Dickens on *Lost*: Text, Paratext, Fan-based Media

Steven E. Jones
Loyola University Chicago

In an extreme close-up a man suddenly opens his eyes and finds himself lying in a tropical jungle, in a suit and tie. He gets up, runs out of the trees, and discovers (in a wide shot) that he is the victim of a major disaster: flaming wreckage, dead and survivors scattered on a tropical beach, a massive jetliner engine towering above the scene, still roaring. After a few seconds, the man starts tending to the wounded and the dead.

This is the way the pilot for ABC's hit TV show *Lost* opened. Watched by over 18 million viewers in fall, 2004, the show went on to win awards and high ratings, as well as a dedicated cult following; the second-season premiere was watched by over 20 million. In a cross between *Survivor* and *Twin Peaks*, the story follows the forty-eight survivors on what looks at first like a desert island. A multithreaded serial narrative mixes science-fiction mythology and crisscrossed character relationships (some told in extensive flashbacks) across long story arcs, using frequent cliffhangers and game-like clues and puzzles. Dedicated viewers watch in order to solve the puzzles and, like the castaways, figure out what's really happening on the island. This is exactly the kind of television narrative that Steven Johnson sees as ascendant in recent media. From such anomalous cult favorites as *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) to the recent *The West Wing, The Sopranos*, and *24*, Johnson traces what he thinks of as a "sleeper curve" of increasing narrative complexity in many mainstream entertainments. Part of the appeal of such shows, according to him, is the formal demand that viewers follow "densely interwoven" serial plots over the course of several seasons. They depend on the viewer's "making sense of information that has been either deliberately withheld or deliberately left obscure" (63).

Scholars of nineteenth-century literature will recognize Johnson's precedent in earlier narrative engagements, the popular fiction of Charles Dickens, in particular, or the sensation novels with which they shared an audience. Victorian readers also took pleasure in following multi-threaded serial narratives in order to resolve mysteries or fill in withheld meanings, in highly complex interactions that Karl Kroeber describes as an "ecological" system of feedback loops. Steven Johnson, having studied Victorian literature, recognizes the precedent. "Indeed," he says, "Dickens helped to invent some of the essential conventions of mass entertainment—large groups of strangers united by a shared interest in a serialized narrative—that we now take for granted" (133-34). However, in comparison with the mass-media audience of 20 million viewers (Johnson, 135), Dickens's audience was small and select (he usually sold about 50,000 copies of a novel). Johnson suggests provocatively that video games are interestingly comparable "mass successes," which like Dickens's novels, "are si-

multaneously the most complex and nuanced in their field" (135).

Although there are many significant historical, cultural, and artistic differences between Victorian fiction and new media, I am prompted by Johnson's analogy—and by the recent appearance of Dickens on *Lost*—to offer the following inter-media observations. I am not interested, here, in source-hunting but in a kind of comparative textual history, in finding ways to think about the modes of production and reception of new media texts when compared to literary texts such as Dickens's. I suspect that this kind of comparative analysis may help explain the contemporary media landscape as well as the reception of Dickens's fiction as social texts. In this case the comparison will necessarily involve video games. Johnson correctly identifies video games as a source of formal conventions for a wide range of increasingly game-like media objects. Appealing to its audience in the way that the best games appeal to their players, works of contemporary media–like the Victorian novel–rely on complex paratextual crossings back and forth between the make-believe of their fictions and make-believe in the world. No text, in any medium, is an island, because all texts are social texts, which is to say they are fundamentally, radically, paratextual, something Charles Dickens already knew, a truth he incorporated into the production and reception of his own narrative entertainments.

In the two-part final episode of the second season of *Lost*, a crucial plotline turns on the appearance of a ragged and treasured copy of Charles Dickens's 1864-65 novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. Wrapped in rubber bands, this hard cover mass-market edition with a key dangling from it serves as Chekhovian prop, creating mysterious expectations to be fulfilled or thwarted later in the episode. *Lost* is known for planting literary allusions as clues, usually in the form of a brief appearance or mention of a book: *Watership Down, Lord of the Flies*, Aldous Huxley's *Island,* Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, to name a few. (The O'Brien, an obscure metaphysical mystery, saw a burst of sales after its appearance among the show's props.) But *Our Mutual Friend* was given more onscreen time than any previous title, and it was clearly used for its symbolic importance as a textual object, a book that signifies certain formal and historical features of all texts, as well as a serving as an allusion to the novel. Themes and plot devices borrowed by the show from *Our Mutual Friend* include concealed identity, shipwreck, rescue from near-drowning, waterfront murder, arranged marriage, disputed inheritance, and of course the characteristic crisscrossing, overlapping dual plots. But the book is also important as an object, a visual pun, a text that figuratively and literally

