

Transmedia Television:  
New Engagement Forms and Industry Practices

Jordan Kaufman

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Film and Moving Image Study

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Film Studies) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 2014

© Jordan Kaufman, 2014

**Concordia University**  
**School of Graduate Studies**

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Jordan Kaufman

Entitled: Transmedia Television: New Engagement Forms and Industrial Practices

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts (Film Studies)**

Complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final Examining Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Chair  
Catherine Russell

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Luca Caminati

\_\_\_\_\_ Examiner  
Charles Acland

\_\_\_\_\_ Supervisor  
Marc Steinberg

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of the Department of Graduate Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ 2014

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of Faculty

**ABSTRACT****Transmedia Television:  
New Engagement Forms and Industrial Practices**

Jordan Kaufman

The emergence of contemporary transmedia practices in network fictional television in the United States has worked to complicate our understanding of the television medium in the twenty-first century. As networks increasingly expand televisual content across new media technologies and various engagement platforms, this creates a series of organizational and creative changes both within the industry and daily experiences of televisions viewers. While transmedia research to date has tended to focus on defining the terminology and recounting early examples of transmedia experiments, this thesis shifts focus away from larger scale accounts of transmedia criticism to a more nuanced approach. To this end, transmedia television is situated within historical, contextual and methodological frameworks before moving on to a formal textual-based analysis of two case studies. These frameworks establish the research criteria and methodologies used to observe and evaluate the various tactics and strategies adopted in a successful TV website and second screen engagements that are the subject of the case studies. By engaging in a close analysis of these two examples of transmedia platforms, this thesis attempts to develop a fuller understanding of contemporary transmedia engagements in television, and contribute to establishing transmedia as an emerging medium in and of itself.

## **Acknowledgments**

I first want to offer a special thanks to my supervisor Marc Steinberg, Assistant Professor of Film Studies. Marc has been an invaluable resource and figure of support throughout this research project, and whose own work on transmedia and media-mix culture in Japan has been a constant inspiration for my own.

I also want to thank my parents, Jay and Joan Kaufman, both of whom have continue to show their love and support throughout my life, and always encouraged me to pursue higher education.

I also want to thank the teaching faculty and administrative staff at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema for their support.

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION</b>	1
Transmedia Television: A Historical Context	2
Convergence	6
Transmedia Television	11
Immersion	15
Transmedia: Towards A Critical Approach	20
<b>Chapter 2: Transmedia Television and TV-Web Convergence</b>	25
USA Network	26
USA Network vs. Quality Drama	31
USA Network, <i>Burn Notice</i> and TV-Web Convergence	35
<b>Chapter 3: Second-Screen, Connected Viewing and <i>The Walking Dead</i></b>	48
<i>The Walking Dead</i> Story Sync: An Emerging Cross-Media Platform	59
Story Sync: The Spectrum of Interactivity and Televisual Liveness	63
<b>Chapter 4: Conclusion</b>	72
Transmedia: The Intersection of Industry, Text and Audience	74
Challenges of Transmedia Television Research and Criticism	84

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Over the past decade, television has seen a series of organizational and creative changes both within the television industry and the daily experiences of television viewers. Increasingly, audiences are being encouraged to participate in storyworlds that extend content across multiple media channels. While television as an industry and cultural form has always known the benefit of ancillary expansion and viewer interactivity, the most recent trend towards incorporating what Henry Jenkins (2006) has called transmedia, requires a re-conceptualization of the way contemporary television industries in the United States are attempting to engage and activate viewers in television texts that operate beyond the confines of what is seen on TV. While recent scholarship on transmedia has generated a number of alternative terms and models such as Frank Rose's 'deep media' (2011), Jay Lemke's 'transmedia intertexts' (2008), Will Brooker's 'overflow' (2004), John Caldwell's 'second-shift-aesthetics' (2004) and Michael Curtain's 'media matrix' (2009), these approaches have tended to adopt a general perspective focusing on defining the terminology as well as the industrial, intertextual and metatextual systems that structure transmedia engagements. Approaches such as these are necessary to establish transmedia as a legitimate field of scholarly research. However, with such preliminary research underway, there is a need to come in to a closer proximity with the object of study itself and consider how specific televisual properties function within distinct transmedia encounters if we are to eventually position

transmedia as an emerging medium in and of itself. To that end, the introduction that follows will establish the historical context as well as a diverse set of methods and perspective for examining the evolution of contemporary transmedia television. In reviewing such frameworks and key concepts, I establish the research criteria and methodologies needed to observe and evaluate the various tactics and strategies adopted in two individual transmedia encounters, which will form the body of this thesis. By engaging in a close analysis of two examples of transmedia developed for television, I shift focus away from larger scale accounts of transmedia criticism to a more nuanced case study approach. In breaking down how a particular cross-platform engagement functions in relation to the whole, I believe we can start to develop better criteria for understanding contemporary transmedia engagements and their impact on the types of media spectatorship that are possible today.

### **Transmedia Television: A Historical Context**

To more fully understand the rapid changes taking place around transmedia we must first consider how the television medium has been historically constituted as either technology or text. Over the last half of the twentieth century US broadcast television has become a central element in media-based public sphere linking the private lives of citizens in their homes with the world at large. In his foundational book, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1975), Raymond Williams argues that broadcast television was “a new and powerful form of social integration and control” (23), arriving at a time when the modernization process allowed populations a new sense of mobility across the periphery, while economic and

political resources were increasingly becoming more centralized. For Williams, television was a particular cultural technology that was able to transmit important information across wide areas while simultaneously creating shared experiences between dispersed populations. Scholars like Jostein Grisdud built on Williams' concepts, and defined broadcast television as, "a cultural form where audio-visual material is disseminated in continuous, sequential form – a flow – from some central unit to varying number of anonymous people who receive the same material at the same time" (9). Other scholars such as Noel Carroll offered a very different approach. Carroll writes: "I do not deny that there are differences between TV of a certain vintage and level of technological development, and comparable films, but I do deny that these historical differences amount to ontological distinctions" (266). From Carroll's perspective technology is historically constituted, and thus secondary to the form moving images and sounds take on screen and the impact they have on society and culture.

By and large, the division between television as technology and television as text that dominated critical discourse during the 1970s and early 1980s was a result of a field of research that emerged out of mass communication and cultural studies, both of which emphasized the social implications of the medium through remarkably different models of analysis. In response, Roger Silverstone (1994) proposed a 'double articulation' model that attempted to mediate these twin paradigms. As Sonia Livingstone describes:

Through the concept of double articulation, Silverstone contrasts the analysis of the media *qua* material objects located in particular spatiotemporal



settings with the analysis of the media *qua* texts or symbolic messages located within the flows of particular socio-cultural discourses, precisely in order to demand that we integrate the two. (2)

Significant to Silverstone's research was the social context of television's use in a domestic setting connecting the private household with the public sphere. Indeed, Silverstone's work sparked an important strand of research and debate that examined how the television functioned in the daily life of a household as a structuring agent and object of active viewer consumption. However, in attempting to mediate between *text* and *context* it was the former that quickly fell by the way side, with questions holding focus on the social context of television's function alongside other media use in general. This problematic division between text and context has continued to dominate the development of television studies for the past two decades, and has yet to be resolved satisfactorily (Hartman 81). The distinctions between technology and text prove even more problematic when considering transmediality and the dispersal of content across multiple technologies.

