

# reviews

## Web

## The Eerie Reality of '24' Online Or, Why the '24' website scares me...

Review By Leigh Clemons

Ever been to the website for the FOX series 24? It's creepy. Really creepy. As the second season came crashing to an end (if you can call a cliffhanger an ending), I found that going out to the website to catch up on the show was more enjoyable than watching the actual program. Part of that may be because the episodes take an hour to unfold and reading the synopses, for me, takes about two minutes, even as involved as they are. Part of that may also be the inevitable mid-season slump that shows like '24' seem to have. The first season reached nadir about episode three, and for the second season, it has taken almost ten episodes, and it picked back up quickly. Most of the big plot twists, such as the nuclear bomb detonation, were revealed halfway through the season, and other strands of the story were left hanging, such as Nina's fate, leaving the viewers to puzzle over how everything is going to resolve itself, thus generating suspense. But it isn't as if I wasn't already watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer in the previous hour and planning on watching The Osbournes in the next, so why would a home-grown couch potato like me actually turn off the TV set and choose to get the scoop from the website 24 (pardon the pun) hours later?

Websites for TV shows have become almost as ubiquitous as the proliferation of shows themselves. Most shows have at least one "official" website and numerous fan-generated ones, not to mention prominent placement on mega-sites like [www.jumptheshark.com](http://www.jumptheshark.com). By the way, visitors to the aforementioned site claim that '24' never "jumped the shark," or reached an irreconcilable climax -- a rarity.

Part of it is site layout. As with most things '24,' the website reflects the atmosphere and tone of the show. The introduction to Fox's broadcast of the American Football NFC Championship game was a complete recreation of the '24' format. It was a great gimmick and more enjoyable than most of the Super Bowl commercials, except for the Budweiser one with the zebra watching the instant replay, but I digress. Upon reaching the site, click on the time clock at the bottom of screen and Kiefer Sutherland's bland, yet somehow menacing voice intones the now-famous, "The following takes place between...." Then, the synopsis of choice is launched. There is also the option of viewing the synopsis from the point-of-view of certain characters. This means that, when the character

dies or disappears from the story line, the synopses just...stop. Also, if a character listed in the original character guide happens to expire, as was the case for the unfortunate Paula Schaffer, a big, red "DECEASED" stamp comes up with the file. Former Counter-Terrorism Unit head George Mason, dying of radiation poisoning, and pilot of the plane containing the nuke, was similarly marked as "gone" following his death in episode 16.

The website blends the "real" with the "reel" in such a way as to put the visitor off-balance. One part of the website, "Research Files," contains background information to help the viewer understand everything he/she is seeing is based upon "reality." Divided, like the show, into hour bytes, the files contain information on the L.A. Coliseum (the site of the final second season showdown), exposure to plutonium, the Homeland Security alert codes, the powers of Executive Privilege and Presidential pardons, and the protocol for reporting child abuse, similar to the US Megan rules. However, just across the site is a link to "Script to Screen," a recent addition which allows the visitor to track the making of an episode from...well, script to screen. It contains background information on stunts, camera angles, editing, and all of those things that remind us that this is a television show, after all. Isn't it?

Other disturbing little tidbits serve to keep the visitor to the '24' site on edge. The link to "Kimberly's Phone" blares that there are "6 messages from Dad," but they can't be accessed (because she lost her phone about episode eight). As bad as it was when you believed that

Images courtesy FOX TV



Reza was the terrorist, the link to Marie and Reza's wedding web page is now down-right sinister because, not only did she turn out to be the link to the terrorists, she also shot her beloved to death, point-blank. It makes you wonder about all those other wedding web-sites you see online, particularly when no photos are posted from after the ceremony. It's particularly gruesome to revisit the site and see the happy home page pictures of the engaged couple and the wedding decorations after Marie's coup de grace in the season finale, where she looks every bit like a female Damien Thorne or Jim Jones as she tells her sister, "You think that you're safe out there...you aren't."

The ideas of safety and security are technological buzz-words these days, as more and more people install software and patches designed to keep their computers virus and cookie-free in the wake of ever-more invasive spamming and monitoring. '24' plays on this idea masterfully, taking the latent fears of a techno-savvy, 24-hour news-inundated generation, pouring the gasoline of terrorist activity on them, and setting them ablaze in "real time." The show's creators, Joel Surnow and Michael Loceff, cut their teeth on USA Network's 'La Femme Nikita,' a techno-orgy conspiracy show that broke the ice for future cable-oriented dramas like 'The Shield' to achieve widespread popularity. Nikita's all-pervasive technology was part of its charm; it introduced its viewers to the idea that nothing, and nobody, can ever ultimately escape the surveillance society.

Internet surveillance and in fact, surveillance in general, has been a topic of heated discussion for quite some time. We have lived in a surveillance society for decades since the creation of the FBI and era of the Cold War. The phrase "surveillance society" itself is over 15 years old, brought into prominence by David Lyon in his 'The Electronic Eye.' Yet the attacks on 9/11 produced a rupture in the fabric of surveillance. Just as now everyone can be a terrorist or the target of a terrorist attack, so does the surveillance mentality enter into the general population in a way previously unimagined. Before 9/11, our heroes were hackers,

the people who flouted the technological infrastructure for the greater good of humanity. Now, control is the mantra. Hackers and those persons who operate outside of the mainframe (or the Matrix?) are potentially dangerous; therefore, everyone must be watched for the country to remain "secure."

'24' has embraced this rupture with a vengeance in its second season, and its website reflects the new world order under which the show operates. This is a show about events hidden in plain sight, in the world that we supposedly know everything about and that, in return, knows far more about us than we want it to. It's dark, cynical, and paranoid, much like most of post-9/11 American society today. Nobody on the show is immune to the plot twists and turns; unlike more 80s action-hero fare, being a leading name doesn't guarantee that you will live to see the 24th episode. It is a show where all of the characters are just trying to stay in control of a situation that is outside of their control or more complex and twisted than any of them know about. And, in the end, all the technology in the world can't save us from human agency. President Palmer is felled not by the highly-intricate, technologically-heavy conspiracy

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that drove the second season; instead he is laid low in the show's final minute by a good, old-fashioned contact poison passed to him by one of the "bad guys" agents.

So, while waiting to learn the fates of Jack Bauer and David Palmer in the highly-probable and much-anticipated third season, why don't you head on over to the site: <http://www.fox.com/24/>. You can catch up on this season and last season, for that matter; the site for season one is set up just like season two. It can't hurt anything, and it isn't as if anyone out there is watching you....or so you hope.

Images courtesy FOX TV

The screenshot shows the '24 PROFILES' website. At the top, there are tabs for TONY ALMEIDA, NINA MYERS, GEORGE MASON, and SHERRY PALMER. The 'GEORGE MASON' tab is selected. On the left, there is a vertical strip of small images. The main profile for George Mason includes a large photo of him sitting at a desk, a 'DECEASED' stamp, and a 'CHARACTER ACTOR' label. To the right of the photo, the text reads:

**GEORGE MASON**

**EXPERIENCE:**

- CTU - Special Agent in Charge, Los Angeles Domestic Unit
- CTU - Senior Section Leader, Washington Headquarters
- CTU - Team Leader, Chicago Headquarters
- CTU - Associate Special Agent in Charge, Phoenix Domestic Unit
- CTU - Senior Agent, Miami Domestic Unit
- CTU - Los Angeles Domestic Unit

**EDUCATION:**

- Bachelor of Arts, Criminal Science
- University of Southern California

**PERSONAL:**

- Divorced
- Son - John Mason

At the bottom right, there is a time display: 7:00 A.M. - 8:00 A.M.