71

holds the key to the meaning of the show's central mystery as well as the character's self-understanding. The castaway Desmond Hume, who intends to read it just before he dies, also uses the book as a hiding place for a fail-safe key that destroys the "magnetic anomaly" under the surface of the island and ends his imprisoning vigil in the bunker-like "hatch" (the enigma that dominated the entire second season) in a massive explosion at the conclusion of the episode.

At the beginning of the episode, like one of Dickens's down-and-out Thames watermen, Desmond washes back onto the island, drunk in the hold of his sailboat. In a fit of despair, he articulates a theory of the island the writers may well have borrowed in the first place from fans posting on Internet discussion boards: that, just as in *Lord of the Flies* (another early allusion made by the show), here the world beyond the island has been immersed in apocalyptic war or even destroyed without the castaways' knowing it, so that they have become a last remnant of humanity trapped in a kind of purgatory. "This is it," Desmond says. "This is all there is left. This ocean and this place, here. We are stuck in a bloody snow globe! There's no outside world. There's no escape." The writers gesture in this speech toward the infamous finale of an earlier series, *St. Elsewhere* (1982-88), when, absurdly, the whole world of the TV show was revealed to take place inside a child's snow globe. Viewers were furious at this winking dismissal of the fairly realistic setting for the hospital drama they had followed for so long. The *Lost* writers, by contrast, introduce the idea of isolated reality in Desmond's speech only to dismiss it by the time the finale concludes, as they admitted in an official podcast at the close of the season, to "blow up" the purgatory theory in the final explosion.

Besides the key, the book also contains an inserted letter from Desmond's long lost love, the heiress Penelope Widmore, the textual key that opens the door from the island to the rest of the world (and to a new series of plot threads for the third season). The point of the letter, and of the coda scene that shows Penelope still alive and apparently searching for the island, is that Desmond is wrong: there *is* an outside world. The island is not a snow globe, some kind of metaphysical purgatory. In the end Desmond's copy of *Our Mutual Friend* serves as portal, allowing access to the rest of the fictional world outside the island and to the extended paratextual world that makes up the show's complicated reception as a social text. Given the contemporary media ecology, that reception is inevitably conditioned more by video games and the fan cultures of the Internet than it is by novel reading, so it's necessary for a moment to consider just what kinds of "texts" video games might be.

The authors of *Unlocking the Meaning of LOST* note that the show's "ongoing narrative drive is modeled, in what may be a television first, on the story world of video games."

> As in a video game, in which players acquire new weapons and capabilities within its digital geography and learn more and

more about how to play from the collective knowledge of gamers online, both *Lost*'s characters and its audience are acquiring sequentially the "tools" they need to play. (Porter and Lavery, 22-23).

The writer-producers of the show have said they are engaged in an experiment in "nonlinear" storytelling, which they define in game-like terms as starting with a well-stocked fictional world containing potentially meaningful objects, tools, codes, "hints and clues" (Vaz, 78). An executive consultant for the show, Jeff Pinkner, said in an interview on the DVD of the first season that "the island would in a way be a dramatic version of a video game. . . [you could] find the hatch but it could take you several weeks before you had the proper tools to open the hatch." One obvious source of inspiration for *Lost* was the so-called reality show, *Survivor*, actually a series of team-based games set in the first season on a tropical island, involving the discovery of withheld information and orchestrated by a director in the role of game master. (This connection was emphasized when *Lost* was parodied in a *Mad TV* sketch; in it the castaways stumble upon Jeff Probst, the creator and host of *Survivor*, in their jungle, and find that they are contestants on the reality show [Porter and Lavery, 139]). More than the usual marketing practice of tie-ins including the inevitable video game (which is indeed scheduled for release in 2007), it is one example of an increasingly common model for the production and transmission of media texts. As Henry Jenkins has argued, "More and more, storytelling has become the art of world-building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (114). This is a way of making textual worlds in collaboration with a dedicated fan base, a way of "expanding the range of potential meanings and intertextual connections" across different media platforms (113) that, I would argue, is most fully developed in video-game fan cultures, where online discussion boards, user modifications, expectations of beta-testing, and world-building (or extensions of the game franchise's "universe") are taken as a matter of course. This is the context within which to understand *Lost*. The formal structures of the show, within and across episodes, were modeled on video-game forms and conventions from the start, and so was its fundamental mode of production and reception. The makers of *Lost* designed it, successfully, to generate its own fan base–a highly networked, Internet-savvy potential audience ready not just to watch but to "play" *Lost* as if it were a massive "cross-media" game of make-believe (Porter and Lavery, 23).