With this growing realization during the late 1980s and 1990s scholars began to relocate television as a more fully historical object, a practice that has only been intensified with the digital turn. For many, especially those scholars attempting to initiate debate over the medium's aesthetic properties, this type of historical reflection began by contextualizing Williams' concept of 'flow' within a particular set of historical conditions and programming practices. To this end, Uricchio points out that Williams was writing in the 'broadcast era' that began

around 1950 and ended mid- to late 1970s, in which, “Williams experienced a form of broadcast television largely dependent on limited VHF and UHF transmissions, with between three to six channels available in most urban American markets” (Uricchio 34). With very limited space for mobility, conditions existed that gave television programmers a large degree of control over the TV audience. This broadcast era, as Uricchio suggests, “was characterized by a finely crafted, relatively stable and largely programmer-defined heterochronic order” (34-35). After the late 1970s, however, new government regulations, new forms of syndication, the increase in television channels on cable and satellite, the introduction of the remote control and VCR, along with any number of technological and global changes marked a shift from programming-centered notions of broadcast and control, as Williams experienced during his day, to a multichannel era known as “narrowcasting.”

Narrowcasting, compared to the age of broadcasting with its modernist conception of mass audiences, was linked to the arguably postmodern idea that audiences were made up of diverse populations, and that television channels should address each of these audiences separately. Programmers began to develop content and advertising for specific segments of the public. The rise of syndication and time-shifting during this era were also seen to offer viewers a new sense of agency, relative to the broadcast era, as television audiences not only had a wider choice of programming (analog channel-surfing), but could also potentially watch the same program on different channels at different times of the day. More recently, however, John Caldwell, has argued, “the current imbrication of digital technologies and the

Internet with television further shatters the authority that either of these two models – broadcasting or narrowcasting – can have on critical analysis” (45). Indeed, with digitalization and the widespread availability of new communication technologies, along with a host of transformative convergence era practices, a series of changes are taking place within the television industry and the daily lives of viewers that make it necessary to once again re-evaluate what the television medium now means.

### **Convergence**

New digital media does not signal radical shift away from traditional media practices. Instead, as William Uricchio argues, new media must be seen as arising out of and transforming traditional media technologies, institutions and industrial practices in complex and often unpredictable ways. As Uricchio writes: “the digital turn has accelerated the challenges to the ontological distinctions amongst established media, offering both new definitional conceits and new media forms with wide-ranging implications for traditional media” (25). Back in the early 1990s, David Morley and Roger Silverstone first described this situation as it related to television:

Television should now be seen, not in isolation, but as one of a number of information and communication technologies, occupying domestic time and space alongside the video-recorder, the computer and the telephone, as well as the Walkman, the answering-machine, the stereo and the radio (201).

Some two decades later, such a statement seems prescient. Networked computers alongside the proliferation of wireless technologies such as smartphones and tablets have further opened up the complexities of the medium, with television sets becoming computers, phones, radios and gaming machines, and mobile phones and computers becoming television sets.

As digitalization of television became more widespread throughout the 1990's there was a series of significant re-conceptualization of the television medium both within the industry and television studies. Most prominent in this regard was the debate that evolved around convergence in which it became "increasingly difficult to make distinctions between different media technologies as they started to adopt functions and forms from each other" (Bolin 237). Barbara Gentikow succinctly describes the convergence era landscape: "complex situations occur with digitization and convergences, such as parallel use of media, cross-media applications, the reception of media content from different platforms, new hierarchies of favorite media, but also surviving patterns of traditional use" (142). Such observations were quite typical of the early convergence debate, whereby convergence was discussed primarily as a process of 'technological convergence'.

To clarify, *technological convergence* refers to what digitalization enables. Information through digitization can be disseminated into binary that can then be reassembled on different digital technologies, which are capable of integrating multiple media functions on a single device. This results in media becoming more versatile and fluid. Today, for example, we can watch the same media content on our projectors, television sets, computers, mobile phones, tablets and gaming consoles.

Computer technology is situated as the root of this development, so it is not surprising therefore that debates around convergence began around the same time as personal computers became commonplace in households in the early 1980s. Strikingly, we see convergence not just as a technological phenomenon but stimulating a parallel and growing discourse that promised a radically new media milieu. The consequence was that technological innovation together with an evolving discourse on convergence lead traditional media institutions, like television, to think about and subsequently create new ways to expand their textual practices across new digital technologies.

Not surprisingly, with so much focus on technology, it wasn't long before the discourse on convergence evolved to include institutional and social approaches. *Institutional convergence* points to the way media institutions expand into other media sectors to form highly diversified media conglomerates. With the rise of New Hollywood in the 1970s, media industries began to develop new marketing, advertising, and merchandising strategies that are coordinated across a variety of media enterprises (See Shatz 1993). As the Paramount decision of 1948 marked a movement away from 'vertical integration' of production and distribution, media industries started to diversify their holdings through a process of "horizontal integration." With it, horizontal integration allowed entertainment companies to control textual components that traverse a variety of different media formats to create a form of "cultural synergy" (See Wasko 1994). A recent example of institutional convergence is Disney's decision to acquire *Marvel Comics* in 2009 and *Lucas Films* (and with it the *Star Wars* franchise) in 2012. This acquisition would in

large part be motivated by the ability of fictional worlds, and the characters that populate them, to secure profits across a variety of different revenue streams.

The most recent and intersecting evolution in the theorization of convergence comes as the social implications of technological convergence and institutional convergence begin to be explored and are related to broader society and changing patterns of consumer consumption. Captured under the term *socialized convergence* this particular discourse describes how individuals are engaging with complex media systems and how these systems are connecting people through shared experiences. Henry Jenkins has raised the social implications of new media, arguing: "Convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (3). Jenkins positions the consumer at the center of the convergence debate, attributing individuals with a greater degree of power and control over the media they consume suggesting that "each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information from the media flow..." (3). Putting consumers at the center appears to represent a major departure from prevailing technology and institutional centered thinking that positioned audiences as relatively passive consumers of media controlled content. While the term socialized convergence implies the shared social networks of media circulation and engagement, it also continues to account for the subtle, yet powerful ways, media technologies, industries and industrial texts work to contextualize and structure those experiences.

Although Jenkins' own research tends to emphasize the circulation of information across expanded media networks, with the individual at the center, Jenkins does offer a more subtle model of convergence that accounts for a matrix of economic, social, cultural, technological and global processes. He argues for a model of convergence that includes:

the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. (2)

While the discourse on convergence will continue to evolve and shape the technological, institutional and social processes that inform it, there is no doubt that there are more complex processes going on both industrially and in the daily lives of viewers. In television, as will be explored shortly, convergence is opening up alternative spaces for engagement and textual expansion as audiences are increasingly encouraged to migrate across expansive media networks, creating an intense relationship with the content they consume via websites, social media, mobile technology and interactive gaming, all of which are now becoming the business of television companies. Yet, as we witness the transformative shift, it is imperative to consider how new textual forms and industrial strategies are negotiated within traditional media systems. As one media industry critic put it: "the evolution of so-called convergence can only be understood in the context of grasping the nuances of how current, finely honed, systems of distribution work to maximize revenue potential" (Ulin 45). Moreover, while it is necessary to describe

and understand these changes, it is also important to consider how these changes are being perceived by television audiences and to what degree they are impacting audience's daily lives. Ultimately, it is not only important to consider how television is intersecting with new media, but also *what* new media forms enable television audiences to do, and *how* they enable them to do it.

