



Narrowly defined, a **cliff-hanger** is a climax cracked in half: the bomb ticks, the screen goes black. A lady wriggles on train tracks— will anyone save her? Italics on a black screen: *"To be continued..."*. More broadly, it's any strong dose of "What happens next?," the question that hovers in the black space between episodes. In the digital age, that gap is an accordion: it might be a week or eight months; it may arrive at the end of an episode or as a season finale or in the second before a click on "next."

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Climax (n) The point of highest dramatic tension or a major turning point in action.

By Andrew Romano, May 15, 2013

"Narrative potato chips"



"Binge watching," as scores of breathless critics have christened it, is increasingly common, especially among younger viewers who'd rather screen their favorite shows online, on demand, or on DVR than wait around for them to air once a week on old-fashioned TV. First you fall for a show, and then you watch it endlessly. Because you can. But that's only half of the equation. [...]

The bottom line is that binge watching is more than just a business story – more than just a story about new technologies and new modes of distribution. It's really a story about the science of storytelling itself. [...]

Hyperserials¹ always pose a clear question designed to propel the story forward. Who will rule the Seven Kingdoms? (*Game of Thrones*). Will Walter White live or die? (*Breaking Bad*). Will Carrie catch Brody? (*Homeland*). It's not that Hyperserials don't delve into² the complexities of character. They do. It's just that, unlike their predecessors, they place

equal emphasis on What Happens Next. [...]

Showrunners aren't scientists, of course. They rely on instinct to decide which chemicals to cook into our narrative potato chips. But where do their instincts guide them? And which chemicals are they relying on these days? To find out, I tracked down the man who was to blame for my first big bout³ of binge watching: Carlton Cuse of *Lost*. [...]

Lost was a weekly master class in narrative invention, and Cuse points to one particularly surprising – and effective – plot twist⁴ to illustrate how he and his fellow show-

runner, Damon Lindelof, did it. Over more than 70 episodes, Cuse and Lindelof conditioned the audience to construe any scene taking place off the island as a flashback to the survivors' previous lives. The Season 3 finale was full of such scenes. But then, at the end of the episode, Cuse and Lindelof revealed that all of the finale's off-island interludes were actually flash-forwards instead – previews of the characters' lives after escaping the island. As soon as I realized that I'd just caught a glimpse of where each character was destined to end up, I couldn't wait to find out how they'd get there.

1. long TV narratives that last over multiple episodes and seasons
 2. delve into: examine carefully

3. "attack" or "period"
 4. plot twist: unexpected change or development in a story