Serial Narratives and Viewing Demands I
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If episodic storytelling is characterized by perpetual endings and re-beginnings, it is perhaps curious that endings are a dominant source of anxiety around serial storytelling, a narrative defined by continually delayed resolution. Does it end, or is canceled with little warning? Does it end on its own terms, or is it forced to finish when still in full swing? Does it end "well," or does the final conclusion fail to answer all of the remaining questions? For some shows, endings have the burden of validating or invalidating entire viewing experiences. I'm thinking here in particular about shows like *Lost*, of course, where so much pressure was placed on the show's finale to justify what was often a frustrating viewing experience. It's true for other shows similarly centered on plot, including mysteries or soap operas, where the resolution needs to present solved puzzle or a love triangle made square. But it's also true for shows more driven by character development, like *Friday Night Lights* or *Gilmore Girls*, where the final episodes are needed to bring a character to a stable conclusion or gesture toward a character's continuing future.

It makes sense that a serialized story pushes viewers away from a standard week-to-week viewing pattern, as continuing plotlines create desire for the next installment and make it pleasurable to view several episodes at once. Maybe a viewer will opt out of a show for a few weeks and then catch up all at once on DVR or hulu, or maybe he or she will wait until a season is completed and watch it all on DVD. More than just establishing a desire for multiple episodes at a time, though, the ability to view television outside of weekly installment structure allows viewers to hold off altogether until they can be sure that a show has ended. When season six of *Lost* appears on DVD, there will be nothing between you and a legal, uninterrupted, start-to-finish viewing experience. Aside from the promise of continuous narrative, alternate viewing technologies allow audiences to watch completed shows with a determinate length, as well as know in advance the circumstances of their endings. A viewer sitting down with *Deadwood* right now can choose to learn that its abrupt cancellation will likely lead to a frustrating resolution, or that despite its beginning appearance as a show centered on high school, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* will continue long enough for its characters to grow out of their awkward teenage years. The presence or absence of these two simple pieces of knowledge – how long a story will be, and how it will end – make serialized television stressful and potentially frustrating in the moment, and profoundly satisfying in retrospect. This, in large part, is why television serialization continues to be a topic of interest for television creators and viewers. It is the form of narrative that best strains the gap between traditional television viewing and alternate methods (how long will it be?), and it reflects viewers' anxieties away from the fiction and onto the creation process (how will it end?).

As a way of coping with the inevitable worry and potential dissatisfaction that comes from unknown endings, serialized television shows have also retained a much stronger episode structure than earlier forms of long-term storytelling, like the serialized novel. Without the benefit of a known end point, serial television shows often provide an impression of the episode as a whole unit, either by coupling the long-arc stories with episodic plotlines in shows like *The X-Files* or *House*, or by establishing the episode as a unit that is whole outside of, or in spite of, incomplete plot. Shows like *Mad Men* or *The*

Wire work with thematic or aesthetic motifs to displace any anxiety about large-scale endings onto episodes that are meant to be complete and satisfying as individual pieces as well as seamless parts of a longer story. This, too, is a reason for our continued consideration of serialized television as a form – its strong episode structure, even in shows that play with the limits of how porous an episode's boundaries can be, make it a different and more complicated type of serialization than simple long-form storytelling. Even in the most serialized shows, the divisions are still more powerful than the continuous line.