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Losing the Streaming Wars: What Netflix loses in Television Narrative and Participatory Fan Cultures

Annabelle G. Naudin
University of South Florida

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Losing the Streaming Wars: What Netflix loses in Television Narrative and Participatory Fan Cultures.

by

Annabelle G Naudin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies
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Major Professor: Amy Rust, Ph.D.
Todd Jurgess, Ph.D.
Abigail Lee, Ph.D..

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Dedication

For all of the people who helped make this possible and helped me through countless sleepless nights by bribing me with pictures of Ben Barnes, especially Julia who was always willing to listen to me rant about television. And for my parents who pay for my Netflix account.
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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the rise of streaming television and subsequent “binge-watching” and its impact on the narrative structure of a series. By looking at shows such as *Stranger Things*, which pioneered the rise in this new form of television, one can see the shift in narrative structure in comparison to previous long-form television such as *LOST*. This shift can be seen in the slow disappearance of “game-changer” cliffhangers within episodes that build to a larger implication in a season are in favor of one longer mystery that stretches throughout the season. In this thesis, I argue that this shift consequently has come with a loss in the communal fan culture that has accompanied the television viewing experience in comparison to serialized weekly broadcast. This shift ultimately poses a risk to the medium as a whole due to its reliance on the participatory nature of viewership and fandom.
Introduction

On May 27, 2022, Netflix released the fourth season of its hit show *Stranger Things* (2016-). There was a marked change in the release format in that the season was released in two parts, with the latter half available for viewing 35 days after the first half. This change created renewed cultural interest in the show that stuck far beyond the season’s initial drop, earning audience engagement that had not happened since Millie Bobby Brown and her beloved Eggo-waffles first graced Netflix accounts in 2016. The show’s maintained level of interest largely can be attributed to the fact that the extended release period allowed for the fan engagement that people have long craved from shows like *Stranger Things*.

My thesis examines the narrative changes to television and its effects on fan culture as a response to Netflix’s binge-watching release format through *Stranger Things* and the earlier broadcast release *Lost* (2004-2010). These two shows are emblematic of these changes due not only to the pivotal cultural impact that they have had, but also their similar use of the genre-specific trope of a “Mystery Box Show” - a term that was pioneered by *Lost* creator J. J. Abrams. This trope within shows has the tendency to drop the viewer into the middle of a mystery, which leaves the audience wanting answers to questions both before and after the time period of the show, creating the perfect vehicle so-called watercooler conversations.

With the growing popularity in the binge-watching format alongside Netflix’s growth, the company has relied heavily on a format of release that allows for the audience member to continue to consume Netflix in a binge-watching style. Netflix’s focus on maintaining its claim as a binge-watching platform has caused a shift in how stories are formatted in order to maximize a viewing experience that is done in one sitting rather than over the course of several months. The result potentially hinders, I argue, a prolonged fan engagement and the cultural longevity of shows. As it stands, the binge-watching release format does not allow for the traditional slow and varied build of fan growth and show community that
comes with episodic broadcast releases as the excitement of new episodes is often confined to the period of a weekend, rather than over the course of multiple months as the season progresses. Because of a shortened period of in-the-moment experiencing, which is done at the viewer’s own pace, there is not as much of an opportunity for live reactions and theorizing for anyone outside of those who complete the season immediately the moment that it is released. This can turn the communal experience that was often associated with television fans into a much more solitary one for some as those who are not at that level of fan engagement are put at risk of being left behind. With a show like Stranger Things, oftentimes there is an initial burst of fan activity at the release of a season which then dies down almost immediately as the new content is over in a matter of hours. In order to participate in the moment from a fan perspective as well as ensure that the show is enjoyable for them without the risk of spoilers, there is pressure on the viewer to consume the show as quickly as possible. However, once this initial burst is over and there is no new content to discuss, fan engagement dies down to those who are diehard fans. This singular burst of activity is in contrast to a continued stream of discussion and participation which then has the opportunity to build upon itself throughout each episode that individually covers one topic at a single moment in time. There is no risk of spoiling at the same level in traditional television releases as there is to binge-watching, as everyone is theoretically able to consume it at the same time. I believe that the rise of binge-watching television has led to a shift in the way stories are told for television and in turn has complicated the audience’s desire for an interactive and engaging experience, leading to a larger disparity in fan engagement levels and an overall loss of communality.

Much of the focus of previous literature on the binge-watching era focuses on the shift in television into something far more cinematic on a technical and financial level- with Michele Hilmes specifically noting how the two forms of media have moved increasingly close to one another and will continue to do so (Hilmes 28). Previous literature describes shows that maintained a stronghold on the cultural zeitgeist in the late 2000s and 2010s being largely centered around their technical extravagance as, in a way, the medium gained a larger artistic legitimacy among society (Hilmes). A lot of the focus in research is attributed to the rise in popularity of “narratively complex” shows coming from cable
television as early as the 1990s, as noted in Jason Mittel’s *Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television.*

However, while modern television research considers the narrative and expanded budgets of contemporary television, it does not often touch on its relation to release models as well as how that connects to fan studies. Fan studies plays an integral part in what led to this shift in the first place as it was the proof that ultimately comes from the audience’s existence that allowed shows to be given larger budgets in the first place (Jackson). When there is evidence of a large audience that wants to take part in the participatory nature of being a fan (especially from the financial standpoint that fans bring to franchises), with weekly discussions on social media in addition to the ratings themselves, it warrants more of a focus and effort to be put into the show. And this sort of extensive fan engagement benefits largely from the extended participatory nature of a weekly release model rather than the immediate rush of participatory nature in binge-watching.