### **Transmedia Television**

In order to fully understand the emergence of transmedia as a dominant trend in television's textual production it was important to situate the concept of transmediality as arising out of a convergent era landscape, which consists of a number of interrelated technological, industrial and reception practices. While transmedia practices can be identified across a range of media markets, arguably, the roots of transmedia in television could be traced back to the late 1970s and 1980s when US television networks began reaching out to fans and creating specific content for a narrowcast market. However, with digitalization and the wide spread adoption of new media technologies, networks have only intensified their relationship with viewers by incorporating transmedia logic into their industrial strategies of television production. As Jeffery Sconce has suggested, " U.S television has devoted increased attention in the past two decades to crafting and maintaining ever more complex narrative universes, a form of world building that has allowed wholly new modes of narration and that suggests new forms of audience engagement" (95). For Sconce, world building includes all the ways the television industry is cultivating and coordinating its televisual content across multiple



platforms, especially through new media technologies such as the Internet, gaming consoles, smartphones and tablets. In this context, world building treats the whole of the media ecology as a necessary toolkit to create and sustain expansive story worlds and brand identities. Such world building strategies can be identified in groundbreaking shows like *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Dr. Who*, *24*, *Lost* and *Heroes* which have demonstrated the potential successes and challenges for transmedia engagement and distribution. Moreover, networks are cultivating television audiences not just as dedicated fans or consumers of content, but active consumers who are encouraged to participate and interact in both the story world and the processes of its production. By coordinating and layering various media into entertainment, producers are seen to offer audiences an immersive cross-modal experience that will not only motivate more consumption across different media, but also cultivate consumer interest, investment and loyalty. While world building is not necessarily specific to television, the medium does seem to have a propensity for it. As Sconce argues:

the cultivation of [television's] story worlds (diegesis) is as crucial an element in its success in storytelling. What television lacks in spectacle and narrative constraints, it makes up for in depth and duration of character relations, diegetic expansion, and audience investment. A commercial series that succeeds in the U.S. system ends up generating hundreds of hours of programming, allowing for an often quite sophisticated and complex elaboration of character and storyworld. (95)

Indeed, the serial nature of televisual form, its obsession with advertising and cross-promotion, as well as an industry focused on keeping its viewers engaged over extended periods of time may suggest just some of the reasons why television has started to incorporate transmedia practices into its modes of production.

Of course, in many ways, on-air broadcasts remain the primary point of engagement for most television audiences, with fans that are more active across multiple media channels continually courted back to the programming source. However, it is becoming increasingly important to consider television's ancillary productions as not simply innovative ways to promote a TV series, but as part of the same meaning-making process as the primary text. Jonathan Gray (2010), for example, has argued for the decentering of the 'main' text when he suggests that a viewer's experience of a narrative is shaped by the textual components, or "paratexts" that surround it. Today, most television networks not only produce a TV show but an abundance of textual ancillary initiatives that are integrated, layered and threaded together across multiple platforms to create an expanded television franchise. While many of the components that surround a television show's textual periphery may not always evolve the primary on-air story they can dramatically change the way audiences engage and interpret a television text. With increased efforts by the industry to cultivate cross-media experiences that typically involves high levels of migratory behavior and interactivity it is not only important to understand the complexity in which these experiences are designed and developed but also consider how these experiences are constructed within the context of shifting audience expectations and consumption practices.

In fact, there have been a number of attempts to use empirical research to examine the way cross-media communications and new media technologies are impacting the ways audiences engage with television texts. Sharon Marie Ross (2008), for example, in her book *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*, looks at the relationship between television audiences and the Internet, arguing “people’s experience with watching TV today are increasingly inseparable from tele-participation (be that literally or conceptually)” (6). In her work, Ross is interested in the way the television industry “is working increasingly to create and/or sustain social audiences for their shows...” (7). By focusing on *how* audiences become more intensely engaged with television content, especially through the types of socialization that take place around a TV series, Ross highlights the types of invitational strategies and new engagement forms utilized by networks to encourage audiences to ‘flow’ across multiple media platforms. In a similar way, Elizabeth Evans (2011) uses audience focus groups to explore the extent to which transmedia narratives alter how traditional televisual content is being consumed, in particular audience attitudes towards the expansion of fictional worlds onto new media platforms. However, for Evans:

It is less about how technology allows audiences (primarily fans) to be invited into the narrative-making process. It [her work] is instead concerned with how the internet and mobile phone are offering multiple ways of engaging with ‘television’, in terms of both texts and technologies, and the impact such a move has on audience perceptions of what ‘television means’.

(8)

Clearly, Moss and Evans both identify new media technologies as not only changing the way audiences experience television, but also playing a crucial role in the development of contemporary television programming. There is a sense that networks are becoming more adept at negotiating audience's expectations of participation and socialization by developing new engagement forms that operate beyond on-air broadcasts but similarly designed to draw audiences deeper into a story world.

### **Immersion**

As television networks strive to create more intense relationships with audiences, the concept of immersion has come to play an important role in describing the act of watching television and been described in multiple ways. Raymond Williams's theory of a televisual 'flow', for instance, suggests the way broadcasters attempt to 'capture' or retain viewer's attention through a planned stream of images "for a whole evening's sequence" (91). For Williams, the immersive potential is located in a broadcaster's ability to hold a viewer's attention for an extended period of time by the undeclared interruptions between segments that compose a network's televisual flow. In many ways, Williams' concept of a televisual flow relates to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's notion of flow or "optimal experience" in which certain activities are pleasurable because "concentration is so intense that there is not attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems" (71). Csikszentmihalyi expressly dismisses television as a passive and brainless medium, unable to create an optimal flow experience, in which "the plots and characters of the popular shows are so repetitive that although

TV requires the processing of visual images, very little else in the way of memory, thinking, or volition is required" (30). Despite Csikszentmihalyi own dismissive and hostile attitude toward television, his model and research does seem to provide productive benefits as he explores an individuals ability to become so focused on an activity that they become immersed in it completely. Conversely, John Ellis' early theory of the television 'glance' denies television's ability to create the type of focused viewing required to be immersed in a text when compared to cinema. He argues, "TV does not encourage the same degree of spectator concentration [as cinema]" and "is treated more casually rather than concentratedly" (128). Although Ellis' glance theory was focused on stylistic considerations emergent in television during the 1980s, in many ways, Ellis' position also coincided with television scholarship that isolated television's casual or 'routine' function in the daily life of a household. In reading Livingstone and Silverstone, for example, there is a sense that television's function in domestic settings didn't create the same types of focused viewing environments as cinema, and viewers were therefore limited in their ability to concentrate on the television screen alone.

More recently, however, there have been a number of attempts to reassert the concept of flow and types of immersive experiences associated with television watching. Will Brooker, for example, questions Csikszentmihalyi's prejudices against television and considers television in relation to an "optimal experience" model, arguing:

The sense of immersion, where the everyday is transcended and the participant enters a different state of being, a form of communion with a text,

a process and sometimes with other participants, seems to offer a fascinating approach to the experience of watching television: in particular the more intense viewing practiced by fans with their favorite shows” (online)

For Brooker, television is seen to offer immersive potential in which viewers can become lost in a fictional world. Significantly, Brooker identifies the types of ‘intensified’ fan viewing practices around shows like *24* and *Dawson’s Creek* as creating immersive sensations similar to those described in Csikszentmihalyi’s research. It is also important to note that Csikszentmihalyi has become a major figure in the study of interactive gaming where flow and immersion are also important concepts. Indeed, transmedia texts will often demonstrate game-like characteristics, with networks developing new forms of engagement in order to cultivate heightening levels of interactivity and audience participation around their television shows. Roger C. Aden has similarly engaged in a type of ‘negotiated reading’ of Csikszentmihalyi’s work, applying his concepts to the kinds of immersive activities and lifestyles fans engage in as they perform “symbolic pilgrimages” into a fictional world creating a “deep sense of involvement” with a television text. (qtd. in Brooker online). Additionally, John Caldwell has explicitly argued against Ellis’ glance theory, and instead suggests that “the [television] viewer is not always not inherently distracted” (27) and that “spectatorship in television can be quite intense and ingrained over time” (26). In this way, television texts should be considered as inviting immersive experiences in which a viewer can potentially become fully engaged in a fictional world. While I am primarily interested in the types of spectator practices cultivated by contemporary cross-media strategies and new

forms of engagement, it is important to acknowledge that immersion is a result of multiple processes including industry, text, technology and audience.

