegetic depth of the series lent itself to deployment across media platforms via licensed card games, for example, which in turn gave a physical tangibility to the diegesis as a real place in which viewers could perform roles and take actions through play.[11] Similar arguments have been made by Janet Murray, who predicts that the increasing marriage of television and new media forms will lead not only to more complex narrative worlds, but simultaneously to a greater opportunity to occupy 'a contiguous virtual space and experience events, in persona, that are also happening to the characters in the series'.[12] *LOST*'s attempts to spill its narrative institutions into the spaces of the everyday might indeed substantiate Murray's predictions, but these textual structures are part of a much larger historical trajectory of dispersing the television world into other texts and experiential contexts.

To understand the serial storytelling of Lost – and push further our understanding of its 'narrative complexity' – we need to examine the aggregate interrelationships and narrative structures not just between television episodes, but also across media platforms and spaces of consumption.[13] The experiences of narratives and the fictional institutions contained within them will change as serial television content moves out of the box sitting in the living room and across a range of media platforms and spaces. These exchanges and extensions between television and digital platforms have been discussed variably by media scholars as 'overflow',[14] 'hyperseriality',[15] and perhaps most prominently by Henry Jenkins and others as 'convergence

... the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want'.[16]

While these perspectives offer useful lenses for conceptualizing contemporary television's presence across a variety of media platforms, the articulation of such 'transmedia storytelling'[17] to the new aesthetics of digital culture potentially limits our comprehension of shows like *LOST* in at least two significant ways. First, we might miss not only the non-digital historical precedents for world building across media, but also the way in which old, analog media maintain a persistent importance in contemporary convergence narratives: as we will see, print media like newspapers and paperback novels play an important role in the transmedia network of a property like *LOST*. Second, the metaphor of convergence threatens to obscure the way in which the serialized, cross-platform structure of *LOST*'s narrative simultaneously constitutes a coordinated narrative *divergence*. Instead of converging into a single, digital medium, the piecemeal narrative of *LOST* must be parsed together from clues dispersed across a series of media. In the same tradition of the Disney textuality of the 1950s, the divergence of the fragmented text across media platforms enables it to pervade everyday space and experience. In its participation in convergence culture, *LOST* is not a singular televisual narrative, but a manifold, multiplatform, divergent narrative often experienced outside of television or any single medium. Given that dispersed textuality is an historical phenomenon, are *LOST*'s current experiments with the fictional Dharma's pervading everyday space in a manner similar to real institutions nothing new?

The fictional television world of *LOST*, like the real world, is structured by institutions. The actions that characters take occur in a world in which regular institutional bodies appear and reappear as fixtures of everyday life; from Oceanic Airlines to the Apollo candy bar, there are companies and products with recognizable images and logos that pervade the fictional world of *LOST*. While only introduced at the beginning of the second season, the fictional Dharma Initiative, funded by the philanthropic Hanso Foundation, has become a pillar of *LOST* mythology and a central site of ongoing narrative enigma. In the third season, increasingly important alongside these institutions became corporate entities like the Widmore Corporation, the company run by the father of Desmond's long-lost love, and Mittelos Bioscience, the company that purportedly recruited Juliet to conduct fertility experiments on the island on behalf of the Others. These organizations have their hand in everything that has occurred in the series, either directly or indirectly, and as such provide a consistent backbone to support the entire *LOST* universe.

The mystery of the island is in large part an institutional mystery – what is it that attracted these institutions to the island, what did these entities do with all those hatches once they got there, and what role, if any, might these institutions have played in bringing the castaways to the island? The ubiquitous nature of these institutions in the *LOST* universe is such that they pervade the narrative even in episodes that are not purportedly 'about' them, often buried in the visuals of the *mise-en-scène*. If we look closely enough, we see that it is Widmore Labs, for example, that not only built or sponsored Henry Gale's hot air balloon, but also manufactured the pregnancy tests taken in several different episodes by Sun (Yunjin Kim), Kate (Evangeline Lilly) and Juliet's sister Rachel (Robin Weigert). *LOST* has become famous for the interconnections between its characters (we learn, for instance, that the fathers of both Jack (Matthew Fox) and Kate have played crucial roles in the lives of other castaways) yet less noticed is that these character relations all occur within a similar network of institutions. The series acquires depth and coherency as a narrative universe – what Matt Hills calls 'hyperdiegesis' – in large part because of the omnipresent nature of these reappearing and very visible institutions. These structural entities glue *LOST* together as 'a vast, detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension.'[18] Much of the *LOST* universe remains unseen, but the institutional nexus of Oceanic, Dharma, Hanso, Mittelos, Widmore, Apollo, *et al.* suggests its extensive expanse. The world-building project of *LOST* is very much an institution-building project.

