The Constant Search: A Study of Information Phenomena in ‘Lost’

Andrea Lau

Andrea Lau is currently completing her Master of Information degree at the University of Toronto in Library and Information Science. She has been a fan of ‘Lost’ since September 22, 2004. The show inspired four of her papers in the fall term of 2010 - ‘The Constant Search’ is one of them. This paper is the product of an exploratory, ethnographic field study that required Andrea to revisit her favourite island.

Abstract

Time travel, true love and information-seeking behaviour converge on televisual terrain in this study of how a character on ‘Lost’ tries to make sense of his predicament in the season four episode ‘The Constant.’ To devoted viewers, each chapter in the story is fraught with meaning - screenshots were analyzed, sounds were played in reverse, names and numbers were treated as potential clues to the show’s many mysteries. This paper focuses on a single hour in the labyrinth of ‘Lost’ and examines how memory, expertise, and trust are instrumental in bridging information gaps. In addition, this foray into imaginary information spaces describes the mechanics of collecting data from the fictional field and analyzing it within the context of sense-making theory.

Introduction

When Oceanic Flight 815 crashes on a mysterious tropical island inhabited by polar bears and a monster made of smoke, it lands in an information jungle where questions are abundant and answers scarce. As the survivors struggle to find sustenance and protect themselves, they must also cope with overwhelming entropy and information poverty. Studying fictional worlds from an information perspective presents exciting opportunities and challenges, a statement substantiated here by the field data collected from ‘Lost,’ the multilayered television serial that aired from 2004 to 2010, and caused fans much frustration and fascination. This paper focuses on a single hour of the show, providing an analysis of the information phenomena occurring in the season four episode ‘The Constant.’

The hero of this tale is Desmond Hume, who has been marooned on the island for years but finally manages to board a helicopter. However, leaving triggers an unexpected side effect: Desmond’s consciousness becomes unstuck in time, flashing back and forth between 1996 and 2004. If he cannot find something familiar in both timelines to anchor himself - a constant - his brain will short-circuit, resulting in death. As Desmond searches for a way to make contact with his constant, the woman he loves, he must rely on his own memory, the knowledge and expertise of others, and the power of trust in order to successfully navigate his chaotic circumstances. ‘The Constant’ is at once a time travel adventure story, an epic romance, and an unusual case study in information-seeking behaviour.
**Literature Review**

This is not the first episode to feature Desmond in an “ambiguous temporal rupture,” as Mittell (2009, p.132) describes it. Desmond has experienced similar difficulties in the season three episode ‘Flashes Before Your Eyes,’ and Mittell suggests that in order to understand these episodes and their larger narrative importance, viewers should always be aware of storytelling norms and violations thereof, constantly ready to ask questions about the show’s treatment of temporality (p.132). Lost viewers number among those who challenge the idea of watching television as a passive activity; in online fan forums and scholarly articles alike, they demonstrate enthusiastic engagement with the show, theorizing about science and faith, free will and destiny, as well as physics, philosophy, and mythology. Academics express their appreciation by publishing their Lost-related work in books, some of which I cite in this paper. Scholarly interest in televisual texts “can help posit television as a more legitimate and culturally validated medium” (Mittell, p.136), and I hope that with ‘The Constant Search’ I have made a small contribution to this objective.

TV shows, like all fictional creations, hold meaning for us because they tap into some aspect of the human experience. “And when they are not only meaningful, but gripping and fascinating,” Barris argues, “it is because they connect with something important or basic to our lives” (2008, p.254). As Desmond strives to fill his information gaps and find a way back to his constant, I also strive to gain insight into his mindset and actions, and we both learn that the process of understanding is not static: “humans are involved in a constant journey through sense-makings and sense-unmakings” (Dervin, 1999, p.731). In our ongoing state of “not knowing how it all makes sense, the theme of being ‘lost’ wonderfully captures a basic part of the human situation” (Barris, p.261). The visual representation below (Figure 1) maps the frequency of words which appear in the episode transcript, showing that ‘The Constant’ focuses on Desmond the individual, or the “I.” Surrounding him are the people with whom he interacts, information need, information to tell… and there also exists the quality of the unknown.