In fact, explicit references to games are found everywhere in the show's scripts: a handheld Gameboy console, the classic board games *Mousetrap* and *Operation*, not to mention the lottery and cards and golf and con games. One character shouts, in a tense (and ironically meta-theatrical) moment, "This isn't a game, man!" Referring to the raft Michael builds to attempt an escape in season one, Sawyer asks, "You gonna vote me off?"–a winking allusion to *Survivor*.

At the end of the finale to the second season, two explorers are playing a game of chess when they detect the electromagnetic anomaly that may reveal the island to the outside world. An actual video game version of *Lost* is scheduled for release in 2007, published by Ubisoft, the same company that published in 1993 what became the best-selling computer game of the 1990s, the puzzle-adventure, *Myst*. The parallels between the two works, game and game-like TV show, are richly suggestive.

Both *Myst* and *Lost* open with a character falling from the sky, and both are set on mysterious islands and require castaways to discover where they are and what it all means. Both demand that players or viewers solve puzzles and figure out how to work complicated technological contraptions (this is true of the viewers as they "play along at home," as it were, as well as of the characters within the fiction). As in Colossal Cave Adventure (the ancestor to many modern computer games), in both *Myst* and *Lost,* tools and objects are collected in one's inventory in order to unlock or manipulate or navigate the fictional world. And both *Myst* and *Lost* engage their characters and players or viewers in discovering the mysterious underlying intentions controlling the worlds in which they take place. *Myst* was inspired in its design by Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (1874), in which Captain Nemo turns out to be the hidden author (or game master). Like the later game, Verne's novel contains adventures that sometimes seem mere excuses to showcase ingenious gadgetry and complicated machines, which are constructed out of the raw materials of nature. Bridges, tunnels, ships, gunpowder, metal alloys, pulleys, elevators, windmills, dams, and machines of every sort are designed, built, and then explained in detail. In *Myst*, this role is played by the world-building Atrus, who is found in a hidden, possibly underground, room in the realm of Dunny, literally writing the worlds of the game into being via magic books, like some science-fiction Prospero. In *Lost*, the shadowy Dharma Initiative, first discovered concretely in the underground hatch, plays the game master role. The parallels between *Myst* and *Lost* have been noticed by some recent TV critics (Millman) and the parallels between Verne's Victorian science fiction and *Myst* were first developed in an article by me (Jones). The chain of associations is more significant than any particular claim for "sources."

But besides these formal, internal parallels, there are even more compelling reasons for viewing the TV show as influenced by the earlier game. *Lost* is the first major-network show to employ the formerly "independent" strategy of deliberately cultivating its own interactive fan culture, using the Web and fan conventions and related publications, official and fan-created podcasts, a dedicated *wiki* (the *Lost*-pedia), and a far-flung viral marketing campaign, to become what one blogger referred to as a "meta-media" object (Hill). The most striking example of this strategy is the multifaceted Alternate Reality Game (ARG), *The Lost Experience*, a phenomenon at the crossroads of marketing, fan-base community-

building, and collective game play. ARGs first came to public attention with *The Beast*, a marketing game tied to the release of Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.* (2001), and culminated in the extremely popular *I Love Bees*, created by 4orty2wo Entertainment in 2004 to market Bungie Studio's and Microsoft's game *Halo 2.* The basic idea is that the real world, including the Internet, phone lines, the press, movie theatres, becomes an arena of play. Players search for clues and piece together puzzles in the style of classic adventure games, or role-playing scenarios such as *Dungeons and Dragons.* Information (including the fact that it is a game and that it is an act of marketing) is withheld from players for a time. By the nature of the game, some will take it for reality–the fake Website for a real commercial site, say. Players of *I Love Bees* famously held up signs behind the podium during the presidential election, and many took phone calls from actors in public phone booths located by using online clues giving them the GPS coordinates.