This alone does not distinguish *LOST* from other 'cult' television series that could also be described as hyperdiegetic. Institution building has played a large role in the *Star Trek* franchise, for example, in which it is the specific, recognizable institutionalism of Starfleet – its command structures, Prime Directive, uniforms, and insignia – that allows different sets of characters operating in different time frames and parts of the galaxy to be understood as part of the same narrative universe (rather than the same genre writ large). The mythology of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Mutant Enemy, 1997–2003) is similarly dependent on the institution of the Watcher's Council that has trained female slayers since the beginning of recorded history. More recently, *24* (Imagine Entertainment, 2001–) has pushed the creation of fictional institutions in more civic-minded, almost mundane, directions, generating a narrative playground for itself by constructing new law enforcement agencies like the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) that can interact with recognizable, real-world institutions like Homeland Security and the Office of the President.

Unlike *Star Trek*, the hyperdiegetic space *24* constructs overlaps and intersects with the real-world institutions that structure the everyday lives of audiences. This is a significant development in world building, blurring the boundaries between hyperdiegetic and everyday space. *LOST*'s institutions may be fictional, but like those of *24*, they prove more compatible with mundane, everyday institutions. Yet if *24* offers a civic-minded hyperdiegesis, *LOST* provides a more corporate-minded set of fictional institutions, joining series like *Angel* (Mutant Enemy, 1999–2004), *Arrested Development* (Imagine Entertainment, 2003–06), and *The Office* (BBC, 2001–03) that have created fictional companies like Wolfram and Hart, the Bluth Company and Wernham-Hogg, respectively, to support narrative worlds fundamentally structured by corporate culture. *LOST's* significance lies in its development of a set of fictional institutions that can interact with the non-fantastic, mundane, corporate institutions of everyday life, a capacity that gives the fictional institution-building project of *LOST* greater economic viability in the current television market. While the fictional institutions of *Star Trek* have certainly contributed to the generation of countless billions of dollars for that franchise, the institutions of *LOST* establish that fictional universe as one coterminous with our own, in which real corporations too can become key institutional players.

Bringing Sponsors into Production and into the World

LOST continues a historical trajectory of pervasive, divergent, hyperdiegetic textuality that allows narrative spaces to spill into the spaces of the everyday, but it does so in a way specifically adapted to a shifting television economy in which the economic viability of lavish narrative programming has come into question and opportunities for sponsor participation in the story world have become increasingly advantageous. While producers and executives certainly did not transform *LOST* from a single-platform television series into a multiplatform, divergent narrative *solely* for economic reasons, this development, regardless of its creative motivation, helped to make this 'clunker' into a cherry more attractive to media buyers.

Prior to the 2004 premiere, ABC increased *LOST*'s public visibility by experimenting with new promotional strategies: as one trade article put it, the decline of broadcast viewership meant that networks could 'no longer depend solely on promoting their new shows with their own on-air promotions, as they need to reach people who aren't watching TV'.[19] Lagging behind in the ratings, a desperate ABC hired a number of specialized marketing firms to help it find creative ways to connect content with viewers. One of the resultant campaigns designed for *LOST* targeted vacationers by leaving messages in bottles on sandy beaches. This campaign first moved *LOST* into the realm of the everyday, taking its promotions off air and into the spaces in which vacationers – indeed a valuable market to tap – relaxed away from the television set. By moving the series' castaway theme to physical spaces, these bottles created exposure and additional media coverage in the press. Simultaneously, *LOST* promoters experimented with websites positioned as non-fictional, including an official site for Oceanic Air and a fan page for the diegetic band Drive Shaft. Due to the overall effectiveness of this summer campaign and *LOST*'s unexpected ratings success in the fall, executives expected to see similar non-traditional marketing campaigns follow, hoping to get audiences to 'stumble' upon programmes when away from the television.[20]