In order to look at how fan engagement has changed alongside the changes between television and streaming, I have turned to two series that were both emblematic for their times and fan cultures within respective eras, *Lost* and *Stranger Things.* Using these series, I am able to investigate the changes between the two in their narrative formats and reception among fans. Prior to streaming, narrative in television held a far more serialized and contained nature. Television episodes were known for their “A/B/C Stories,” which took the audience member on a contained story within an episode, a side story for minor characters, as well as an on-going and evolving storyline that evolves over time. As time shifted and the TV-watching experience became condensed to fewer sittings rather than over the course of months, the storylines shifted to have a much larger focus on the ongoing storyline of a given season or show. *Lost* and *Stranger Things* share a lot with their overarching themes of mystery, but this narrative shift can be seen clearly in both. Particularly in the earlier seasons of *Lost* we see the use of A/B/C storylines for events going on within the island as well as in flashbacks explaining the details of certain characters’ lives and what led them to their current circumstances. Even if episodes are written to tell a larger story, they still have satisfying beginnings, middles, and ends within them. However, in *Stranger
Things, these storylines are told as a piece of the larger story because Netflix assumes that you are going to watch several episodes in one sitting.

Due to this shift, the fan cultures surrounding both shows is very different, with *Lost* maintaining a diverse fan base that was active amongst one another and dedicated throughout its earlier seasons and continues to some extent even now. Meanwhile, despite having a similarly diverse fan base, much of *Stranger Things*’s participatory culture is confined to its release cycle and private circles among fans. The relative interaction of these fan bases is not dissimilar to the fan engagement levels attributed to Henry Jenkins who argues that fan engagement ranges from passing interest (the first level) to an increasing level of devotion and focus (the second through fifth levels). I argue that, with the shift in television structure that comes with Netflix’s binge model and with streaming culture, these middle-tiered levels are slowly disappearing and leaving just the passing interest fan and the overly devoted “Trekkie”-style fan. This shift in fan cultures can similarly be attributed to the changes in narrative not allowing for the participatory nature of weekly broadcast. As Clay Shirkey argues, with the rise of modern technology, there is a similar desire amongst audiences to interact with one another, I argue that desire is difficult to achieve in the isolated binge-watching culture. I have decided to focus my research towards online fan engagement due to the fact that an empirical set of data is easier to be achieved and tracked when looking at online records rather than informal or formal gatherings in person. With the rise of streaming rendering both television and film into a more solitary experience, with viewers able to watch television on their own time rather than being constrained to a weekly time and channel, the need for engagement with other people has grown. However, while binge-watching may provide immediate gratification with a completed story, due to the personalized nature of streaming it is almost impossible to maintain a “water-cooler” culture and diverse range of fan engagement as there is no way to ensure a simultaneous viewing and schedule within the age of binge streaming. In my thesis, I first track how the aforementioned changes to narrative structure have shifted in the rise of binge-watching and how these specific changes affect fan engagement before expanding to the larger changes to fan culture.
Chapter One: Narrative Structure Between Broadcast and Streaming

There are many things that are different in the world of streaming and broadcast television, but one of the notable differences that has arisen between the two is how they differ in narrative formats. Shows like ABC’s Lost built a following from its weekly serialized format over the course of several years, while the addictive nature of Netflix’s streaming content like Stranger Things seemingly has the power to skyrocket to pop-culture touchstone overnight. These differences are largely due to the ways that their creators chose to separate storytelling beats in a serialized fashion such as with LOST or a condensed singular story such as with Stranger Things. Broadcast narratives tell a slowly built up story that allows for weekly discussions but risks losing a viewer at the wrong narrative choice, while streaming narratives promise a shorter commitment to achieve the payoff of a complete story but risk the communality that can accompany broadcast. The narrative structure is the core foundation of any story and what fans find appealing about a piece of media. Therefore, in order to understand the difference between how these platforms build followings and are generally received over time, it is important to first see how the modality of television changes narrative beats with the A/B/C structure being largely left to broadcast television.

In the fall of 2004, the American Broadcasting Company premiered a show that would become largely indicative of television’s rise to power in the 2000s. Centered around the survivors of an international plane crash and the unraveling mysteries surrounding their survival and past, LOST quickly became synonymous with the idea of cult television and grew to be one of network’s most watched dramas within its first season (Nielsen). Up until that point, the idea of serialized weekly episodes often centered around a familiar set such as an office or home, giving way to countless episodes that could take place within this centralized location without the need for too much background information. At its core, LOST was a show about people surviving on a mysterious island after a plane crash. While it was not a
workplace sitcom, it maintained a centralized location that allowed for a certain level of basic understanding without watching from week to week. While Lost caused a shift in what audiences thought of when it came to network television, it still relied on a tried and true narrative structure: the A/B/C method.

In the A/B/C approach to serialized television, the narrative structure is split into two or three storylines that are followed throughout an episode. The A Storyline is the central plot of the episode; it is what fulfills the promise that the show is offering, while the B and C storylines create subplots that follow secondary characters and their relationships and/or build towards a greater storyline as the season progresses. In traditional storytelling, this A storyline is concluded by the end of the episode, allowing for the B/C storylines to help support and then push the narrative onto the next episode.