**Research Methods**

Conducting information research on an isolated island populated by a variety of hostile creatures might be hazardous to the health, but the advantage of studying a fictional environment is that one only needs to turn on the television for a trip to the island. I focused on Desmond,
confident that I would not violate any human subject protocols, and the people and places he visits to seek information in order to stop his imminent time-travel-induced death. Desmond’s unique situation required an idiographic approach, concentrated on his individual actions as he attempts to bridge significant gaps in his knowledge. The overarching sensitizing concept, as would be the case with any researcher working in an imaginary landscape, is that I am in effect omniscient in this universe and from the beginning I already knew how Desmond’s story ends.

Collecting data was a simple matter of observing what happens and making jottings, so my opinions and biases as a viewer may have coloured my interpretation of events. I watched the episode twice, taking an emic/participant observation approach on the first viewing and scribbling notes from Desmond’s perspective. I followed him around without pausing or rewinding the episode, while he figured it out one harried step at a time. In my second viewing, I used a more omniscient point of view, slowing my frenetic note-taking and applying a more methodical, etic approach to see how his behaviour is affected by external agents. I tried to look at Desmond’s situation within the context of sense-making concepts: time, space, movement, gap, power, constraint and force (Dervin, p.743), since sense-making theory was developed to study information needs, seeking, and use (Dervin, p.729). I formulated questions and considered the answers and their implications: What is he trying to do? Who or what helps or hinders him? Who does he exchange information with in order to figure out what is happening to him and how to save himself? Where/when is he each time his consciousness experiences a flash? What does he try to do in each flash? The idea of the inseparable inner and outer worlds of human beings is fundamental to sense-making’s meta-theoretical assumptions: we are “moving from a past, in a present, to a future, anchored in material conditions; yet at the same time with an assumed capacity to sense-make abstractions, dreams, memories, plans, ambitions, fantasies, stories, pretenses that can both transcend time-space and last beyond specific moments in time-space” (Dervin, p.730).

In addition, I also consulted the episode transcript, online fan discussions and any relevant literature. Finally, I experimented with different visual representations - timelines, graphs, Venn diagrams. I began with the assumption that the linearity of his timeline (or lack thereof) was key to mapping his movements throughout the episode and illustrating the data, but as it turned out, the themes that emerged during coding and analysis of my field notes are not overly concerned with where or when Desmond was, but rather the people he encountered there. It is due to this social framework of human interaction that he could create and use memories, receive external help from experts, and build and renew bonds of trust - all of which ensured his survival.

**Preliminary Findings**

**Memory**

Desmond experiences the first flash while the helicopter is flying through a sudden storm to reach an offshore freighter. He struggles with a confining seatbelt...
while alarms blare, electricity crackles, and unfamiliar voices shout at him to keep still. When Desmond reverts to his 1996 consciousness, he loses all the memories of his 2004 self. He has no idea why he is on the helicopter, and it is this loss of memory that initiates his information-seeking behaviour. On the freighter, he is able to speak on the phone with Daniel Faraday, a scientist who is still on the island:

**Daniel:** We met yesterday before you took off? But I’m guessing you don’t remember that. Am I right?

**Desmond:** Took off? What?

**Daniel:** Desmond, we don’t have long to talk so I need you to tell me what year you think it is.

**Desmond:** What do you mean, what year do I think it - it’s 1996!

**Daniel:** All right, Desmond, you gotta tell me... where are you?

**Desmond:** Um... I’m in some kind of sick bay...

**Daniel:** No, no, not right now, Desmond. Where are you supposed to be? Where are you in 1996?

Daniel uses the memory of 1996 Desmond to figure out where he belongs and where they can go from there to solve the problem. As Desmond tries to interpret this new reality in which he finds himself, it is a testament to how our environments are constantly in flux, taken to a surreal level, because of “differences in how humans see reality arising from their differing anchorings in time-space; and differences in how humans construct interpretive bridges over a gappy reality” (Dervin, p.731).