Thanks to that surprising performance, media buyers immediately began to re-evaluate the cool reception they had given *LOST*. That success enabled ABC to use *LOST* as a pathfinder for developing new kinds of revenue models around fictional programming. In 2005, *LOST* was among the first fee-based television content available on iTunes, and by 2006, ABC was using the series as a draw for its experimental distribution of free, ad-supported content online.[21] Based in part on the strength of *LOST*, ABC was able to attract ten sponsors to the trial, in which viewers would be given the choice of viewing a traditional spot, or playing an advertiser-sponsored game in exchange for viewing an episode.

Despite this success, *LOST* itself remained the sugar that made the bad medicine of advertisements tolerable. While advertiser-sponsored games may indeed have been fun, the pleasures of *LOST* itself remained cordoned off from sponsors' products by the diegetic boundary between its narrative world and the advertising and promotional apparatus – unlike the attractive integration offered by reality TV. *Survivor*'s castaways competed for Mountain Dew, while *LOST*'s castaways remained removed from the extra-diegetic world of sponsoring products like Sprite. In spot advertisements, sponsoring products remained external to the content desired by audiences. Though the network could force advertisement viewing in these experimental online venues, the popularity of *LOST* with DVR users sustained the economic disadvantage of spot advertisements.

DVR viewing exacerbated the need to develop alternatives to traditional broadcasting revenue models: though *LOST*'s status as the fourth-most DVR-ed programme in 2005 signalled its popularity with technologically elite audiences, it also suggested that advertising time purchased during *LOST* was among the most at risk of being skipped by viewers. As Jim Edwards points out in *Brandweek*, though product placement appears most ubiquitously in reality TV (designed to thwart commercial skippers) and is used most ubiquitously in reality series, no reality series ranks among the top ten most DVR-ed programmes, so advertisers would benefit more from placing products in scripted series. However, as Edwards argues, scripted television is too much of a battleground: 'writers, producers, networks, directors, and talent all have to be taken into account before a brand can appear'.[22] In the words of one executive: 'It's not like in reality where any brand or any product will do.'[23] To stand on equal footing with reality TV's attractiveness to media buyers then, *LOST* needed to find the right brand.

Unfortunately, the literal isolation of *LOST*'s setting and characters from corporate brands and consumer lifestyles made this a tall order. Because the *LOST* narrative lacked any kind of institutional connection to the real world, there was no point of entry for any potential sponsor. So while the introduction of Dharma and Hanso may have emerged in response to storytelling needs, it had the pleasing side effect of allowing the series to support a brand of its own – a fictional institution that could serve as an intermediary, an interface, between the story world of the show and the corporate world of sponsors and consumers. As early as November 2004, the producers were promising a revamped, 'considerably different' season two.[24] When those changes arrived the next October, the series' focus shifted away from life on the beach to the castaways' discovery and operation of a series of underground installations left behind by the mysterious Hanso Foundation and Dharma Initiative. Ultimately, along with 'a whole new set of questions to ponder',[25] these institutions gave *LOST* a connectivity to the realm of global institutions that, however fictional, enabled the series to bring down the diegetic boundaries between narrative and marketing.

The capability to bring down those boundaries, however, did not automatically generate sponsor interest. With little creative control over the long-term development of Dharma and Hanso on television, direct interface with those fictional institutions remained a dicey proposition for potential sponsors. Yet if the institutional umbrella of Hanso and Dharma widened to encompass experiences in media spaces outside of television that sponsors *could* more handily control, creative and economic relationships between the fictional institutions of *LOST* and the corporate institutions of sponsors would become more tenable. If their institutional imprint exceeded the bounds of television, Hanso and Dharma could interact and have business relations with other real-world institutions in the spaces *outside* of television less centrally controlled by television writers. So following the start of the second season in fall 2005, Coca-Cola and three other sponsoring partners joined ABC to develop a viral marketing campaign that would transform *LOST* from a single-platform television narrative into a divergent set of media experiences. The idea was to make brands like Coca-Cola's Sprite into key players in a mystery strewn across media platforms, integrating those brands into the expanded *LOST* narrative.[26] This is not to suggest that *LOST* found a means of generating more revenue streams than through product placement. Instead, through the expansion of the hyperdiegetic into the realm of the everyday, *LOST* discovered a means of maintaining sponsor interest in expensive, expansive narrative television by setting a place for corporate marketers both within the sphere of production and within the story itself.