Lost is a perfect encapsulation of this narrative format, especially within its character-driven early seasons. The basic structure of Lost centers around a specific character, as we follow their point of view throughout some aspect of their life before ending up on the island (the A Storyline); this is often accompanied by how it is affecting their life on the island and their relationships with the other castaways (the B Storyline) and the larger mystery of trying to survive on the island as a whole (the C Storyline). While one might think that the A storyline would focus on being lost on the island, viewers quickly learned that Lost is first and foremost a character-driven show told in this flashback and nonlinear way that then builds into a narrative. Therefore, it makes sense to have the A storyline focus on the flashbacks of a specific character. For example, in the season one episode “Walkabout,” the A storyline focuses on the character of Locke. Through flashbacks we slowly unravel the introductory background of the character and learn about his previous paralysis and how that led to him being on the plane in the first place. Then, secondary to that, we follow Locke in the present on the island as the lack of food leads him to start a hunting trip to find more. Finally, we have aspects of the storyline concerning the evolving mystery of the island, including the monster that is seen by Locke, though he denies seeing it in the final moments of the episode. Despite ending with a cliffhanger that leaves the audience trying to put together
the pieces of the larger mystery at hand, the episode tells a conclusive and satisfying story of Locke’s background.

There are many reasons that the A/B/C method is so ubiquitous within broadcast television, and that is simply to do with the nature of the format. Unlike modern streaming services and theatrical release films, broadcast shows like *LOST* aired at a specific time every week. With the A/B/C method, a show had a much greater chance of being able to draw in and retain an unfamiliar viewer if the episode told a somewhat cohesive story. Of course, there would always be questions as to the larger storylines that might leave a new viewer confused, but at base, a new viewer could tune into *LOST* during the “Walkabout” episode and walk away with a general understanding of what the show promised to deliver. If they liked the format, they could rest assured that next week, at the same time and place, *LOST* would deliver another episode similar to it.

In the battleground world of pre-streaming broadcast television, a viewer had to choose what show at any given hour was their priority, with their choice then playing a role in the economic decisions made by networks. The shows with the bigger audience got the better advertisement slots. The better advertisements, the more money a show brought in for a network. All shows, streaming or broadcast, live and die by their audience. Renewals and cancellations are decided on the numbers that a show brings in. Shows with a bigger audience are guaranteed a greater safety net when it comes time to decide the next year’s slate of shows. With stakes so high, it is imperative within a show’s narrative structure to not only draw you in but to make you hungry for more. And one of the best ways to leave an audience member wanting more is to give them a cliffhanger. A complex and successful cliffhanger all but guarantees an audience member will return week after week to see what happens next in a show. Like with anything, what is simple in regards to a cliffhanger is not necessarily what is considered memorable in the long term. A simple cliffhanger might leave a beloved character in a precarious position before solving the issue immediately in the following episode (something that *LOST* was no stranger to), but a complex cliffhanger is something that has the potential to evolve and reframe the story at hand. At the end of the day, a simple cliffhanger will make the viewer question *what* will happen next whereas a complex
cliffhanger will simultaneously ask how this changes the story at hand. Going back to “Walkabout,” the episode ends with a subtle cliffhanger that adds to the growing mystery of the island itself, thanks to the appearance of the Smoke Monster and Locke’s denial of its existence. However, the viewer knows this to be not true, and is, therefore, left with not only the question of what is the smoke monster, but also why Locke would have lied about it. To the newcomer, the simple question of what is the Smoke Monster might draw them into returning to the show, while for a previous viewer, the question of Locke’s denial might be at the center of their focus.

The added layers of a complex cliffhanger not only allow for a television show like LOST to meet the network’s need for returned viewership week to week, but also give fans pieces of the story to ruminate over and discuss. In fact, scholarship on the matter suggests that watching the series after its original airing diminishes the viewer’s experience. Jason Mittel explains that those who watch a show outside its original broadcast are “inherently isolated from the larger fan community and its rich network of paratextual materials, suggesting that the truly ephemeral aspect of the series [is] not the initial textual broadcast but the experience of serialized spectatorship.” (51). Furthermore, these discussions encourage non-watchers to become part of the conversation and check out the show, helping to give it an ever-growing and loyal fanbase.

A year before the final season of LOST aired, the previous seasons were added to the expanding library of Netflix’s newly minted streaming service. LOST was one of the many television conglomerates that found a second life and helped pave the way for the streaming platform’s popularity. Like many series on Netflix, LOST fans were given easy access to the entire library of episodes to watch at their own leisure; however, oftentimes, this meant consuming numerous episodes at once. Given the show’s nature as ripe for rewatching, LOST helped create the binge-watching mindset that Netflix became known for. The idea of binge-watching quickly became the standard for the media platform. In the early years of Netflix, the concept of the binge-watch was something of a symbiotic relationship with its week-to-week counterpart. In the case of a show like LOST, the Netflix library allowed for viewers to catch up in time for the final season as well as have easy access to older episodes to cross-reference as the show aired.
*LOST* was not the only show to have symbiotic benefits with the streaming platform. Several shows benefited within their broadcast lifetime from having earlier seasons made available to Netflix subscribers. Most notably, *Breaking Bad*, an AMC original program about a former chemistry teacher turned drug lord, was able to find its larger audience and eventual pop-culture notoriety due largely in part to its availability on Netflix in the years leading up to its final season. Netflix’s success in creating the streaming world was largely due to this binge-watching mindset, which has since stuck with Netflix throughout the years and greatly influenced and shaped their eventual era of original programming.

When Netflix prepared to launch their lineup of original programming, they sought to take the best parts of broadcast television as well as the best parts of binge-watching in hopes of creating the best possible viewing experience. For Netflix, this meant maximizing the potential for binge-watching. After all, that was what subscribers loved about the service and much of Netflix’s metrics for calculating profit are based around the number of people who binge.