Ultimately, it is Desmond’s memory of Penelope, the love of his life, that anchors him.

Memory is not simply something that Desmond has lost - it is also the tool he relies on as he moves between realities. He uses his memory to retain the information he has obtained, since written information cannot bridge the two time periods, as he discovers when Daniel gives him verbal directions.

**Daniel:** When it happens again, Desmond, I need you to get on a train. Get on a train and go to Oxford. Oxford University. Queens College Physics Department. All right?

**Desmond:** What, why?

**Daniel:** Because I need you to find me.

2004 Daniel proceeds to give Desmond complicated instructions in how to obtain 1996 Daniel’s help. This involves a code of sorts: Desmond must tell 1996 Daniel to “set the device to 2.342” and to make sure it is “oscillating at 11 hertz,” information that is the solution to Daniel’s time travel experiment with a rat. The success of the experiment would convince 1996 Daniel that Desmond is, in fact, a time traveler from the future. The problem with relaying this information is that Desmond has no way of documenting it - his mind is jumping back and forth, but his physical body is not time traveling. He scrawls the numbers on his hand in 2004; a heartbeat later, he is back in his 1996 body staring at his unmarked palm. The only way to make a record is by committing it to his memory, and fortunately, whatever Desmond’s affliction is, it is not short-term memory loss.
Expertise/Technology

During Desmond’s quest, eight people provide him with assorted information; ten if Daniel and Penelope, who appear in both the 1996 and 2004 timelines, are counted twice. All of them are knowledgeable in different areas, but of all these characters, Daniel, Sayid and Penny play the most important roles.

If anyone can be said to be an expert on Desmond’s situation, it is Daniel. He has studied time travel and other temporal anomalies, and he is the one who tells Desmond how he can make it stop: by finding a constant:

_Daniel_: All this, see, this is all variables, it’s random, it’s chaotic. Every equation needs stability, something known. It’s called a constant. Desmond, you have no constant. When you go to the future, nothing there is familiar. So if you want to stop this, then you need to find something there... something that you really, really care about... that also exists back here, in 1996.

_Desmond_: This constant - can it be a person?

_Daniel_: Yeah, maybe. But you have to make some kind of contact. Didn’t you say you were off on a boat, in the middle of nowhere? … Uh, who are you calling?

_Desmond_: I’m calling my bloody constant.

This attempted phone call fails because at this point in 1996, Desmond and Penny have ended their relationship, and Penny has moved and changed her phone number. However, Desmond now has a purpose in 1996, thanks to Daniel’s expertise: he must seek out Penny’s father, learn her new address, visit her at her London flat, and convince her to give him her phone number so he can call her in 2004 - none of which he can accomplish without the wonderful technology of the telephone (and, it is assumed, an efficient, if offscreen, transportation system).

Desmond is only able to obtain 1996 Daniel’s help because he was directed by 2004 Daniel, and he could only communicate with 2004 Daniel via satellite phone. The device was put in his hand by Sayid, a former soldier and a technology expert who is by 2004 Desmond’s side throughout his ordeal. When they arrive in the freighter’s radio room to call Penny, they discover the equipment has been sabotaged. Sayid simply says, “I need a minute,” and calmly goes about his repairs. As Desmond navigates his information gaps each time his consciousness experiences a flash, “each new here-and-now always includes the potential for not merely grabbing an understanding already constructed but creating one that is new at least in part” (Dervin, p.741). Thanks to the expertise of others and the support of technology, Desmond creates the knowledge of what he must do, step by step, and eventually makes contact with Penny.
Trust

The shock of Desmond’s flashes is most visceral the first time. Not only is he suddenly and inexplicably inside an airborne helicopter, he is trapped in a roiling sky with men he doesn’t recognize, even though they speak to him as though they know him. Perhaps his plight would be slightly less alarming if he were not surrounded by complete strangers who appear to be feigning familiarity with him. “How do you know my name?!” he screams, and it is a question he keeps asking in different ways the rest of the day - a day that spans eight years. “Who are you people?” “Do I know you?”