Early scholarship on immersion tended to focus on the viewers ability to be attracted or distracted by a broadcaster's televisual flow or the immersive potential around certain types of fan activity. Until very recently, most accounts of immersion also focused exclusively on engagement with a single media apparatus, namely the television set. However, today, as television texts increasingly become constructed across various media and engagement platforms, the concept of immersion has taken on a more complicated relationship to television spectatorship. In his book, *The Art of Immersion*, Frank Rose describes a new type of transmedia narrative:

One that's told through many media at once in a way that's nonlinear, that's participatory and often gamelike, and that's designed above all to be immersive. This is "deep media": stories that are not just entertaining, but immersive, taking you deeper than an hour-long TV drama or two-hour movie or 30-second spot will permit (30)

In a transmedia context, immersion takes places through the act of digging, deciphering and mastering the complexities of a story world, in large part, by the very act of scouring various media for bits and pieces of story information. Indeed, one could imagine such ancillary engagements external to the primary activity of television watching would have been seen as a distraction to the type of concentrated flow experiences described by Williams and Csikszentmihalyi. While the simple act of watching television is not diminished by the proliferation of a show's textual ancillary productions, it does create a complex situation where

immersion in a television text is increasingly being framed in relation to a show's 'cross-media' experiences. Elizabeth Evans, for example, has noted:

For participants in this research, television drama is approximately defined by its ability to offer them [participants] an immersive experience with a fully realized narrative world involving external characters on a reliable and regular basis over a period of time that may then bring them together within a viewing community (175)

For Evans, the concept of immersion is becoming an evaluative marker for ancillary extensions created around a "fully realized" transmedia television text. While an audiences' personal habits and viewing practices may vary, Rose and Evans both seem to highlight the way contemporary notions of immersion are being defined against a television text's ability to keep audience actively engaged and 'flowing' across a range of media that invite different levels of interactivity and socialization. As will be explored in Chapter 3, things become even more complicated as television networks start to introduce cross-media initiatives that function simultaneously during on-air broadcasts, creating a situation where a television viewer's concentration is divided between two different platforms in real-time. Interestingly, contemporary discourses on immersion are increasingly being discussed in relation to industry practice rather than the types of immersive viewing habits and behaviors practiced by fans. While research aimed at understanding the consumption habits of television audiences is on the rise, there doesn't seem to be the same critical discourse surrounding immersion in the way previously described by Brooker and Arden. Indeed, this is something my own research is guilty of and



any future research into immersion within a transmedia context should endeavor to take into account the types of immersive environments and activities cultivated by viewers/fans in relation to industrial strategies and processes of production. For my purposes, however, immersion not only encompasses traditional linear television watching, but also accounts for the types of sensory pleasures created through the kinds of non-linear movements and new forms of engagement inherent in transmedia practices. The concept of immersion will be one this thesis continues to return to as television practices - both transmedia initiatives and modes of consumption - are increasingly becoming more immersive in nature.

### **Transmedia: Towards A Critical Approach**

Transmedia has typically been interpreted from either a cultural studies tradition focusing on the social aspects of texts proper or through a commodity-based approach to industry and media consumption. Jenkins, for his part, while not dismissing the commercial logic underwriting transmedia practices, is primarily interested in how emerging moments of transmedia texts and collaborative authorship coordinates the flow of content across multiple mediums as a form of social communication and participation among audiences. More recently, scholars such as Jonathan Gray (2010) and Elizabeth Evans have likewise adopted similar approaches to Jenkins largely rooting their own research in text-based considerations. Other scholars such as Matt Hills (2002) have tended to focus on the cultural, social and psychological factors that inform fandom and fan-like activity

around what Hills calls the ‘hyperdiegesis’ of cult texts.<sup>1</sup> In divergent readings, however, transmedia practices are seen to engage in a form of commercial intertextuality as a way to maximize profits by exploiting an audience’s desire to master the complexities of expanded story worlds. For critical political economists who adopt a commodity system approach (Kinder 1991, Proffitt et al. 2007, Hardy 2010), transmedia becomes “a serial form of production where each product in a series is linked through a network of cross-promotion” (Marshall 70). Within such synergistic models of corporate intertextuality, a transmedia fiction such as *The Matrix* franchise is seen to create ‘narratively necessary purchases’ (Proffitt et al, 239) by creating a depth of experience that compels consumption across multiple media channels.

The tension between economic and aesthetic considerations has been one of the many challenges faced by more recent transmedia research attempting to locate transmedia texts as both *practice* and *process*. In this context, transmedia functions at an intersecting axis of industrial production practices, text-based world building, and audience flows. Still, there have been a number of attempts to integrate these approaches by focusing both on industry and text. John Caldwell (2004), for example, in his important essay “Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in Culture of Conglomeration” looks at how the television industry in the US has responded to the instabilities created by digitalization, broadband and new media. By focusing on a ‘critical industrial practice’ or “culture of production’ Caldwell, “... describe a series of changes in television’s textual forms

---

<sup>1</sup> Matt Hills defines hyperdiegesis as the production of a “vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever seen or encountered on screen” (137).

and to reconsider methods of aesthetic analysis in television studies itself" (44). What is particularly important about Caldwell's work for my purposes is how television has come to develop tactics of "aggregating," "migrating," and "repurposing" content for textual expansion online. Although Caldwell does not explicitly use the term transmedia his approach does highlight many of the same cross-media and convergence era practices inherent in transmedia. By paying attention to both industry and text Caldwell demonstrates a particular model of analysis that can be used towards a more integrated approach to transmedia research. In a similar way, M.J. Clarke (2013) offers a look at contemporary network television, "contending that one can use knowledge of the industry to elucidate texts and that the form of texts can also, in turn, provide insights into the work of producers" (22). Marc Steinberg in his book *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (2012) also provides compelling examples of how fictional characters become transmedia figures that are proliferated across multiple narrative media, as both a practice of culture and a marketing industry that mediates lived social environments. The strength of these authors lies in their ability to understand contemporary cross-media applications within their historical and theoretical contexts while simultaneously negotiating moments of convergence and transmedia as both industry and text.

While the latter approaches provide a significant entry point into my own understandings of transmedia, I will primarily be engaging in a text-based approach of transmedia texts within US cable television. While there has been a great deal of focus on transmedia over the past few years there is still a lot we don't know about

what motivates television audiences to migrate across platforms and how industrial forces instruct modes of consumption. Geoffrey Long has echoed this concern when he suggests that we need to “start engaging in a close analyses of transmedia experience, to start breaking them down and figuring out why they work and why they fail” (30). Only by figuring out “what makes them tick... we will push the medium forward” (Long 30-31). Transmedia designer Brooke Thompson shared a similar concern in a blog post called “A Criticism on the Lack of Criticism”:

It strikes me that one of the biggest problems hindering the growth of transmedia (and all the various things that fall under it, such as ARGs) is the absolute lack of critical looks at projects. That’s not to say that criticism doesn’t exist – it does, but it’s scattered in conversations and hidden in forum posts or mailing lists. And it is, usually, not about a project as a whole and, instead, focuses on a single issue or is a broad look at the field.

In taking up Long’s call for close readings of transmedia texts to figure out what makes them ‘tick’, I want to move past broad categorizations of transmedia as a form in its own right. Instead, I want to shift focus towards individual engagement platforms that support a larger transmedia narrative in order that we might be better able to critically assess different components that make up a transmedia text without feeling the need to comment on the whole project. In other words, what formal traits and processes does a specific platform contribute that makes it worthy of critical analysis beyond its relationship to a larger project? Exactly *how* are these contributions located and *how* might we go about analyzing their formal properties and function while still acknowledging its place within a larger transmedia context?

In starting to answer these questions this thesis will engage in a close analyses of two specific transmedia engagement platforms developed for network television drama in the United States.