Therefore, seasons of Netflix originals were released in their entirety rather than in a week-to-week format. The idea of dropping an entire season of a show at once meant that many aspects of the episode structure had to be reworked. In a network format, shows are created to be viewed one at a time, but in a binge format, they are meant to be viewed in their entirety as a singular piece of media, thus blurring the lines between individual episodes. The blurred lines between individual episodes begin to disregard what Mittel argues is one of the most crucial aspects of balancing a story’s seasonal narrative with its episodic structure. He writes: “Most episodes begin with some crucial markers, such as recaps of previous events, an opening title sequence of variable length, and credits that might run over the titles or early scenes; likewise, an episode almost always ends with closing credits, bumper cards identifying the production companies, and a preview of future narrative moment” (49). With Netflix largely doing away with things such as recaps or previews of outside episodes, it signals to the viewer that they are watching a singular story. Netflix even bolstered this mindset with shows only offering a recap at the beginning of a season, automatically skipping past the opening credits within the body of a television season and only
playing the closing credits once the viewer has reached the final episode. This further signals to the
viewer that they are no longer watching a series of episodes but a singular piece of a larger story.

Rather than episodes being viewed as just that—episodes of a larger story—programs view their
pieces as chapters of a larger story, going so far as to even name them as such in the case of *Stranger
Things*. As Anthony Smith notes in *Storytelling Industries*, “Many narrative designers working on Netflix
drama series similarly conceive of the season, rather than the episode, as a primary narrative unit. For
example, according to the narrative designers responsible, the first seasons of *Daredevil*, *Bloodline* and
*House of Cards* were each plotted as a 'a very large movie' rather than as a sequence of distinct episodes”
(94). This further gives weight to the idea that within a season of a television show, the individual pieces
are conceived as chapters or scenes of a larger story. The idea of the seasons of a Netflix show being told
as individual season stories rather than episodes that build into a season affects the way that Netflix lists a
show like *Stranger Things* on its platform. Unlike traditional shows or other shows being hosted on the
streaming platform, Netflix does not divide *Stranger Things* into individual seasons and instead denotes
its as *Stranger Things 1* or *Stranger Things 2* (Netflix). Naming each season with a sequential title makes
it resemble a movie franchise more than a television series.

While weekly broadcast television was predicated on the idea of viewers returning to the
program, Netflix’s programming is built on the viewer never leaving the program in the first place
(Jenner). It is important to note that it is so important to the Netflix structure for audiences to click the
“Next Episode” button that, unlike traditional television, Netflix measures a show’s viability largely
around how quickly a subscriber works their way through a series. As Lynn Kozak and Martin Zeller-
Jacques write in *Binge Watching and Contemporary Studies*, “Two of Netflix’s key metrics for
determining a show’s success are ‘survivability’—how many viewers who watch the first few episodes of a
show continue to watch the rest—and ‘28-day viewership’—how many viewers watch through a whole
series within a month of starting it” (449). Therefore, it is in the best interest of the writers and the
creators of a television show on Netflix to create episodes that specifically leave you wanting more. Their
jobs literally depend on it. While this is the goal of any writer, Netflix shows have the tendency to simply
take shortcuts by cutting what would be the wrap-up of an A/B/C storyline and leaving the conclusion for the next episode.

Everything within the storyline of an episode is built to make the viewer want to continue watching. Therefore, by that logic, storylines within episodes are rarely conclusive and satisfactory. If an episode is satisfactory, then the viewer may turn it off and come back later, which would defy the nature of a binge watch. Often, within an episode of *Stranger Things*, the climax and culmination within a storyline is stopped just before the end of the episode so that one will not feel the conclusion unless they continue watching, making it more of an easy cliffhanger than that seen in *LOST*. However, by starting a new episode, new subplots are introduced which start the cycle over again. For example, in the second episode of the third season, “Chapter Two: The Mall Rats,” the viewer follows what seems to be the central storyline—Billy’s possession and his efforts to lure victims into possession alongside him. However, the storyline abruptly ends during the third act without any conclusion. It is not picked up again until the following episode when we see Billy and the newly possessed Heather kidnapping her parents to fulfill the antagonist’s the plans. By abruptly breaking up the story, *Stranger Things* forces the viewer to keep watching in hopes of finding answers before the process repeats itself. It often is not until a season finale in *Stranger Things* that we see the storylines reach some sort of conclusion before giving way to a final cliffhanger that promises to redefine the direction of the show in the way that *LOST*’s flashbacks might.

Building *Stranger Things* storylines from a complete seasonal package and releasing it as such can prove a gamble for a streaming service. Unlike many broadcast shows, which are still in the production process as the initial episodes air, Netflix must trust the fact that they are telling the ideal story to their subscribers as they deliver their story in completion. While most notable in sitcoms, it is not unheard of for network shows to take audience feedback on a show’s initial string of episodes and have it alter the focus or character details of later episodes. Of course, Netflix takes audience feedback into account when they return to create additional seasons, but they miss out on the potential for those changes to take place gradually as the story progresses. This can often create a more jarring change in storyline for
viewers, such as the jump from Steve Harrington’s roots as an apparent school bully and popular kid in season one of Stranger Things to his underexplained redemption as a member of the team in season two. Netflix and creatives never intended for Steve to become the breakout hit of the first season and were pushed, therefore, to change what they had initially planned. However, because of this, all of his character growth happens off-screen and is left for the viewer to accept at the start of season two.