In *The Lost Experience* ARG, players watch for clues inside and outside the show's fictional world, including telephone numbers listed in fake commercials shown during broadcasts, editorial ads printed in newspapers, and fake Websites for the fictional Oceanic Airlines and the Hanso Foundation. Manipulating the Hanso Websites using clues from the ads, for example, yields "Easter eggs" of further clues, sometimes concealed in images or employee profiles on the company site. And then everything is discussed by fans at great length on both official and unofficial Websites and blogs, as well as in real-sounding entries in the Wikipedia, for example. The official sites are sometimes sponsored by the show and the writers and producers sometimes take part. Executive producers and writers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cruse provided content for a regular official podcast posted during the TV season. In recorded conversations downloadable for computers or MP3 players, they offered behind the scenes insights and answered some fan questions from online discussions, or teased listeners with clues. In one instance, they responded to a threat from the fictional Hanso Foundation as if it were real, in effect playing along with the ARG.

This new form of cross-media entertainment hinges in part on what Gerard Genette famously labeled the paratext, any element attached to any text, title, subtitle, dedication, preface, postscript, even cover, binding, illustrations, epigraph, or note, that "makes some commentary on the text and bears on its reception" (265), that prompts the reader's interpretation by situating the main text in some way. The paratext is a "threshold" device (the French title of Genette's book is *Seuils*, or "thresholds"), the formal mediation between the inside and the outside of the text, between the text per se and the rest of the world. This threshold is the site, Genette says, "of an action on the public in the service . . . of a better reception of the text . . . ." The paratext, especially in the aspect Genette describes as the "epitext," which is outside the boundaries of the book itself but part of its reception, establishes a "transactional" space of exchange where cues to

interpretation overlap with (and are often indistinguishable from) forms of marketing. It is interesting how very literary and "bibliographic" Genette's definitions now appear. For example, his analytical division between public and private "epitexts," an author's TV interview versus his correspondence, say (1997, 344-403), is of little use when it comes to an author's Weblog, for example, which may also include a comments section containing instant correspondence with readers; or the regular podcasts by the writers of *Lost*, listened to by an individual fan on her iPod, or postings by the authors on fan discussion boards, especially those in which the writers confess to an editorial or production error, or reveal personal reactions to their own work. If anything, such examples suggest that what Genette saw as a limited device supplementing the main text can now be taken to describe an essential and everyday character of media texts of many kinds.

The most striking example of paratextual crossing in *The Lost Experience* ARG was the ghostwriting and publication in 2006 of an actual mystery novel by Hyperion Books, a company owned by Disney (as is ABC TV): *Bad Twin* by "Gary Troup," an author said to have gone down in the crash of Oceanic Flight 815. (His name, the fans quickly pointed out online, is an anagram for "purgatory," but the actual author was later revealed to be the novelist and professional ghostwriter Laurence Shames.) ABC executives played along, repeating the rumor that Troup was the anonymous passenger sucked into the severed jet engine on the beach in the pilot episode. In an episode soon thereafter, another character finds Troup's manuscript of the book among the wreckage on the beach. In May, 2006, near the end of the second season, the actual book entered the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Amazon.com* posted short video interviews from a fictional talk-show appearance, with an actor playing the author, talking about his book and the Hanso Foundation, as well as a suppressed earlier book about a mysterious mathematical formula. The novel itself is a detective story about murder, mistaken identity, and inheritance–in other words, it also owes a great deal to Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*–and its fictional world overlaps with that of the show and the ARG, since it concerns the corrupting influence of wealth, seen in the Widmore family and their corporation, which has a connection to the nefarious Hanso Foundation (which may be responsible for the Dharma Initiative the islanders discover on *Lost*). Paul Artisan, the detective, goes to the Widmore Building in New York and accidentally gets off the elevator on the floor apparently leased to the Hanso Foundation, full of robotic-looking people engaged in obscure science experiments (31-32). Real newspaper ads were placed in spring 2006, as if from the fictional Hanso, condemning the book's (fictional) smear campaign, and these were matched by ads by Hyperion defending its novel against the (invented) foundation. In the coda to the season-2 finale, at the moment when Penelope takes a call from hired explorers who have detected the "electromagnetic anomaly" coming from the island at the time of the explosion, players of the Alternate Reality Game who were also readers of the paratextual novel *Bad Twin* were thrilled by the cross-media event, a game-like entertainment exceeding the conventional boundaries of either conventional novels or conventional TV shows.

