Playing for Plot in the *Lost* and *Portal* Franchises
Jason Mittell
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.¹

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 it 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
caracter 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 mythical entities Jacob
and The Man in Back, 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. 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 mythical 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-sode” 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 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.³ *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.⁴

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.”⁵ 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.” 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 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 franchises’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.

References


### Games and Series Cited

- **ABC (2004-10)** *Lost* (Broadcast television; DVD; ARG; websites)
- **Valve (2007)** *Portal*. (Xbox 360)
- **Valve (2011)** *Portal 2*. (Xbox 360; web comic)

### Notes

1. 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.

2. 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.


4. 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.