The resultant, coordinated transformation of *LOST* from a television text to a divergent, multiplatform launched as the alternate reality game (ARG) 'The *LOST* Experience' in the summer of 2006. The primary narrative function of the game was to explore enigmas that had accrued over the course of two seasons – what did the mysterious 4-8-15-16-23-42 number sequence mean, and, most importantly, how was it connected to the institutional presence of Dharma and Hanso on the island? But rather than answering these questions in a direct, narratively linear manner, the ARG buried the extended *LOST* narrative amid a range of consumption experiences through the careful coordination of content deployed successively through television and newspaper advertisements, public appearances, corporate websites, published novels, podcasts, guerilla video, and even candy distribution. To piece the narrative together over the course of the summer, viewers would have to pool their collective intelligence and talents.[27] This coordinated multi-platform deployment of content positioned the viewer not as an external spectator looking in on the story, but as a resident situated within the diegetic universe in which that story unfolded. The game hailed the viewer-player as an investigator of the mysterious Hanso Foundation and Dharma Initiative, inviting them to look for clues amid advertisements and promotions that they experienced as a quotidian part of everyday life, not as part of a televisual narrative diegetically bound off from it.

Experiencing *LOST* outside of television, therefore, simultaneously meant moving *inside* its narrative world. The fictional institutions Hanso and Dharma, not fictional characters or narrative threads, enabled viewers to experience everyday life as part of the *LOST* hyperdiegesis – not just in the digital realm, but across a range of mediated experience. Advertisements supposedly paid for by the Hanso Foundation aired during ABC programmes, pointing viewers to the Hanso website where they could search for clues on a site that hailed them not as *LOST* viewers, but as web surfers sharing the Foundation's philanthropic interests. Print advertisements begged newspaper readers to discount claims made about Hanso by the tie-in novel *Bad Twin*. As the game continued, digital podcasts and guerilla videos emerged, purporting to reveal to the public the truth about the real Hanso Foundation – but they did so in concert with analog content deployed throughout everyday mediated spaces.

Staged public appearances on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* (Jackhole Industries, 2003–) and at the San Diego Comic Con even went so far as to purport that while *LOST* was fictional, the Hanso Foundation had a real history worthy of both cover-up and investigation. At Comic Con, 'Rachel Blake' (the anti-Hanso guerilla blogger), interrupted the producers' discussion of the show and attacked the writers for their complicity with a real-life Dharma–Hanso agenda. The producers played along with the fantasy, not denying the real-life existence of such fictional institutions, but quashing her conspiracy theory by claiming that they took dramatic license in their portrayal of them – a response met tersely by Blake: 'you're liars. You're promoting them as some kind of force for good. But they're not.' If Comic Con brought these institutions into the spaces of reality by attacking them, Jimmy Kimmel did so by defending them, giving airtime to 'Hugh McIntyre,' the communications director for Hanso. Framed as a public relations intervention, McIntyre claimed that 'the writers and producers of

LOST have decided to attach themselves to our foundation'. Promoting Hanso's major projects around the globe, McIntryre admitted that Dharma 'was a real project', but that 'it's just not true, the way [*LOST*'s producers are] colouring the project'. Both the Comic Con and *Jimmy Kimmel Live* incidents contrasted *LOST*'s fictional status with the purported real-life existence of Dharma–Hanso, constructing them as bigger and more real than the television programme from which they originated.

Without a doubt, the fact that these new web portals, printed products and promotional appearances could network across distribution outlets owned by Disney, the parent company of ABC, presented an opportunity for classically synergistic revenue multiplication. The appeal of a single property like *LOST* could be used to generate sales of other Disney-owned books, ratings for other Disney-owned television programmes, and hits for other Disney-owned web spaces. But it was the institutionalization of *LOST* across the spaces of everyday life that presented further economic possibilities.