This is not to say that the narrative structure surrounding Netflix’s original programming, namely Stranger Things, is not without its merits. The freedom of Netflix’s on-demand structure allows for far more creativity to be given to the production team than what is attainable in a traditional network setting. Streaming shows do not have to fill a full 22-episode season or create “filler” episodes that many network shows see over the years (Jenner). While most episodes of Stranger Things adhere to a traditional time frame for a drama series, the creative team is able to stretch the length as they see fit, and episodes often range from forty-three minutes to an hour and thirty-eight minutes. This is in contrast to a network broadcast, which must limit episodes to forty-two minutes to adhere to the larger schedule at play and maintain allotments for advertisements.

Similarly, there are many instances where shows that did not make it in an ad-focused network and received premature cancellation were given a second chance in the world of streaming, including shows like Netflix’s Lucifer. As John Ellis writes in Storytelling and Television Today regarding the shifts in narrative structure towards binge-watching, “The main change is that television drama storytelling tends to be made for a longer period of active consumption than previously. It has less ‘currency.’ Some of the role of what was once ‘for the moment’ TV drama has now been taken by narratively driven reality and challenge shows. Drama is pretty explicitly constructed now for ‘boxset’ viewing, for binge-watching, or watching in the user’s own time and convenience.” (162). This push for narrativity that is driven by longer periods of consumption is in contrast to the serialized structure that is driven by potential ad revenue found in weekly time blocks with commercials.

The lack of focus centered around potential advertising revenue also means that a certain level of creative freedom is given to the very idea of a show’s lifespan. Unlike Stranger Things, LOST was milked
for all it was worth once ABC executives realized it was a big financial hit. The creative team behind *LOST* notably said years after the show’s finale that they had originally envisioned the show to end after its third season but were chained to the desires of network executives to not see an early end to potential profits. Therefore, *LOST* continued for an additional three seasons. And, as previously noted, given broadcast television’s need to keep viewers coming back week after week, it required a certain expectation of upping the bargain each week. Given that the show *begins* with a plane crashing on a mysterious tropical island inhabited by polar bears, there is only so much escalation that can happen until the viewer no longer believes the stakes and gives up on the show. This mindset is encapsulated in the fact that most people who were at one time fans of the program look back on its final seasons with distaste and outright bitterness—even ten years later (El-Mahmoud). *Stranger Things*’s focus on a seasonal structure rather than individual episodes eliminates much of the threat of this issue.

*Stranger Things*, however, often fails to achieve the emotional depth of shows with a serial network release simply because of the amount of time that viewers spend with characters. From a narrative standpoint, this can often result in the emotional beats of the show not producing nearly the same level of reaction that they might have had in a traditional broadcast format. Given the nature of binging, a viewer has sometimes spent but a day with a character in comparison to the weeks that they might have spent with the same character in a weekly broadcast.

For example, one of the most memorable moments in *LOST*’s runtime was the season three death of Charlie Pace. In the final moments of the episode, viewers watch as Charlie sacrifices himself in hopes of saving the other survivors and drowns within the underwater DHARMA station. In his final moments, he struggles to pass along the information he came across on his mission, writing out a message on his hand to show the other characters and audience as he fights to stay above the rising water. While there is no doubt that there is a certain level of emotion present in the scene whether or not the viewer is familiar with the story, this emotion is magnified given how long the audience has had to get to know Charlie and watch his growth as a character. Viewers were given three years watch Charlie evolve from his struggles with addiction and the ways that affected his life before he achieved sobriety on the island. Viewers
watched as he found love with fellow survivor Claire before becoming a father figure to Claire’s newborn son. The three years of history that viewers had with Charlie did not end on screen. Given the weekly nature of LOST’s episodes, viewers were able to build further attachments with what they hoped Charlie may one day become. And yet, in the season three finale, viewers had no choice but to come to terms with the end of this character’s life.

In comparison, arguably one of the more impactful deaths in Stranger Things was that of Bob Newby, the boyfriend of Winona Ryder’s Joyce Byers. Bob is introduced in the premiere episode of the second season. Bob then dies six episodes later. In Netflix’s ideal world of binging, a viewer who started the season upon waking would barely have had time for Second Breakfast before Bob was dead. Despite dying in sacrificial circumstances that resemble Charlie’s, unlike in LOST, viewers are given only a few hours to get to know and care about the character before this happens. The viewer has little to no backstory about why this is a monumental character choice as they had with Charlie’s development over the course of three seasons. Given the very nature of the two delivery methods, there is not the opportunity for viewers to develop emotional bonds to characters in the same way, which potentially takes away from well-written deaths and emotional beats that otherwise might have had a long-term cultural staying power.

For better or worse, broadcast shows allow time to develop and build audience connections with storylines and characters, however these effects are largely byproducts of the role that maintaining and growing ratings play in the commercial success of a show. Similarly, Netflix’s economic push for binge-watching allows for a condensed focus on the story and the creator’s artistic vision without the limitations of relying on weekly ad revenue, but lose out on the proposed benefits of drawn out narrative buildup and the fan culture that accompanies it.
Chapter Two: Changes in Fan Culture

Ian Christie reminds us that storytelling includes two parts, according to Walter Benjamin, who argued that the role of audience response and communal participation was equally as important to the artform as the initial narrative itself (12). However, I argue that the personalized nature of Netflix’s binge-watching format potentially hurts the sense of communal and diverse participation that arises in the ways that other release strategies do or that the shows themselves have garnered from word-of-mouth rise to gradual popularity. As previously stated, I am mostly focusing on fan engagement data collected from online fan engagement such as social media interactions due to the easily traceable nature of when these engagement examples took place as well as the fact that the internet has become an equally accessible platform for fan engagement in today’s world. Without a common ground such as a weekly time slot that most broadcast shows have and the modes of interaction that rise from that such as live tweeting and meme reactions of the previously discussed narrative community that lasts beyond a show’s release period. Instead, extreme sides of fandoms have become more prevalent with the rise of streaming, and many fandoms are losing sight of fans that bridge the gap between the extremes.