Chapter 2 will consider current models of TV-web convergence as demonstrated by USA Network's hit television show *Burn Notice*. Here, I explore the central role a TV show's website plays in a USA Network's brand identity as part of a comprehensive cross-media strategy that seeks to immerse audiences in a diverse array of elaborative online content. I argue that a conventional show like *Burn Notice* takes on a new level of complexity when considered alongside its interactive and social engagements. In Chapter 3, I look at second screen engagements, or 'story sync' mode, in AMC's *The Walking Dead* to elucidate ways in which the television industry is using transmedia approaches to capitalize on new forms of audience engagement brought on by mobile technology. I position AMC's story sync in relation to historical notions of interactivity and televisual 'liveness' as a way to further understand the emergence of connected and interactive viewing within US fictional television. In both cases, I adopt a nuanced approach that evaluates individual components as examples of transmedia as a medium and locates meaning within specific engagement platforms designed to be part of a larger transmedia network. Ultimately, by identifying and breaking down the processes, traits and logics apparent in these two case studies we are better able to critique how transmedia practices and cross-media experiences are re-shaping contemporary television in the United States and further develop a uniquely transmedia mode of criticism.

## Chapter 2

### Transmedia Television and TV-Web Convergence

The following chapter sets out to explore how USA Network creates a more intense relationship with audiences by encouraging online activity through the show's website as demonstrated through USA's original television series *Burn Notice*. Networks have long known the economic value of interactivity and have always strived to achieve audience loyalty. Increasing competition for viewers has, however, led networks to develop cross-media strategies to engage and activate television audiences within multiple content streams, creating a dynamic relationship between viewers and their favorite TV shows. Today, it is becoming commonplace for network producers to build in some level of textual modularity in their productions, whereby a television show's narrative is utilized across different ancillary extensions to drive viewer participation, socialization and consumption. This is a type of transmedia practice, which aims to aggregate and repurpose narrative elements across multiple media channels, is best demonstrated in models of TV-Web convergence. In the case of *Burn Notice*, I will discuss how a conventional program that is not typically associated with notions of 'quality drama,' demonstrates a new level of complexity when considered alongside the show's website. In this context, the *Burn Notice* website takes on a central role in USA Network's transmedia strategy, allowing enthusiastic viewers to immerse themselves in the storyworld well after the initial on-air broadcast. I will also explore the types of relationships and connections that emerge across online

content, with a specific focus towards understanding how USA Network seeks to construct and manage online activity alongside the web-user's own agency. By analyzing and evaluating the different components that make up the *Burn Notice* website, I suggest that USA Network has created a successful transmedia experience that retains audience attention and encourages fans to pursue the experience of television across additional media platforms. In observing the tactics and function of the *Burn Notice* website in relation to the television series, I attempt to highlight the value of engaging in insightful criticism of a specific transmedia experience as well as the role such criticism can play in making sense of this new medium.

### **USA Network**

In 2004 NBC Universal took over USA Network with the promise to produce more scripted original programs. Over the next few years, USA Network would become the number one network in all of basic cable in the United States reaching over 102 million US viewers with a stable of scripted programming such as *Psych* (2006), *Burn Notice* (2007), *Royal Pains* (2009), *White Collar* (2009), *Convict Affairs* (2010), and *Suits* (2011). On its website, NBC Universal describes its subsidiary as “a trailblazer in digital innovation and storytelling, USA is defining, driving and setting the industry standard for Social TV.”<sup>2</sup> The corporate description proffered by NBC is not without truth, as USA has remained the most watched cable network in prime

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nbcuni.com/cable/usa-network/>

time since 2006 with an average of 3 million total viewers with adults 18-49, outperforming Disney Channel, ESPN and TNT.<sup>3</sup>

Initially, USA's development as a top cable network can be traced back to a comprehensive multi-platform branding campaign developed in 2005 by Minneapolis-based branding agency Mono as a way to penetrate an increasingly competitive multichannel environment. As Caldwell has argued, "branding was the first of many tactics that exploited the instability of the televisual form in the age of digital" (57). In this case, USA's brand identity, captured in its slogan "Characters Welcome," became a comprehensive multiplatforming blueprint and organizational model that USA used to align dispersed media platforms and its scripted productions under a single corporate vision. In an interview with Andrew Hampp of *Advertising Age*, Chris McCumber, co-president of USA Network, explains:

Every show we do has brand attributes and criteria that we use when making decisions from programming to the marketing campaigns. First of all, having a central character with a unique skill set is key, as is being very blue-sky and positive. Where a lot of other places are going dark and crazy-edgy, we're much more blue-sky and aspirational. Everything has a touch of humor to it as well. *Burn Notice* originally took place in Newark, NJ, but when you apply the Characters Welcome brand filter to it, it takes place in Miami.

As McCumber describes it, the Characters Welcome 'brand filter' becomes a signifier that attributes meaning across all areas of its cultural productions from the structuring of its series to its ancillary extensions including websites, discussion

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.deadline.com/2011/12/2011-basic-cable-ratings-usa-still-on-top-history-fx-up-nick-at-nite-tbs-down/>



forms, mobile fan clubs, second-screen story sync and much more. While I am primarily interested in how USA's brand influences textual space, I think it is important to consider ways in which the Characters Welcome brand operates as the primary mode of address through which USA Network invites audiences in.

Derek Johnson (2007) has traced the development of television inviting audiences in to participate back to the 1980s in the United States when broadcasters began to reach out and leverage smaller dedicated fan groups for their ability to drive consumption across a wide range of branded media. However, in the 1990s, networks began to see an increasingly competitive multichannel environment that coincided with the expansion and adoption of digital technology, both of which created industry wide instabilities. As Caldwell elucidates: "the shift to digital created tremendous anxieties and a series of abortive responses from broadcasters because it threatened many of the most central tenets that had made the industry profitable over several decades" (42). One of the ways in which the US television industry responded to the rapidly changing landscape was to strategize ways to create more intense relationships with fans that would enable a closer proximity between spaces of consumption, narrative and labor. As Johnson argues, "audiences are not just cultivated as fans, but also *invited in*, asked to participate in both the world of television text and the process of its production" (63). These invitational modes were viewed as a way to sustain a show's longevity and motivate more consumption across multiple revenue channels by dedicated fans. While Johnson focuses primarily on the textual invitation strategies and forms of tele-participation, we can see that corporate branding becomes an invitational strategy in its own

right. In the case of USA Network, the Characters Welcome slogan becomes one such overarching strategy that not only promotes the 'distinct' characters that populate the network's storyworlds but more importantly, the rhetorical dynamism which identifies viewers as characters themselves.

Initially, this type of subject positioning can be identified in the types of cross-platform extensions that USA launched as part of its Characters Welcome brand. "Characters Approved," for example, was an initiative launched in partnership with Vanity Fair designed to spotlight distinct and notable personalities and innovators across America through an annual awards show. More permanently, the Character's Approved website houses a bulletin board that allows anyone to submit a person's bio of personal achievements for a chance to win weekly prizes. In a similar way, Characters Unite is an ongoing cross-platform pro-social initiative designed to combat social injustices in America. The program holds a competition where a select number of winners will receive a \$5,000 grant, while also inviting anyone to post a picture and share "what they won't stand for." The personal pictures posted by users are positioned alongside photos of the stars of USA Network's television shows, further reinforcing the idea that viewers are just as much a 'character' as the real life and fictional personalities that populate a television series. In many instances, USA's stable of actors becomes spokespeople or leaders in these social initiatives. Without dismissing the potentially positive aspects of social conscious initiatives such as these, I would suggest these types of brand extensions work primarily as an invitational and promotional strategy that

leverages viewers to participate in its brand with the specific aim of drawing audiences back to its cable programming and building brand loyalty.