As Marie-Laure Ryan claims, the careful construction required of narrative becomes all too fragile and chaotic when too many interactors have the ability to impact an interactive story.[28] It would be nearly impossible for an ARG like 'The *LOST* Experience' to construct any kind of meaningful interactive narrative in which all participants could be friends with Jack, Sawyer and Kate without sacrificing the agency of those participants in the story world. But by shifting the focus away from characters and towards institutions, the ARG sidestepped these obstacles, generating larger infrastructures that could be effectively shared by a wider range of participants. Players need not encounter familiar *LOST* characters to know they inhabit the *LOST* world, because they interact with it through their shared institutional experiences. Just as Jack, Kate and Sawyer live in a world structured by Dharma and Hanso, so too do the players of the *LOST* ARG. Television characters and ARG players have separate experiences and encounters, but they all occur within the same institutional superstructure. However, perhaps most importantly for the argument forwarded here, the manner in which the institutions of *LOST* decentralize the narrative world (no longer dependent on the central stories represented by Jack, Kate and Sawyer on the island) simultaneously decentralizes the creative power of constructing that world. Not only do these fictional institutions allow viewers to operative narratively within the *LOST* universe, but they also provide an interface with which other cultural institutions might enter the story as both content and producers of that content.

Over the course of the second season, the development of 'The *LOST* Experience' moved beyond synergistic Disney tie-ins, reaching out to other corporate interests that could partner with ABC to take advantage of the blurred line between *LOST*'s institutions and the institutionalized spaces of everyday life. In interacting with the Hanso Foundation and Dharma Initiative as if they were real, viewer-players easily entered into a narrative space that would accept the sponsors affiliated with those institutions as legitimate players and sources of narrative detail. Instead of asking viewers to play as compensation for being granted access to the *LOST* universe, Sprite-based games could now be played from *within* the *LOST* universe by consumers play-acting as corporate-investigating, culture-jamming hackers. Similarly, Sprite's 'Sub-lymonal' television commercials ceased to be advertisement, and became potential sources of narrative revelation to be mined for clues to *LOST*'s enigmas. *Monster.com*, a website that allows users to browse job listings and post their own resumes, also participated in this institutionalization of the Hanso Foundation, listing Hanso job openings throughout 'The *LOST* Experience'. In doing so, the corporate operations of *Monster.com* became narratively operative as a source of information about Hanso's hiring practices.

Even more adeptly, the web of clues and narrative threads offered that summer by 'The *LOST* Experience' directed viewer-players to an official Jeep website, where nosy visitors could exploit a convenient security lapse and pry through corporate documents that detailed the relationship between Hanso, Dharma and Daimler Chrysler. Daimler Chrysler literally became a player in the narrative as the unwitting supplier of the Jeep Compass vehicles used by Hanso to illegally transport human organs in South Africa. Examining the evidence exposes us to the new Compass schematics, but also gives the corporation a chance to distance itself from the nefarious schemes of Hanso. The fake memos hidden on the site could take the time to make it clear that while Chrysler did supply Hanso with top-quality merchandise, the automaker would never knowingly aid and abet human organ trafficking. As a partner in ABC's institutional deployment of *LOST* across media platforms, Jeep marketers enjoyed a decentralized creative control unavailable on traditional narrative television written under the aegis of a writing staff. Able to frame its own operations in interaction with Hanso, Jeep could shape its association with this fictional corporation as much or even to a greater degree than it could with product placement. When narrative encompasses the corporate realm of everyday life, the economic exchanges between viewer and advertiser can take place in the context of the narrative. As a report in *Advertising Age* explains, 'The *LOST* Experience' provided the 'must-see, bite-sized content … [that] … advertisers have been seeking as the world of multi-platform programming explodes'.[29] By tying its fictional institutions to those of reality, *LOST* was able to refit narrative television for integrated marketing in the age of reality TV, moving brand integration outside of the fictional and into a space sponsors could control.

