

A show about dependence

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

February 9, 2011



The last 10-15 years have seen a lot of innovation in scripted television. The most notable trend has been in edgy, high-budget dramas made for cable, but my favorite developments have come from the broadcast networks: *The West Wing's* mashup of *ER* romantic realism and Tracy-and-Hepburn goofball wisecracking, *Arrested Development's* perfection of the sitcom shift from sound stages and laugh tracks to tightly edited madcap plots, the hit-or-miss beautiful mess that is *Glee*.

My current favorite is also a broadcast-network show, but its most notable trait is how steadfastly conventional it is. *Friday Night Lights*--the finale airs on the [101 Network](#) tonight before being rebroadcast later on NBC--has never exhibited much interest in pushing boundaries of genre, subject matter or FCC-regulated taste. Instead, the high-school-football-themed drama combines steady writing, soft-touch directing and fantastic acting to produce a fully realized picture of a small Texas town and its residents.

Actually, *Friday Night Lights* has been innovative in the area of [production](#). The show relies entirely on locations rather than sets, shoots scenes in single takes with

multiple cameras and employs an unusual degree of improvisation. But all this serves the show's diligent realism, which is truly striking--especially given how rare it is for a show to focus on middle America at all, much less in an authentic and unironic way.

Part of this place-based realism is the central role of Christianity--not as a [very special episode](#) but in the week-to-week lives of the characters. "Few series," [observes](#) *Time*'s James Poniewozik, "are as matter of fact about the importance of religion, be it expressed in church or in a student's Christian speed-metal band." Poniewozik goes on to argue that *Friday Night Lights* manages to navigate difficult political terrain without being divisive (spoilers ahead):

The underlying theme is, we need each other. Everyone, even a teenager, is part of a web of dependence. You could see the show, from the right, as an example of how the best social programs are a job, a family and self-discipline; you could see it, from the left, as an argument for the crucial importance of an underfunded government institution, the public school. You would be right both ways.

*FNL* has shown the same generosity and nuance in dealing with tricky social issues. A Season 4 episode in which a player's estranged father dies in Iraq was a complex depiction of grief, mixed emotions and war's impact on a small town. That season, a student had an abortion. . . . *FNL* handled the story with such grace that even Andrew Breitbart's conservative website Big Hollywood praised the episode's "dignity and maturity."

Compare that to *The West Wing*'s patronizing strategy for bipartisan ratings: a neoliberal presidential administration appreciates that its left flank is obviously naive (why is this obvious?) but is repeatedly surprised by the human decency of its conservative opposition (why is this surprising?). I love *The West Wing*, but if I had to choose I'd take *Friday Night Lights* every time.

Plenty of critics share my enthusiasm, yet the show has enjoyed limited commercial success. Hence the current arrangement: the finale airs tonight on DirectTV before the season has begun on NBC, a partnership that has [kept the ratings-weak show on the air](#).

*Friday Night Lights* is ostensibly about football but really about human relationships, and apparently one or the other keeps a lot of viewers away. In one episode, I found

myself oddly moved by a game-winning block that a wide receiver delivers. I don't even like football--but I know that wide receiver better than I've ever known any character on television.