With a lack of diversity amongst fan levels, it is not dissimilar to the different methods of fan activities that Henry Jenkins suggests exist within his proposed levels of fan engagement. Again, according to Jenkins, there are five levels of fandom activity:

1. The fans who maintain a close and emotional connection with a piece of work. They “watch television with close and undivided attention, with a mix of emotional proximity and critical distance.”

2. The fans who adopt a community’s “set of critical and interpretive practices” by engaging with each other and the texts and have a shared level of understanding and knowledge of the world’s rules.
3. Fans who adopt a sense of “consumer activism” and share their opinions and beliefs with creators about how they feel storylines should play out.

4. Fans that engage with creating transformative works and “possess particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices. Fan artists, writers, videomakers, and musicians create works that speak to the special interests of the fan community.”

5. Fans who use a piece of media to create an “alternative social community” for themselves.

(Jenkins 277-280)

Despite being off the air for over a decade, LOST maintains a fan base that is active to this day on its most extreme level as well as the descending levels that rewatch and discuss the show occasionally on social media. Of course, this is not to say that shows like Stranger Things are without a fan base. That could not be further from the truth. Stranger Things has a very active and devoted fan base; however, the way that the fanbase interacts with the show and with one another greatly differs from that of shows that do not adhere to the binge-structure. With much of Stranger Things, there are fans on each side of this spectrum but not as much diversity in the middle seasons that relied purely on the binge-watching mentality. And while there are many reasons as to how and why these differences arise, including narrative structures and modes of delivery, one of the main differences is due to the lack of potential for a communal aspect to binge-watching in the way that exists in broadcast television.

By the late 2010s, live-tweeting arguably became half of the experience of any given episode of popular television. Shows, both streaming and broadcast, promoted official hashtags in order to encourage live engagement with shows. Hye Jin Lee and Mark Andrejevic theorize as much in their work Second Screen Theory:

The second-screen promise is to reassemble audiences around viewing-a shared-event and to thereby reconfigure a version of television viewing as social ritual—not because viewing cannot be time-shifted, but because doing so would mean losing out on a proliferating array of interactive affordances and the forms of social networking they enable (43).
With the advent of on-demand viewing, there has been a push to bring viewers back to scheduled viewing blocks with the idea of livetweeting so that the viewing experience becomes an opportunity for social ritual and an event to interact with others. It can be argued that live-tweeting is an easy stepping stone into Jenkins’s model of fan engagement. While it is not necessarily at the extreme level of fans that create their own works and communities centered around a given piece of media, live-tweeting and reacting to a given show in real time is undeniably one step further than those who simply watch a show without engaging in fan culture. LOST is not immune to this idea of a second-screen promise. While it is hard to track specific reactions to pivotal episodes of LOST, given that social media and the concept of live-tweeting was still in its early stages, statistics show that there were nearly half a million tweets over the course of the twelve hours during and following the show’s series finale along with an average of about thirty thousand tweets per week in the episodes leading up to the finale (Trendrr). Similarly, pop cultural juggernauts like HBO’s Game Of Thrones or AMC’s The Walking Dead regularly hold the top trending spots on the nights of their release while shows such as The Bachelor are rife with live-tweeting.

Additionally, when it comes to LOST, fans have forty-two minutes of story to dissect over the course of the week, and their time starts the moment the episode airs on television. As Jason Mittel writes, complex television such as LOST allows for “viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement” (38). Those who sought LOST’s online discussions went into them with the expectations of seeing the most recently aired content. Archived data from some of the more popular forum sites, such as TheFuselage or 4815162342.com (the frequently appearing sequence of numbers throughout the series), reported over 100,000 registered users at the height of the show’s popularity in 2008. While these fan sites may no longer be available online, the subreddit dedicated to LOST has an average of a hundred comments each day.

Almost every episode of LOST unlocked potential for theorizing and re-analyzing previous episodes, especially with regard to how LOST’s previously discussed narrative structure spurned an opportunity to reframe previous character decisions with reveals made in later episode flashbacks. These episodes had the potential to unlock anything from a character’s motives in a previous episode to a new
clue that would aid solving the mystery of the island itself, such as with the previously mentioned season three finale reveal that the offshore boat that survivors had seen did not belong to the previously believed Penny. This reveal left fans with a reframed idea for the entire storyline to discuss and unpack as they worked to figure out who the boat may have belonged to instead. And given the fact that every person involved in these online discussions was on a level playing field with regards to spoilers, this allowed for interaction between any level of fan. Therefore, a fan who, according to Jenkins’s model, was on a 1-2 level of fan engagement could end up interacting with a fan who was so dedicated to the show that they were able to cite timestamps in answer to a question the lesser fan had about the story. As Mittell writes on the nature and importance of simultaneous viewing: “This mode of fan engagement is dependent on simultaneous viewership, with everyone at the same point of the story, enabling a collaborative group process of decoding and engagement. Although LOST will continue to be watched via DVD, downloads, and streaming (and future distribution technologies) for years to come, the broader experience of communal serialized viewing is tied to the original broadcast moment” (51). The act of communal serialized viewing that came with LOST is why so many of its pivotal moments, such as the “Penny’s Boat” reveal last in the viewer’s memory.