As the network's branding works to aggregate multiple niche audiences and connect dispersed products and platforms, a more direct appeal for audience participation can be located on USA Network's on-air invitational strategies. During its scripted programming, interstitials will occasionally appear on screen that encourage audiences to visit USA's website and engage with a show's ancillary extensions. The network's station ID, Characters Welcome slogan and the twitter hash tag are relatively constant on screen. There are also more strategically placed interstitial that invite viewers to chat live with cast members, access to exclusive show merchandise and ways to dig deeper into a show's mythology. This type of interstitial programming is typical of what Sharon Marie Ross (2008) describes as "organic," in nature, where "the show/network assumes that tele-participation is *already* an occurring element of the viewers' way of watching" (8). In her work, Ross traces the growing awareness of networks towards the fan-like activities taking place online through the proliferation of the Internet connectivity in homes across the US during the 1990s, and the resulting strategies to capitalize on such connected activity. Ross goes on to further identify "overt" and "obscured" as two other invitational strategies used by networks to attract viewer engagement, with overt referring to shows like *American Idol* where there is a direct appeal for audience participation, and obscured being located primarily at an aesthetic level in shows like *Lost*, where participation is more hidden and invitations are found through complex narrative structure. Indeed, most of the scholarly attention on invitational

strategies, to use Ross' terms, has been focused on overt and obscured, with complex narratives such as *24* (Johnson), *Dr. Who* (Evans) and *Lost* (Ross) often being repeatedly cited for their experimental and innovative cross-media strategies to draw audiences into their storyworlds. There has been much less attention paid to organic invitational mode, which is perhaps the most common type of invitational strategy because it allows networks to create touch points for their programming outside the dietetic storyworld. As a result, more conventional programming like *Burn Notice* on USA Network draws much less critical appeal because it is seen to lack formal, aesthetic and cognitive richness when compared to narratively complex shows like *24* and *Lost*, or more recently, shows such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead* and *Mad Men*.

### **USA Network vs. Quality Drama**

In focusing on narrative complexity in cult shows like those mentioned above there has been a tendency to overlook how certain networks have adapted more conventional programming to achieve similar goals of audience penetration and loyalty by developing a comprehensive cross-media strategy. An example of conventional programming, *Burn Notice*, created by Matt Nix, is forerunner in this trend. The show follows a renegade spy in Miami, Michael Westen (Jeffrey Donovan) as he helps people in need and tries to uncover the truth about the people who burned him. The show has a recurring cast that includes Michael's former girlfriend Fiona (Gabrielle Anwar), an old military buddy Sam Axe (Bruce Campbell), Michael's mother Madeline (Sharon Gless) and Jesse Porter (Cody Bell), an ex-

counterintelligence officer. *Burn Notice*, in its seventh and final season, combines a mixed narrative format that combines an episodic standalone story of the week with each episode containing serial elements of a larger story arc that spans across multiple episodes or seasons. According to Jason Mittell (2006), at a structural level, *Burn Notice* exemplifies a type of complex narrative because of the “interplay between the demands of episodic and serial forms” (33). But unlike many of the shows Mittell identifies as complex narratives (*The Simpsons*, *Buffy*, *Lost*, *24*, *Dr. Who*), a show like *Burn Notice* would be seen to lack the level of sophistication and cult appeal compared to those Mittell is interested in. However, since it first aired, the *Burn Notice* has averaged a steady viewership of anywhere between 3.5 million to 5.5 million US viewers each week, and gone on to generate a book series written by Tod Goldberg, a prequel film “*The Fall of Sam Axe*,” a multi volume online graphic novel “*First Contact*” as well as a multiplexed website used as a central hub to mobilize viewer-users across multiple touch points, including an online fan club, social media, sweepstakes, flash games, music, a second-screen story synch and mobile app. Although I do not want to overemphasize the degree to which *Burn Notice*’s success and longevity can be attributed to its textual ancillary, it does suggest increased attention by USA Network towards ancillary expansion and the kind of crafting and maintaining of expansive story worlds that Jeffery Sconce has described in relation to U.S television. Sconce, like Mittell, is primarily interested in narrational construction and comprehension that form new modes of audience engagement. Although Sconce does acknowledge that television is increasingly utilizing multiple mediums as a way of “catering to audience desires to master the

details and complexities of the story world” (95), he ultimately attributes accelerated audience investment in a television series to emerging on-air textual strategies.

For shows like *Burn Notice*, however, viewer pleasure is not a result of disorientation or manipulating viewer expectations, which are some of the techniques Mittell identifies as characteristic of contemporary complex narratives. Instead, *Burn Notice* offers a consistent and reliable narrative structure and aesthetic that is unwavering in giving viewers the same show each week. While the pleasure derived from television forms that use a repetitive narrative structure has been well documented (Newcomb 1974), there has been a tendency with recently renewed interest in television to focus primarily on narrative complexity in what is termed ‘quality drama’ (Thompson 1997; Thomson 2003; Mittell 2006; McCabe and Akass 2007) leaving more contemporary ‘conventional’ programming absent critical attention. The fact that many of the shows Mittell points to as complex narratives are the same shows being discussed in relation to cross-media innovation is not surprising. There is no doubt something alluring in mapping the textual fields and serial architecture of complex narratives as these shows that create multifaceted storyworlds and generate multiple texts, or as Jenkins says, “to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium” (95). Although the question of whether narrative complexity is a true measure of value is, perhaps, problematic in its own right, television scholars have consistently and convincingly cited complexity as a distinct storytelling technique as a way to describe

contemporary American television produced since the 1990s<sup>4</sup>. However, as television networks expand and layer their content across multiple platforms it is imperative that we start to re-examine what narrative complexity means as television now extends far beyond what is seen on-air. I would argue that many conventional dramas such *CSI*, *NCIS*, *The Mentalist*, *Supernatural*, *Bones*, *Criminal Minds* and, of course, *Burn Notice* offer a similarly rich source of critical analysis and debate. Despite the repetitive simplicity of their narrative structure and character psychology, these dramas appear equal in their ability to cultivate complex storyworlds, especially when considered alongside their extensive textual ancillary and cross-media initiatives. In fact, many television networks that have traditionally produced more conventional programming are aggressively incorporating transmedia as a network wide industrial practice. This is distinct from many of the complex television shows often associated with transmedia, which are more a product of innovative production companies and show runners rather than a parent broadcast network. *Lost*, for example, was produced by ABC Studios and Bad Robot, with the latter the production company of J.J. Abrams, who has demonstrated an affinity for cross-media practices since he created *Alias* back in 2001. As a transmedia narrative, *Lost* was more a product of the shows creators and executive producers. In comparison, networks such as USA Network and CW (See Jennifer Gillian 2011), which have a long history of producing more conventional genre shows, have aggressively started to incorporate new media technologies, dynamic cross-media experiences and interactive engagements across the majority of their

---

<sup>4</sup> Jason Mittell identifies the 1990s to the present as the era of television complexity.

network programming. Initially, the wide spread incorporation of transmedia into the mode of produce could have something to do with these networks' desired demographic of 18-49, who may be more likely to engage in cross-platform experiences compared to older audiences. It could also be linked to the repetitive nature of the shows themselves, with viewers less likely to be captivated or swept away by the show's narrative alone. This allows for a type of multitasking behavior, which networks can exploit through simultaneous and near simultaneous ancillary extensions around a show's broadcast. Still, as more and more networks start to develop cross-media initiatives, it is important not to overemphasize notions of quality and narrative complexity. This seems especially true when taking into account the ways in which conventional programming takes on a high level of complexity when considered alongside a television show's textual, social and interactive cross-media strategies.

