

Lost, The Leftovers, and Lindelof: How Rabid Fans Built and Destroyed a TV Empire

With the incredible success of his hit show *Lost*, showrunner Damon Lindelof garnered a large and devoted following. *Lost* cultivated and appealed to fans by encouraging active fan engagement. Fans created chat rooms, websites, and wiki pages, and the show's creators made themselves uniquely accessible on Twitter to engage with fans' speculations, analyses, and decodings of the complex mythologies behind the series. It was this active form of fandom, largely facilitated by the popularization of the internet, that made Lindelof's large fan base so rabidly loyal. When the *Lost* series finale aired, it invited the same kind of fervent scrutiny, but this time, it was mostly critical. The *Lost* fandom, who had for so long been encouraged, trained, and rewarded for seeking out the answers to the show's myriad mysteries, felt disappointed and betrayed by the series' ambiguous ending. Lindelof, on the other hand, defended his work as the story he wanted to tell that, due to the show's high profile, massive audience, and mystery format, would never be able to satisfy everyone. Despite the conflict, *Lost*'s rabid fan base was an essential economic asset to the show and its parent network ABC, illustrating the industrial utility of fandom. With the critical success and universally acclaimed series finale of his follow-up show, *The Leftovers*, Lindelof ultimately found redemption as a mediamaker and reclaimed his right to authorship.

On September 22, 2004, Oceanic Flight 815 crashed onto that mysterious island, and *Lost* crashed into the television landscape. Over the course of six seasons, showrunner Damon Lindelof established *Lost* as a network phenomenon, garnering critical praise and extraordinary ratings—at its most-watched, it pulled 23 million viewers (Wilkes). But *Lost* didn't just amass a large audience; it also amassed a rabid audience by cultivating highly active and engaged fans (Katz, Greenwald). Fan engagement was based upon active speculation, which included “wikis and articles and frame-by-frame analyses,” and fans were not only encouraged to study the show's mythology but were rewarded with Easter eggs for doing so (Hunt, Greenwald). For example, the transmedia extension

The Lost Experience was an alternate reality game that allowed fans to track down clues on the internet and uncover information about various fictional organizations on the show (Den of Geek).

This mutation of fandom was made possible by the concurrent blooming of the Internet (Facebook was launched in 2004, Reddit in 2005, Twitter in 2006), which helped to normalize the idea that television can not only be intimately watched and shared by millions of strangers, but that episodes can live on throughout the week via “chat windows, status updates, and ill-advised Googling” (Greenwald). Fan sites began to proliferate (there are a total of 42 listed fan sites on the *Lostpedia* website, the official encyclopedia of *Lost*), and Twitter became a site for fan discussion during and after episodes. Indeed, the discussions, recaps, and analyses on these various platforms weren’t just fringe ramblings usually exiled to the corners of the internet—this was mainstream fan discourse. The unique form of fandom that sprung up around *Lost*, built on incessant speculation and a hunger for answers, unsurprisingly created issues when it came time for the series to end.

On May 23, 2010, *Lost* aired its final episode, “The End.” Suddenly, fans’ fervor turned on the show, as they felt profoundly polarized by its ending. Most fans, so long encouraged to seek out answers to the show’s central questions, expected to discover the characters’ place in the island’s grander scheme, a mystery built on the past that would reveal the answers to the show’s biggest secrets (Hunt). Instead, the finale ignored the show’s most central and longest running mysteries in favor of focusing on the characters after they had died and gone to heaven. The internet erupted with backlash, with fans and critics alike calling the series everything from a “cop-out” to “frustrating;” one *Slate* article simply bore the title, “Goddamn You, *Lost*” (Keller).

The day after the finale aired, Lindelof and his co-executive producer—who had both been extremely active and engaged with fans on Twitter throughout the series’ run—decided to go “radio silent,” taking a month-long trip to Italy and leaving fans to fend for themselves in the hunt for answers (Ifeanyi, Lindelof). Lindelof admittedly regrets this decision: “We were so available [to

fans] up until that moment, and then suddenly we were gone” (Ifeyani). Understandably, Lindelof’s sudden rupture from the fan base to which he had been so responsive for six seasons further stoked fans’ frustrations. As Lindelof would learn over the next decade, hell hath no fury like a fandom scorned. Fans largely took to Twitter, a platform on which Lindelof was particularly engaged and responsive, to tell him not only that they disliked the finale, but that he had “ruined their favorite show and wasted six years of their lives” (Brodesser-Akner). The backlash became so hostile, Lindelof left Twitter, where he had first cultivated his active and devoted fan base; fans now used the site to send Lindelof angry threats and insults, instead of the enthusiastic questions and observations they had sent in the years prior to the finale (Katz, Brodesser-Akner).