One of the most prominent ways of furthering fan engagement includes seeking out additional forms of media that tend to be found in fandom circles, as noted in the middle tiers of Jenkins’s theory. One way that is more and more common with regard to television fan circles is that of podcast recaps. It can be argued that LOST itself spearheaded the trend of television recap and discussion podcasts due to the deal that ABC made with Apple upon the launch of iTunes Podcasts in 2005 to have the platform host the official LOST Podcast. In conjunction with the eagerly anticipated second season of LOST, the podcast featured various cast and creative team members who would come together each week and discuss the events of the most recent episode and how it might play into the future storylines as well as past storylines. The notion of such a podcast further pushed the idea that LOST was a show that was meant to be discussed and theorized in the time following an episode release. Of course, the official podcast was not the only one of its kind and several other unofficial ones quickly followed suit over the
years. The week-to-week release structure of broadcast television lends itself to be easily adapted to a companion podcast, and nowadays, there is a podcast for just about everything on television.

While much of the first season’s popularity and initial fan base are no doubt due to the first season’s masterful storytelling, I believe the slow and communal discovery of Stranger Things also played a large role similarly to how communal discovery played a role in LOST’s popularity. Despite obvious differences previously mentioned in regards to the immediate gratification that comes with the binge-watching structure in comparison to the slow growth in popularity to broadcast television, Stranger Things’s initial season and rise to popularity had an almost similarly slow growth in popularity that many broadcast shows see over the initial release of episodes. Like much of the original programming from Netflix, Stranger Things initially spread largely through word-of-mouth, with very little pre-release marketing to grab a viewer’s attention (Duran). Unlike later seasons’ implied sense of urgency from both by fans and Netflix itself in consuming the content as soon as it was released, the first season had a slow growth to its status within the cultural zeitgeist of 2016. I, myself, had never even heard of the show until it was recommended to me in passing by the on-duty manager of my high school job who knew what a fan I was of anything evocative of Spielbergian stories. Unlike other shows that have months and months of pre-release marketing, Stranger Things largely grew to popularity by sharing it between consumers until everyone seemed to be watching it. There was very little fear of logging online to social media and having the show spoiled as everyone else was discovering it at largely the same pace. And, given Netflix’s binge model, it still allowed viewers to have the instant gratification of a complete story being told at their preferred and chosen pace- whether it be over the course of several hours or days.

Just as so much of LOST’s cultural power was rooted in the theorizing and discussions that came with it week-to-week in fan discussions or podcasts, much of that potential is unattainable in Netflix’s binge-watch structure beyond an initial burst of activity. In fact, it becomes hard to develop the same responsive fan base within a binge-watch structure that exists in broadcast shows like LOST.

In weekly broadcast television, time is the great equalizer. No matter how big of a fan one might have been of LOST or any other weekly release show, they needed to dedicate one hour of their week to
watching the show in order to participate in the community-building that followed. When it comes to binging, the time commitment one must agree to in order to participate in fan culture is on average twelve times as great, not to mention the fact that the timer for the aforementioned twelve hours start at midnight PST. With a gap of one hour in the evening to twelve hours in the middle of night, the level of dedication required to participate in the initial discussions of a binged-watched series grows exponentially. Priority is given to the fans who are willing to give up an entire night’s sleep to take in the new content so that they might be at the forefront of discussions. However, these discussions are then limited to fellow diehard fans of the show. What is more, while a viewer is welcome to go online and post to their heart’s content about the events of a newly released streaming season, it is largely considered a social media faux-pas to do so without giving others a chance to watch first. Those who ignore these rules risk losing a following on social media or public ridicule for ignoring the community rules, which are sometimes unwritten. Instead, fans are left to discuss episodes with those who are actively watching with them or within their own private online circles, prefacing everything said with a warning of spoilers. A search on Twitter for “Stranger Things Spoilers” reveals that almost a year after its premiere, viewers who were tweeting reactions still felt the need to preface any commentary with a spoiler warning. Therefore, with the common acceptance of live-tweeting for broadcast television, it is interesting to note that the rules of engagement are so different when it comes to streaming. It is not as if the cultural pendulum has swung in the other direction as there are still plenty of serialized shows that all but market themselves on the potential for live reactions, but there is a generally agreed upon distaste for live-tweeting that applies to Netflix. With the inability to post without fear of consequences, the already personalized viewing experience grows smaller. The die-hard fans who begin watching the moment the show is released retreat to their own private circles where the rules of engagement are followed while everyone else approaches social media in the days following walking on eggshells in case a spoiler shows up on their feed.

Because of this reaction, later seasons of Stranger Things saw a more distinct separation between Jenkins’s proposed levels of fan engagement, with higher-level fans having the tendency to keep to their own circles while more casual viewers were left on the sidelines. The fear of coming across unwanted
spoilers makes some question the binge-watching method altogether. As the user AzrielK posted on reddit with regards to the second season of the show, “I don't binge-watch stuff. The reason why I did this was to avoid spoilers. I've blocked most of the internet at the start of the fall season. The worst part is that I regret doing it. Binge-watching something ruins the quality of the content. Instead of embracing every moment of something, and giving your mind a chance to think it through, you are speeding through a complex and multi-faceted storyline” (Reddit). Of course, there were many who disagreed with AzrielK and ridiculed the user for making the decision to binge, calling the Reddit poster “ridiculous” because they were given the opportunity to watch it at their chosen speed, but it is hard to ignore the truth in that some see binge-watching as a somewhat necessary measure to take in order to avoid spoilers as even large publications such as Entertainment Weekly were known to post spoiler reviews of the show within hours of its release (Peterson). And due to the lack of discourse in opinion on this matter beyond the occasional post, only those who adhere to the accepted binging opinions remain active.