Part of the allure of such cross-platform "intermediation" is the viewers' or players' pleasure at following the "hacks" or media repurposing created by the game, seeing different media crossed and re-crossed in order to use the network as the platform for a larger, unstable, paratextual structure, even if everyone knows that structure is at bottom (that is, at the bottom line) a marketing device for an entertainment product. The whole point, in some ways, is that the marketing is simultaneously entertainment, that an ARG such as *The Lost Experience* earns the attention it gets by telling complex stories and engaging players in real game-play, a series of pleasurable social acts of puzzle-solving and meaning-making. The pleasure is in part about simple frame-breaking, like older campaigns involving real decoder rings for radio shows, but on an unprecedented scale and based on greater narrative and ludic complexities.

Fans take pleasure in experiencing the media crossings in real time and physical space–watching a character read a manuscript in the show (on the island as it were) and then being able to find the material, hardcover book and traces of its author in the real world, not only online at *Amazon.com* but also in a neighborhood brick-and-mortar retail store –and then seeing its fictions mentioned in newspaper ads as if they were real. Such crossings are the basic mode of video game culture, where online boards and player groups create "mods" (or programmed modifications) of games they love, and in some cases, such as MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), build the game-world and perform the game-story in mostly but not exclusively online space. This mode of play ultimately derives from early role-playing games, forms of social make-believe such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, where people act out imaginary game-world in physical space. ARGs tap into this kind of game culture but emphasize its leaky boundaries, its areas of contact with the everyday physical world. They may be understood as adaptive opportunities to play with the very fuzziness of cultural boundaries, to test one's ability to navigate the sometimes invisible currents connecting cross-media products and forms of expression. The benefit and pleasure is therefore abruptly diminished when cruder forms of *mere* product placement intrude, as they did with the use by *The Lost Experience* of some tie-in Websites for Sprite (which played on hidden-message marketing by calling itself the "subLYMONal" campagin) and Jeep (commercials for which simply flashed a Hanso Foundation logo and URL). When they avoid such heavy-handed marketing, ARGs are compelling to fans precisely because they allow them to cross back and forth between fiction and the material world; in a kind of reverse escapism, they allow players to test the boundaries of make-believe and marketing in the contemporary media landscape.

To understand this kind of media environment and to appreciate the significance of such shows as *Lost* and the video-game culture from which they emerge, literary critics need to shift away from narratology or hermeneutics and toward what Fredric Jameson has called "mode-of-production analysis" (408)—although Jameson ignores the fact that "mode of production" has always been the purview of a materialist textual studies. Descended from traditional bibliography and now associated with the work of theorists such as D. F. McKenzie and Jerome McGann, who focus not on imagined static verbal constructs, the isolated literary "text," but on the "social text," which is to say on dynamic discourse fields of production and reception composed of interacting forces: verbal, graphical (or bibliographical), cultural, ideological, and always social. Before McGann's *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* in 1983, McKenzie was the first to argue for this kind of broader definition of the social text, as any recorded form of "verbal, visual, oral, numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives or recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information . . . " (13). He proposed a sociology of texts that focused on the thresholds between textual objects and the world in which the meanings were constructed. This view now includes—indeed I would argue it is most clearly embodied in—video games and their related media objects and fictional worlds.

From the point of view of materialist and sociological textual studies, a novel such as *Our Mutual Friend* appears as a harbinger, a kind of nineteenth-century version of the "Alternate Reality Game" of serial publication, marketing, and audience reception. Most people are aware that Dickens helped to develop a system for the serial publication of his fiction, eventually producing installments of paper-wrapped parts of a novel for a shilling each, twenty parts over eighteen or nineteen months. Like the writers of a serial television show, Dickens was engaged in a popular form of fictional entertainment based on sketching a story outline, invoking a fictional world, and then filling it in over the course of eighteen or twenty installments, often in collaborative response to reader or viewer feedback. In one interview, *Lost* executive producer Carlton Cuse noted that Dickens "was writing chapter by chapter for newspapers. We often think: 'How much did Dickens know when he was writing his stories? How much of it was planned out, and how much was flying by the seat of his pants because he had to get another chapter in?' We can respect what he went through" (Arthur, 1). Actually, Dickens was usually writing not for newspapers but for magazines or separately-wrapped serial publication, not newspapers, and he often worked from a skeletal outline (his "number plans"), much like the way TV series are created, and he referred to the narrative difficulty of gradually revealing a mystery as "much enhanced by the mode of publication"–of unfolding the story over eighteen or nineteen months (*Our Mutual Friend* Postscript, 798).