In the weeks, months, and years following the finale, Lindelof attempted to defend his work and consider the impossibility of a perfect conclusion for a series like *Lost*. He stood his ground, arguing, “I stand by the *Lost* finale. It’s the story that we wanted to tell, and we told it. No excuses. No apologies” (Lindelof). He explained the writers’ intentions for the finale saying that, “Obviously, there are all these mysteries [on the show]. But what if we answered a mystery that was never asked, what’s the meaning of life and what happens when you die?” (Dos Santos). But he also evaluated just why the task was so impossible, reflecting that with *Lost*’s monstrously long 121 episode run, with “every episode, the diving board gets higher and higher, so the ending becomes a burden” (Sims).

In 2013, Lindelof told his side of the *Lost* story in an op-ed in *The Hollywood Reporter*, admitting that, seven years later, he is still “deeply and unhealthily obsessed with finding ways to revisit the *Lost* finale and the maddening hurricane of shit that has followed it” (Lindelof). In the article, he compares himself to an alcoholic, saying his “bar” is Twitter and Comic-Con (Lindelof). In it, he speaks directly to scorned fans, asking them, “If it’s unpleasant and exhausting for me to keep defending the *Lost* finale, aren’t you getting tired of hating it?” (Lindelof). He concludes his

piece with a request, a kind of truce. Lindelof challenges his own notions of authorship and authority over his work, surrendering it to decodings that he may not have intended, relinquishing much of his authority to the fans:

I'd like to make a pact, you and me... You acknowledge that I know how you feel about the ending of *Lost*. I heard you. I will think about your dissatisfaction always and forever... And I will finally stop talking about it... because I accept that I will not change hearts nor minds. I will not convince you they weren't dead the whole time, nor resent you for believing they were despite my infinite declarations otherwise.

The relationship between *Lost* and its fans, though tumultuous, demonstrates the industrial utility of fandom. When greenlighting *Lost*, ABC surely predicted the show's lore, mythology, and endless mysteries would develop a highly engaged audience while its mainstream, inoffensive appeal would garner a large audience. When ABC spent a record-breaking \$14 million dollars on *Lost*'s pilot episode, it did so to capture the record-breaking 18.6 million viewers that it did; all investment in the artistic storytelling of the show was done with the intention of capturing a massive and devoted audience (Felix). ABC greenlit *Lost* because it could do double duty for the network by pulling an audience that was both extremely large and extremely active; these are the characteristics in an audience that advertisers look for. Naturally, advertisers flocked to the show. Purchasing an ad during *Lost*'s season finale cost advertisers up to \$950,000 for a 30-second spot since due to the episode's status as "event programming" (Steinberg).

This is also enabled ABC to monetize the show so completely; with a large and devoted fan base, they also had a large and devoted consumer base. The *ABC TV Store Merchandise* page of the fan-run website *Lostpedia: The Lost Encyclopedia* (lostpedia.wikia.com), includes a highly detailed list of all of the licensed merchandise ABC sold: \$25 t-shirts, \$90 dollar "official" costumes, \$300 necklaces, not to mention figurines, trading cards, and box sets. Fans' rabidity—the force that propelled the show and just as quickly turned against it—was translated into an

endless collection of merchandise, directly for the profit of the show. Ultimately, fans who bought DHARMA hoodies or carried around *Lost* aluminum water bottles were only further advertising the show in public by providing it with more visibility (Jones). Whatever anger certain scorned fans may have felt towards the show after the series finale could not un-purchase their merchandise.

In his revealing op-ed, Lindelof confessed he was “still naive enough to believe I can attain some level of redemption” after the mistakes of the *Lost* finale (Linedlof). Seven years after the divisive *Lost* finale aired, Lindelof’s new show, *The Leftovers* ended with a series finale that was so universally adored by fans, it undoubtedly redeemed Lindelof as a mediamaker. Lindelof feels he was able to stick the landing with *The Leftovers* because it has “a much smaller, impassioned audience, so I don’t feel the pressure of a *Lost*” (Linedlof). Here, the small *Leftovers* fandom may not serve an industrial utility, but it clearly serves an artistic one. Lindelof learned from his experience with *Lost* about how to be a more responsible mediamaker; after the finale of *The Leftovers*, he made an effort to be far more “engaged in talking about the show,” unlike his “radio silence” after the *Lost* finale (Linedlof). Lindelof still understands the pressures that came attached to the *Leftovers* finale, saying that “the two most likely narratives to emerge are ‘Lindelof has screwed us over again,’ or ‘Lindelof has redeemed himself,’ Neither of those feel true to me, so I hope there’s a third narrative: ‘Here’s how we feel about the *Leftovers* finale’” (Egner).

Ultimately, the tragic story of the *Lost* finale is one of artistic redemption, artist/fan conflict, and the industrial utility of massive, rabid fandoms. It also shows the immense power of these fandoms, able to create and destroy mediamakers for a single disagreeable story choice. Luckily, redemption can be found for wronged fans and wronged storytellers alike. *Lost* may have saved ABC’s soul, but *The Leftovers* saved Lindelof’s.

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