### **USA Network, *Burn Notice* and TV-Web Convergence**

At the intersection of industry and text, current TV-web initiatives are perhaps most capable of elucidating contemporary transmedia practices in American network television. Since the 1990s, when broadcasters became aware of the Internet's ability to facilitate fan-like activities and socialization around its television content, networks have been spending an increasing amount of time and capital in developing dynamic websites for their TV shows. John Caldwell, for example, convincingly suggests, "the television industry (and far more so than either the computer or film industry) brings to the groundswell of anticipation for



broadband and the Internet its obsession with advertising, sponsorship, and programming” (50). For Caldwell, websites for TV “demonstrate the complicated strategies by which television in the digital age continues to extend its historical niche as a form of entertainment commerce” (51). For Caldwell, the television industry managed the volatile shifts that took place as a result of digitization by embracing the Internet’s ability to deliver simultaneous and ancillary digital streams across multiple channels of content. Caldwell first analyzed Dawsoncreek.com back in 2004 as a way to elucidate a convergent practice of “conglomerating textuality” that includes the development of online textual expansions around such things as character backstory, metacritical commentary and merchandising. However, since first introducing his model of convergence television and the practice of conglomerating textuality, websites for TV have become even more complex and immersive, especially around online strategies that cultivate socialization and interactivity.

In this context, USA Network’s website stands out as a successful example of convergence television and cross-media initiatives. As an initial entry point, the homepage<sup>5</sup> offers access to all its original and syndicated shows’ websites, on-air schedules, full videos, exclusive online features and a social dashboard that pulls relevant feeds from across multiple social media sites. Although USA Network uses the same user-interface across the entirety of the website, the digital content for each individual show’s website is unique and demonstrates the types of strategies

---

<sup>5</sup> In late 2013, USA Network launched a new look and navigational interface for [www.usanetwork.com](http://www.usanetwork.com). This thesis reflects most of those changes, however, the online trivia games discussed in this chapter have since been removed from the show’s website.

by which USA Network cultivates online activity. The *Burn Notice* website, for example, offers multiple digital content streams including immediate access to videos, social feeds, games and episode recaps on its homepage, with the bulk of the online content accessed at the bottom of the screen through seven pop-up menus: Videos, About, Photos, Games, Features, Social and Store. While the amount of online content is staggering, much of it was developed over time and often strategically launched as part of evolving the on-air series. The flash game *Covert Ops: Vegas Heist*, for example, was released as part of season three to further develop the on-air narrative arc that included Michael's brother, Nate Westen, returning from Vegas with a 'shady' business partner for his limo company. Additionally, in *Michael's Interactive Loft* users are able to navigate with a graphically rendered interactive space that mimics the recurring on-air set. For instances, clicking on a stack of driver's licenses in the kitchen shows Michael's cover IDs, or clicking on the fridge reveals Sam's favorite beer. While these props are commonly used on the TV show, the website provides otherwise nameless objects with narrative depth, allowing enthusiastic users to dig deeper into the details of these objects and locations of the storyworld in general. The site's design also invites viewer participation by convincing viewers they have direct access the show's characters. For instance, in *Ask a Spy*, Michael Westen answers questions sent in by fans on how a spy would handle certain situations, such as what to carry in a purse if worried about your safety. In a short one-minute video Westen answers the questions often beginning with the phrase: "When you're a spy...", mimics the same type of voice over narration that is commonly used during the show. The website also provides access

to background information of the show's production, including behind the scenes videos and interviews with cast and crew. An interactive *On Location Map* allows the user to click on specific locations across Miami that reveal details about where certain scenes were filmed. The website immerses viewers in both the fictional storyworld and the show's processes of production.

The *Burn Notice* website also pulls visitors into the diegetic space of the show by positioning them as spies who could potentially join Michael's team. For instance, the online quizzes are called *Could You Join The Team*, *Could You Be a Spy*, and *Which Special Agent Are You?* While the quizzes test a user's knowledge of the series, the mode of address functions to test a user's 'spy potential'. In *Could You Join The Team*, for example, the introduction to the quiz concludes by asking the user: "Answer the following questions and if you're lucky, Michael might be hitting you up for a favor someday soon." For Sconce, this type of strategy functions to cultivate a storyworld that "that viewers gradually feel they inhabit along with the characters" (95). In a similar way, the online games are designed to mimic the same types of activities seen in the TV series. *See it Like a Spy*, for example, tasks the user with selecting household objects to build a improvised spy gadget, essentially asking users of the website to put their own 'spy savvy' to the test. In a more recent example, USA Network initiated a project called *The Science Challenge*, in which high school students across the United States competed for a \$10,000 grant by solving a challenge that the characters on *Burn Notice* might face such as building a wireless communication device or aerial drone that takes photos. The students were to build the devices with repurposed supplies commonly found around the household in

order to mimic the way Michael creates his gadgets on the show. Science Challenge not only positions students as spies, but also elicits a 'live performance' in the daily lives of audiences, a strategy that is becoming increasingly common in cross-media initiatives.

The website is also designed to act as the primary hub for viewers to migrate across different platforms. The prequel film *The Fall of Sam Axe*, for example, was promoted heavily on the website prior to season five of *Burn Notice* setting up plot elements for the premier episode of the television series. In an attempt to manage the movement of users across the website, USA Network created *Burn Circle*, a challenge-based reward system that allowed fans to earn points as they interacted with the various features of the website. By competing in Burn Circle, users, in addition to earning points towards merchandise, were also recognized through an online leader board. However, the most innovative example of USA Network's attempts to mobilize users across different platforms can best be demonstrated in the creation of the online graphic novel *First Contact* (2012) released over the course of season six of *Burn Notice*. As with other transmedia texts produced for the television series, the graphic novel explores character backstories, in particular the origin story behind Michael and Fiona's romance. The online graphic novel was promoted heavily on the website as well as during the on-air broadcasts. In attempting to access the graphic novel via the website, the user is provided numerous options to interact with the same content. Initially, the user is prompted to 'experience it online' or to 'read it on Facebook,' with the former providing access through USA's website, and the latter opening a new window in which the user must

sign into Facebook in order to continue to the next page. Whatever option is selected the following page is the same and provides another set of options that allow the user to either continue to read the graphic novel online or to read it by downloading the mobile app. At this point, the user is made aware of the host of extra features when they download the app, such as motion and sound effects, close-up views of each panel and hidden sketches. Clearly, there is a hierarchy of privilege presented to the user as they attempt to access the graphic novel. While the user can access the same content multiple ways, USA Network wants a portion of their content to be accessed through partnered technologies and allied interfaces. Indeed, similar strategies as those described above can be seen across the website as a whole with certain touch points being privileged over others with the promise of enhanced experiences. Ultimately, the website is designed to solidify an active migratory audience that is constantly moving in between a network of interconnected points of consumption.

Interactive Flash games also play a prominent feature on the *Burn Notice* website. Instead of investing in more complex computer and console games like *Lost*, *24* and *CSI*, USA Network has developed a series of flash games that offer a simpler form of gameplay that often take only minutes to complete through highly repetitive keyboard or point-and-click commands. In her research, Elizabeth Evans has articulated the prominence of Flash games as a form of online entertainment, suggesting “flash games... play a crucial role in the television industry’s development of transmedia storytelling, with most transmedia gaming texts taking the form of Flash games” (87). For instance, in *Jet Ski Getaway*, the user is simply

required to navigate a jet ski avoiding enemy speedboats and marina obstacles towards a destination. A game such *Jet Ski Getaway* offers little narrative potential, but the majority of games developed for *Burn Notice* demonstrate a high level of narrative intertextual continuity with the TV series. *Sam's Stash*, for example, requires the user to explore a storage shed filled with objects from Sam's past. Clicking or pairing certain objects will bring up a video in which Sam explains the object's relationship to a covert mission he took part in during his years working for the CIA. While the gameplay itself is simplistic, the plot elements contained within work to create a detailed backstory for Sam's character on the show.