Desmond encounters many strangers during his quest to solve his temporal troubles. On the freighter, Desmond meets people that neither the 1996 nor 2004 versions of himself have met before, such as Minkowski, the communications officer, who is strapped to a cot in the medical bay (but ends up trusting Desmond with some answers and leading him to the radio room). However, some of these ‘strangers’ are, in fact, friends of 2004 Desmond. He treats them as “either an unknown or possible foe, but in each timeline the unexpected friend gives Desmond the key to resolve the trauma of his experience” (Bauer, 2008). Daniel, the person who helps Desmond the most, is essentially a stranger, since 2004 Desmond only met him a day (or has it been a day?) before the helicopter took off from the island. And Sayid is Desmond’s closest ally - they met on the island and Desmond knows him to be fearless and resourceful, someone you would want on your side in a crisis. Sayid is instrumental in saving Desmond’s life, because although he does not understand why Desmond is behaving so erratically, he trusts his friend enough to help without asking why. ‘The Constant’ starts with the idea of friends suddenly becoming unrecognizable strangers, but throughout the episode different strangers provide vital information to Desmond, culminating in an establishment of mutual trust which is required to obtain crucial information and resolve his information-seeking encounters.

Trust is also required in love. In the episode’s climactic scene, Desmond visits Penny at her flat in 1996 and tries to persuade her to give him her new phone number - so that he may call her in 2004:

Desmond: I know this doesn’t make any sense, because it doesn’t make any sense to me. But eight years from now... I need to call you, and I can’t call you if I don’t have your number.

Penny: What?

Desmond: Look, Penny, just - just give me your number, and I... I know I’ve ruined things, and I know you think things are over between us, but they’re not. If there’s any part of you that still believes in us, just give me your number.

Penny: And what’s to say you won’t call me tonight, or tomorrow?


Despite being apart from each other for years, Desmond still feels that Penny is his constant and trusts that she can provide the information he desperately needs. At the same time, Penny must believe that giving him her phone number is a good idea, trust him with that information, and have enough faith not to change her number.
Dervin poses the question, “Are emotions the antithesis of information seeking and use, as has been traditionally assumed?” (p.748) This episode suggests otherwise, since only a constant that holds deep emotional meaning could save Desmond’s life. It is this connection to Penny and the reaffirmation of their love for one another that anchors him in time and space.

**Conclusion**

Successful ethnographic field studies often connect the personal to the intellectual, and just as Lost combines emotional character arcs with cerebral plotlines, an investment in the show can be channeled into academic research. Perhaps someday I will concatenate my research to follow Desmond’s story across all six seasons of the show, or study the evolution of island society throughout the whole series, or conduct macro-ethnographies of online fandom. After all, “humans and their worlds are constantly evolving and becoming, sometimes decentered, sometimes centered, sometimes fluid, sometimes rigid” (Dervin, p.731) - even our fictional worlds.

In ‘The Constant,’ Desmond, like the classical hero Odysseus, finally makes contact with his Penelope after being marooned on a strange island for years. And like her namesake, Penelope has been waiting. All information seekers are Odysseus on a quest for what they lack, what is missing, what is lost and what is home - the constant. “A central feature of Lost... and one that rivets our interest, is that everything seems to hint, but only to hint, at making sense. Tantalizingly, this is not enough sense to be quite understandable; it is a sense just beyond our grasp” (Barris, p.260). As an information explorer attempting to describe and map an imaginary setting, I set out trying to find an elusive thread, but even the title of the show is a reassuring reminder that we are expected to wander and to lose our way when seeking information: the information we hold in our memory, the information that we obtain via external technology, and the information that permeates and defines our relationships with other human beings. Though it is generally accepted in this reality that time travel and true love are improbable (or perhaps just rare) occurrences, the stakes are irrelevant.
We all have a stake in our own constant searches for meaning and for understanding, and it is how we move through this process that matters.

References