But what Dickens "went through" in the case of *Our Mutual Friend* is, it turns out, even more relevant to the production of this particular TV show than Cuse's comments suggest, since he was under pressure to complete the final installments on time and compressed them; at one point he lost track of the process and had to write quickly in order to produce the correct number of chapters at the end. The textual history of *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens's final major novel, published just five years before his death, overlaps with the themes of *Lost* in a yet more dramatic way. Dickens was working on a late installment of the book when he made a railway journey back from Paris to London that ended in the "terribly destructive" Staplehurst railway disaster of June 9, 1865 (Ackroyd, 958-64). His train ran off a gap in the viaduct and some of the cars plunged into the river. Ten passengers were killed and Dickens, relatively unhurt and using his top hat to carry water, worked for hours among the wreckage, helping "the dying and the dead." As he was finally leaving, at the last minute, he suddenly returned to the crashed train and climbed inside to retrieve his almost-forgotten manuscript, the installments in progress of *Our Mutual Friend*, Book IV, chapters 1-4 (840n).

The crash, the survivors, the gentleman tending to the wounded, the manuscript recovered from the wreckage–it would seem that the textual history of Dickens's novel, even more than its thematic contents, inspired the creators of *Lost*. Most significant for my purposes, Dickens told the story himself in a "peritextual" postscript published with the completed novel. In his version, the events of the disaster represent a jarring intrusion of his fictional characters, Mr. And Mrs. Boffin, into the real-world disaster, embodied in what he calls their "manuscript dress." "I climbed back into my carriage–nearly turned over a viaduct, and caught aslant upon the turn–to extricate the worthy couple. They were much soiled, but otherwise unhurt" (800). The threshold where the fiction entered the real-world drama of the railway disaster, where the novel came into violent contact with the material world while making its way into the world of its reception, was then folded back into the reception history of the novel. It also resonates with what *Lost* tries to do formally, in its textual and paratextual constructions, in representing and playing with the deliberately narrow threshold between text and the world.

Dickens's monthly numbers would later be collected as a codex book, but as they were first appearing, each installment of the twenty parts (the final number was a double, not unlike the two-part finale of a series such as *Lost*) was a discrete moment in a dynamic publishing event. As Robert L. Patten has explained it, having each serial installment reviewed kept the novel before the public for an extended period and generated more attention for it (what would now be called "buzz"). But the serial structure also fed back into the shape of the novel as it emerged, as Dickens suggested in his postscript. The cliffhangers, huge cast of characters, major and minor, and multiple narrative threads (two major plots

intertwined and often multiple background or subplot), were all innovations that arose in relation to the serial form, how the fiction came into the world. Dickens is famous for cultivating an interactive relationship with his readers. He received a great deal of correspondence from his fan-base, as it were, and would sometimes adjust the stories in response; and he performed the stories in public, reading his own texts for live audiences in different voices. Jay Clayton refers to Dickens's control of the form and medium in which his works appeared as innovative "nineteenth-century information technology" (199), combining cultural expression with economic opportunity. He reads Dickens's article on the post office system as foreshadowing the point of view of "gamers who imagine the inner spaces of the communications system in terms of knights and quests, bright halls and dark passageways" (4; I would add that the parallels between the author's publishing practices and the reception of games and recent game-like media are even more significant as these fictional parallels). Clayton adds that Dickens also oversaw the placement of illustrations and advertisements (even some of the ad copy) for consumer goods that appeared wrapped with his monthly numbers, took a keen interest in spin-offs (though they were not licensed and he received no royalties for them)–for example going out of his way to visit a tavern named Our Mutual Friend. He "understood the publicity value that came from their wide diffusion" (Clayton 153).