The personalized timelines of consumption also limit the potential memetic nature that comes with so much of pop culture engagement in today’s world. Like with live-tweeting reactions, so much of fan engagement is based around the replication and personalization of standout moments in an episode of television as memes. In traditional weekly broadcast, there might be one or two moments per episode that are then replicated and used for comedic purposes in the days following release compared to the condensed nature of a binge-watching narrative, which presents these opportunities for an entire season rather than one episode at a time. Unlike later seasons, the slow build of awareness in the first season of Stranger Things allowed for many viral moments associated with the show. These memorable moments included the surprise popularity of characters like Barb and Steve. In the months following the release of the first season, tweets regarding “Justice for Barb” grew to be so popular that the showrunners of Stranger Things promised to give her character proper closure in the second season, echoing the third proposed level of engagement for Jenkins (Stefansky). These moments of widespread virality, such as when aspects of the first season went beyond tweets and as far as parodies on late-night television, including Barb on Late Night with Jimmy Fallon, were largely due to how the popularity of the show
slowly grew and spread over the course of several months. One would think that if so much of Netflix’s marketing strategy relied on maximizing the potential for social media trends and memes, they would cater their release strategy to aid a sense of ramping up popularity like the original season. It is unclear as to why Netflix does not take more of an advantage of a gradual build-up, but a lot of seems to rely on the idea that Netflix does not yet see a reason to change a model that has worked this well for them for so long.

Even still, the few moments that come out of later seasons of Stranger Things lack the resonating power of the first season’s Christmas lights or frozen waffles or the most recent season’s reference to Kate Bush’s song “Running up That Hill.” This may be due in part to the later seasons of the show having less of an impact on audiences owed to the varied fan engagement. Parodies or references to Stranger Things in outside media often return to the iconic imagery of the first season rather than things that happened in the second or third season as seen below in an episode of The Simpsons.

![Figure 1: Parodies or references to Stranger Things (Fox. Used with Fair Use.)](image)

It wasn’t until the most recent season of Stranger Things, which notably had a split release schedule that allowed for an extended period of fan engagement, that the show demonstrated the cultural prominence of the original season. In the season four episode “Dear Billy,” the climactic scene of Max finding the strength to outrun the antagonist because of her favorite song became an iconic meme throughout much of 2022. Fans of the show immediately recreated and parodied the scene with their own song choices, with the trend #VecnaSong having over seven billion views on Tiktok. Similarly, on Twitter, people photoshopped album covers of their own choosing onto screenshots from the show, as seen below from Twitter user @anrolinginddeep.
Similarly, by looking at the statistics of iconic keyword searches in relation to both *LOST* and middle seasons of *Stranger Things*, the differences in engagement levels becomes painfully obvious. Given the aforementioned emotional narrative beats of the similarly sacrificial deaths of Charlie Pace and Bob Newby as well as the similar backgrounds between actors, comparisons between their impact are well matched. An initial search of both of these terms with corresponding dates of the show’s airing yielded the following results:

Figure 2: Photoshopped Album Cover from Twitter (Twitter user “anrolinginddeep. Used with Fair Use.)
As one can see in the results for Bob Newby, there is an initial spike in late 2017, which correlates with the premiere of the second season of *Stranger Things*. The number of searches then returns to near-zero before spiking again in July 2019, which correlates with the season three premiere of *Stranger Things* before flatlining once more until the season four release in 2022. In comparison, Charlie’s search results were far more lively. We can see a regular pattern of searches before a major spike in May 2007, which correlates with the premiere of the episode in when he dies. However, even
after that point, Charlie’s searches continue a normal pattern of activity even through 2020, ten years after
the show’s ending. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the weekly release had a more profound response
with viewers in the long term than the streaming release.
Conclusion

In a post-pandemic world, the practice of consuming art becomes even more personalized. For so many people, the last several years have become manageable through the use of online spaces, and it is hard to consider as people have begun to return to the workplace in 2022, they still are unable to engage to the same extent with these specific types of media due to the gatekeeping that occurs when one is unable to keep up with the speed of the most involved viewer. In light of these societal changes, it is important to note that there has been a steady drop in the stronghold that Netflix once held in the streaming world that they pioneered, reporting in July 2022 their largest quarterly drop in subscribers (Forristall). While so much of their original business model centered around catering to the on-demand nature that was desired at the time, they have seemingly failed to adjust to the shifting perspectives and preferences for a prolonged release period as seen with other streaming services with regards to media consumption beyond recent moves to split a binge watch between two dates with the fourth season of *Stranger Things*.

In the wake of Netflix’s struggle to maintain their hold on the streaming world, other services have learned from the juggernaut’s mistakes. Almost every other major streaming service such as Disney+, Hulu, and AppleTV now employs some variation of a weekly release, with most catering to a combination between the two formats with an initial drop of two to three episodes that help satisfy the desire to binge before switching to a weekly release. Apple TV in particular has seemed to crack the code for a happy medium between the two formats, especially with the rise in popularity of their show *Ted Lasso*. Like many of Apple TV’s shows, *Ted Lasso* has an initial release of multiple episodes in order to help generate the binge-watching experience before switching to the benefits of prolonged engagement for viewers and the services themselves – three months for a season means two additional months of subscription, which is good for the business’s bottom line. The additional time also allows for a longer
engagement period for fans to interact with one another. *Ted Lasso* has become so popular among audiences that the demand for the show is twenty-seven times that of the average television program in the United States, according to reports by ParrotAnalytics. While there are benefits to the binge-watch format, with shows finding a second life upon their release on streaming platforms or the artistic control that is given to creators when they are allowed to tell a predetermined story without having to worry about advertisement reactions, when shows rely entirely on the format, an element of fan engagement is often lost.
References


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CONCLUSION

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