

24: Crack in the Box

by Cory Bickmore
March 25, 2007

I have recently become addicted to *24*, the hit television show about people who never eat, never sleep, and only visit the bathroom to plot insubordination vital to the national security interests of the United States of America.

For the two of you left who still don't know, *24* stars Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer, a really short federal counter-terrorist agent who repeatedly saves the country with lots of action sequences and cell phone calls. The show takes place in "real time", where each season corresponds to a twenty-four hour day, and each episode corresponds to one hour of that day (minus the five-minute opening flashback and several six-minute commercial breaks, where I suppose the characters stare at their feet.) Mix in international terrorists, plenty of gunfire, and some gritty whispering, and you've got a compelling television feast.

It's a great show. It's also worse than crack cocaine.

Let me explain. To date, *24's* run is at six seasons and counting, with the first five seasons already available as DVD box sets. My new roommates own Seasons 2 through 5, to which they devote vast swaths of time. The very evening I moved into the apartment, they broke out Season 3 to begin another of their Bauer-fests, and I was invited along. I had never watched an episode before.

Their warning: "Be careful. You'll get hooked." Ha! Small-brained men. I am the Bickmo, handsome and tall! I would take in episode, maybe two, just to bond with the fellas, and then head off to bed.

Four weeks and ninety-six episodes later, I lurched from my apartment into

the sunlight, squinting and raving. My beard was a badger's nest, my fingernails Arby's curly fries. I had missed much. Small children had grown up without me; America had started several more wars. But can you blame me? This is *24*! Where else can a character spontaneously decide to knock off a gas station just to keep the baddie shopping there occupied until the surveillance satellite has time to reposition overhead so headquarters can track him to his secret terrorist hideout? Oh, such a show!

They say the devil sets traps to ensnare the careless. True enough, but that dude has nothing on the writers of *24*. Those guys put cliffhangers at the end of *each* episode! Good ones! Often with explosions! And the next part of the story, that next chill-packed hour is RIGHT THERE on that DVD, calling out me to watch just one more. I try to resist, but the box stares up from the floor, "Crack" Bauer's glowering face taunting me to find out whether he can defuse the atomic bomb before it detonates under that playground full of children and newborn kittens. I am powerless before the Crack in the Box.

Yes, I'm a doctoral student, and doctoral students have mountains of homework, but think about it — how can I be expected to read about, say, ontological reductionism when I hear Jack growl, "*You probably don't think I can force this towel down your throat. Trust me, I can. All the way.*" from my living room? A man's gotta have priorities, and I do.

Ignoring my homework allowed me to master the Bauer-athon, having blown through Seasons 3, 2, 4, and 5 (in that order). You can as well. Here's how: Watch an episode. The moment the show's clock hits the final tick, make a frantic grab for the remote, and press

menu. Good job: end credits are for losers. Now, immediately press *play* on the next episode before your good sense realizes what's going on. Speed through the opening flashback at 8x fast forward till you can resume the story where you left off, a mere sixty seconds after leaving Bauer's presence. All told, it takes less than eight hours to watch twelve episodes straight through. That's the beauty of my method: life may take an hour in Jack's world, but in mine it's only forty minutes.

As much as I love the show, not everything on *24* makes sense to me. For example, why must the terrorists always try to destroy Los Angeles? Don't they know Jack lives there? They would probably find more success in *jihad* if they went after Chattanooga next time around.

Issues like this one make it clear I need to talk to Jack Bauer. (Michelle Dessler too, but Michelle is dead, which is unfortunate because she was damn hot. In fact, that is the very reason I need to talk to her.) I would ask him questions like:

"How does your cell phone get such great reception everywhere, even when you're hiding in airplane baggage compartments or sewer tunnels?"

Or: "Have you ever noticed a major crisis occurs right at the top of every hour? Couldn't you prepare a little for that?"

Or: "What's with your bulbous earlobes? They freak me out."

Come to think of it, these questions matter but little, for even though I predict Jack needs to whiz like a racehorse after each season, we may sleep secure in the knowledge that Los Angelinos are once again safe from terrorists. But will those newborn kittens escape death next time? I will find out, for I cannot escape the call of *24*, the Crack in the Box.