As an entrepreneurial move by the career-savvy author, surely, a bid for greater financial control, I think Dickens involvement in production and dissemination also allowed him to extend the discourse field, the story world or realm of make-believe in which his fictions played out. In its way, the reception he helped to create for his dynamically constructed works, was a Victorian precursor to the mixed art and marketing phenomenon of the present time, the Alternate Reality Game. In both cases, in spite of the powerful imperatives of commerce, the result is also a formal extension of the discourse field of the text, the game of make believe, outward into a complicated material social space. Dickens's publishing practice depends upon, even while it attempts to exploit, a model of reader-shaped and sometimes even reader-generated "content." Clayton speaks of Dickens's cultivation of his audience as part of his "restless technocultural creativity" and his "craving for cultural bandwidth" (200). The writers of *Lost* are doing something similar on a different scale, something Dickensian, when they produce ARGs (including publication of paratextually significant books such as *Bad Twin* and multilayered allusion to existing books), publish podcasts, and, most notably, follow "the boards," keep in touch with, and to some unknown degree (it is the subject of much speculation online), shape their work interactively in relation to what the fans are posting on the Internet. What Robert L. Patten says of Dickens's serial publication rings true as a description of game-like new media, as well: "breaking down the novel's bulkiness into twenty snippets of entertainment allowed readers to 'inhabit' a world, like a television soap opera, in manageable segments." This is precisely what is said about video games and the gamelike media they have inspired: they allow users to inhabit or become immersed in the make-believe world extending outward from and including (but not co-terminal with) the imaginative work. As Patten continues, Dickens's form of serial publishing "blurred the distinction between reading a book, a closed container whose contents are enjoyed in a private space and time separated from diurnal activities, and reading an installment that is simultaneously circulating, through reviews and conversation, in the public world of daily events."

In this sense, Dickens's texts, like *Lost* and like many of the best video games, are always already predominantly paratexual when it comes to their reception. They operate *across* the borders of their own receptions. This impulse or tendency in Dickens has increased exponentially in and become central to recent new media. Genette's limited paratext, which serves as a threshold or transactional space between the text and the world, has moved into the foreground; the paratext has become the essence of the social text itself. Crossing thresholds in pursuit of meanings for the pleasure of taking make-believe into the everyday world characterizes the reception of the most interesting of recent popular media productions. It's a development Charles Dickens understood very well, as the makers of *Lost* reveal in their ongoing tribute to his canny acts of transmedia make-believe, his fictional worlds and world-building fictions.

NOTE: Karl Kroeber's work as a whole, from his experiments with computer analysis to his recent forays into film studies and make-believe, I take as a precedent for this my foray into the textuality of video games and gamelike media. He is not to blame for the limitations I bring to the task, but a conversation with him in a Broadway diner did encourage me at a crucial juncture, as usual.

WORKS CITED

Ackroyd, Peter. *Dickens*. 1990; Arthur, Kate. "Dickens, Challah, and that Mysterious Island," *New York Times*, May 25, 2006 (E1); Clayton, Jay. *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture*. 2003; Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*. ed. Adrian Poole. 1998; Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin. First publ. 1987 as *Les Seuils*. 1997; Hill, Dan. City of Sound blog, March 27, 2006: "Why *Lost* is Genuinely New Media": <http://www.cityofsound.com/blog/2006/03/why_lost_is_gen.html#more>; Jameson, Fredric. "Symptoms of/for Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004): 403-408; Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. 2006; Johnson, Steven. *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*. 2005; Jones, Steven E. "*The Book of Myst* in the Late Age of Print," *Postmodern Culture*, 7.2 (Jan. 1997); Kroeber, Karl. *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*.

1994.; McGann, Jerome J. *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism.* 1983; McKenzie, D. F. *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts: The Panizzi Lectures* 1985. 1986; Millman, Joyce. *Getting Lost: Survival, Baggage, and Starting Over in J. J. Abrams' Lost,* ed. Orson Scott Card. 2006; Patten, Robert L. "The Composition, Publication, and Reception of *Our Mutual Friend,*" *The Dickens Project,* < http://humwww.ucsc.edu/dickens/OMF/patten2.html >; Porter, Lynette and David Lavery. *Unlocking the Meaning of LOST: An Unauthorized Guide.* 2006; Troup, Gary (Laurence Shames). *Bad Twin.* 2006; Vaz, Mark Cotta. The Lost *Chronicles:The Official Companion Book.* 2005.