In institutionalizing the Hanso Foundation and Dharma Initiative, however, *LOST* not only created a space for the integration of sponsors' brands, but it also created a brand for itself that it could begin to leverage on its own. As with many series, ABC markets products stamped with the *LOST* logo that acknowledge the fictional status of the series itself; but alongside these more traditional merchandising efforts have arisen a supplementary line of products that, like the *Jimmy Kimmel* and Comic Con appearances, position fictional institutions as bigger and more real than the fiction from which they came. Yet while those appearances might be best described as promotion, these product lines generate revenue in their own right. While currently limited in scope, a line of Dharma-branded merchandise has emerged that perpetuates the illusion of the institution's reality and maintains its presence in the spaces of everyday life. On *ABC.com*, one can buy not just Dharma-branded T-shirts and hats that increase the institution's presence in quotidian life when the user wears them, but also Dharma-brand composition books (just like those used in the Pearl station!). The fact that these composition books come in a set of three suggests that while severely overpriced – $14.95 for the set, plus shipping – they are packaged for eventual consumption, designed to be used and replaced. While a relatively obscure tie-in product, these notebooks constitute a significant step in tie-in marketing: these are not just *LOST* collectibles, but a line of consumable goods sold on the brand name of Dharma.

While it may seem far-fetched to imagine the actual distribution and marketing of Dharma beer, macaroni and automobiles, the potential for further mobilization and capitalization on the Dharma brand seems conceivable – especially as other series such as *The Office* (Reveille Productions, 2005–) continue this trajectory by selling Dunder Mifflin T-shirts and paper products. Indeed, in 2007 industry analysts increasingly began to consider the merits of this kind of 'reverse product placement', in which marketers 'create a fictional brand in a fictional environment and then release it into the real world'.[30] Analysts are still unsure of the mass-market potential for reverse product placement, but consider the possibility that it could be most cost effective to launch a product through fiction than typical advertising and marketing channels. The Dharma brand may only be used to sell T-shirts and notebooks at the moment, but the possibility remains that it, and other fictional brands like it, might yet become greater sources of institutionalized revenue in their own right.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *LOST* represents the dissolution of boundaries between diegetic space and the space of consumption, allowing narrative, promotion and advertising to overlap. Mike Benson, ABC's senior marketing vice president, suggests that the industry look at marketing

> more like content … If we can take the program, explore the stories and perpetuate the mystery … and people can share this stuff, it furthers the relationship with the audience. We're crafting content, and we work with the sales departments and integrate them with the original marketing materials.[31]

While *LOST* heralded a narrative resurgence on US network television to counter the trend toward reality, it simultaneously succeeded in integrating the spaces of narrative, marketing and everyday reality. On television, fictional institutions like Dharma, Hanso, Widmore and so many others serve as the diegetic glue binding together networks of interrelated characters and actions. But when *LOST* diverges as a narrative, moving away from television and into other media and spaces of everyday life, those institutions begin to structure more than just the lives of television characters.

When fictional institutions like Dharma or Hanso become part of quotidian existence, quotidian activities can be subsumed underneath their institutional umbrellas: the actions of audiences and their movements between different platforms of media experience can now take place within the hyperdiegetic world. This is not, however, just a curious evolution in televisual form, but it is also a significant economic development, as the blurred boundaries between narrative consumption and the institutionally positioned experiences of everyday life make sponsors a part of the story world. Real-life corporations that enter into economic relations with fictional institutions can become a creative part of the everyday *LOST* experience. The Dharma–Hanso complex may not be as real as Jeep, *Monster.com* or Sprite, but its institutional relationships with them and to consumer life have increasingly become quite real.

Notes

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5 Matt Roush, 'Lost and found! An original idea', *Broadcasting and Cable* cxxxiv/41 (11 October 2004), p.44.

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10 Jeffrey Sconce, 'What if? Charting television's new textual boundaries', in Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (eds), *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp.94–5.

11 Kurt Lancaster, *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p.30.

12 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p.264. By suggesting viewers can experience events in persona, she suggests that viewers can themselves be represented by some kind of avatar in the narrative world.

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17 Jenkins: *Convergence Culture*, pp.20–1.

18 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.137.

19 Claire Atkinson, 'Networks add alternatives to traditional on-air promos', *Advertising Age* lxxv/25 (21 June 2004), p.6.

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