The Flash game *Covert Ops 1.0*, perhaps, best exemplifies USA Network's approach to its transmedia gaming platforms. The game was developed in 2008 over the course of season two of *Burn Notice* in conjunction with the show's creator Matt Nix, and consists of a series of nine missions that test the players' ability to perform similar tasks seen on the series. For instance, Mission 1 required the player to scramble security cameras in an office trying to help an informant flee the building. Similarly, other activities included conducting surveillance, cloning a phone and planting evidence, all while behind the wheel of GM's Saab 9-3 Convertible. The game garnered more than 7.6 million views from over 300,000 web-users during the course of the nine-week campaign, with a new mission being released serially each week and tied to the broadcast schedule of *Burn Notice*. In an interview, Jesse Redniss, vice president of USA Network Digital stated: "*Covert Ops 1.0* surpassed our expectations in creating an engaging new experience for our fans

as well as extending the reach of our sponsor..."<sup>6</sup>. As a part of *Burn Notice's* transmedia strategy, the game was specifically designed to fit the narrative diegesis of the television series in both look and style, allowing players to explore and experience the fictional world through interactive game play. The partnership between USA Network and GM also demonstrates the types of partnerships that exist between networks and corporate sponsors, as cross-platform extensions are increasingly providing innovative opportunities for corporations to engage with fans as customers through interactive involvement with their products. In the case of *Overt Ops*, the interactions with a graphically rendered Saab 9-3 Convertible provide the digital playground for users to perform the missions. In many ways, *Covert Ops* provides a compelling example of the types of narrative coherence, textual elaborations and corporate sponsorship found in transmedia gaming being developed for television series. There does seem to be more at stake as networks position themselves as gatekeepers for corporate interests seeking to exploit the pleasure derived from fans wanting to delve deeper into televisual storyworlds.

The interactive strategies located on *Burn Notice's* website are constructed alongside USA Network's attempts to create and sustain social audiences around its programming. Attempting to leverage the power of enthusiastic fans, USA Network embeds its websites with an online chat platform referred to as "Character Chatter." As mentioned previously, USA Network directly appeals for viewer engagement through its on-air interstitial programming, as well as promoting its website to fans at the end of every episode with offers of exclusive online features that allow

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.movieweb.com/news/usa-network-announces-online-burn-notice-game>

viewers to dig deeper into a series' mythology. However, interstitials are also used as a way to pull users directly to the website's chat platform by providing access to stars and creative personnel who are actively posting during a show's broadcast. For example, in the episode *Acceptable Loss* (Season 5, Episode 17) of *Burn Notice*, the television audience was consistently reminded at the bottom of their screen that they could chat live with actor Jeffrey Donovan (Michael Westen) by going to [characterchatter.com](http://characterchatter.com). If not a weekly occurrence, invitations to chat with cast and crew did occur consistently over the course of the *Burn Notice* series and was promoted on social networking sites prior to the shows airing as a special event that allowed fans the pleasure of watching the show in the company of their favorite stars. While access to cast and crew is nothing new, USA Network cultivates socialization around its programming by offering immediate and simultaneous access to its star power during a show's airing. This type of strategy is suggestive of a growing awareness on the part of television networks to a growing number of viewers who are active on social media sites during television broadcasts. While this type of multitasking behavior is the focus of Chapter 3, we can initially identify the types of engagement tactics as a way to attract television audiences to USA Network's own social platforms by offering additional content that is only accessible during a show's weekly broadcast.

The Character Chatter platform is accessed by clicking on the 'Social' tap at the bottom of USA's homepage. The web-user will then be linked to the main chat platform which trends social feeds and news articles from a host of prominent websites including Facebook, Instagram, Indiewire, and Twitter. The user can then



filter the chat platform for each show, as well as further filter their feeds to display social buzz, online chat, tweets and USA's social sync.<sup>7</sup> In order to comment, a user must sign in using one of their accounts with Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo, Google +, or other popular social media sites. The potential for this type of cross-platform integration is not lost on networks that want to extend their reach across as many social media platforms as possible. In a recent report by *the Convergence Culture Consortium*, Alex Leavitt writes: "the industry already uses SNS [social networking sites] to capture the interest of audiences and extend their attraction from social networks to centrally-controlled platforms, usually to boost immersion within the television show" (7). Leavitt points to the way the television industry is able to derive information from social networks and apply insight "to both the future production of television content as well as conceptions of potential and actual audiences for advertisers" (6). In the case of USA Network, the Character Chatter platform allows users to switch seamlessly between posting on the network's chat platform, on Facebook and on Twitter with the option to have comments show up on all three sites simultaneously. By allowing users access to other popular social media sites via their own central chat platform, USA Network is not only better able to manage social interactions and expand sharing capabilities of other social networks, but also aggregate multiple messages into a central platform, while simultaneously integrating multiple points of brand consumption.

---

<sup>7</sup> Social sync is USA Networks' second-screen platform, whereby a mobile device offering additional content is monitored simultaneously during a show's broadcast. This form of engagement will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

Additionally, the central chat platform created by USA Network for its website is designed to allow users to post comments as well as reply in a way similar to other social networking sites. However, the reply function is not as privileged as the comment box at the top of the platform, which consists of a small text link at the bottom of a user's post. While this does not necessarily limit the potential for discussion, the design of USA's chat platform does seem to place a greater emphasis on soliciting new comments over returning users replying to other users. In fact, the types of comments found on USA's chat platform typically come as either a user 'liking', or more rarely, 'disliking' something, or a user simply posting details about a show. The Facebook and Twitter pages created by USA Network for its shows function in a similar way, with the only major difference being that these social media sites are primarily used by producers to post promotional information about the show. The update messages posted on social networks by producers and a show's creative teams provide the main threads for most social interactions, with social audiences constantly relegated to a position of respondent. The personal accounts controlled by a show's cast function in a similar way with their messages constantly being channeled into USA's central chat platform. While the integration of social networking pathways across USA Network's Character Chatter may provide multiple ways for users to socialize around a television series, there is in fact very limited or restricted space for fans to engage with each other in any real interactive discussion. In many ways, the design of the Character Chatter platform is primarily used as a way to generate and gather buzz and transplant it into a single unified social experience.

Despite the restrictions and clear attempts by USA Network to structure online social interactions, the website continues to play a crucial role in USA Network's cross-media strategy. Although only one part of USA Network's larger transmedia strategy, a TV website like the one created for *Burn Notice*, is seen to immerse audiences in an expansive textual ancillary that far exceeds the initial on-air broadcast. Many of the textual elaborations, interactive content and social TV initiatives analyzed in the discussion of USA Network and *Burn Notice* highlight the complicated strategies that American television networks are engaging in online. When considered alongside its textual ancillary, a television show like *Burn Notice* can be seen to take on a high level of complexity as fans search out bits of narrative information across multiple engagement platforms and expand their experience of a television text beyond a weekly forty-three minute episode. In doing so, a show like *Burn Notice* offers a challenge to both the distinctions being made around notions of quality and complexity in what is being referred to as the new golden age of television.

As television networks endeavor to develop coherent and expansive storyworlds it is important that critical attention starts to consider how cross-media encounters being developed for TV websites are shaping and expanding audience expectations and experiences of television on a daily basis. By focusing on examples of transmedia branding, interactive gaming texts, social platforms and the various other online tactics adopted by USA Network we are better able to observe how these specific transmediated experiences appear to function in service to the whole. The ability of USA Network to successfully gather and retain audience attention,

while simultaneously converting audiences into fans that pursue the experience of television across multiple media demonstrates the important role transmedia practices play in our understanding of contemporary television. Although the measures of transmedia criticism outlined in this case study are still subjectively formed absent any sort of tightly-defined criteria or transmedia metrics to evaluate success, the kind of transmedia experience created by USA Network may help point towards the kinds of evaluative processes, industry best practices and critical criteria needed to further develop a more definitive approach to transmedia criticism.

## Chapter 3

### Second-Screen, Connected Viewing and *The Walking Dead*

While the previous chapter focused on the evolving range of interactive and social Web-TV strategies, the following chapter sets out to explore a specific form of transmedia engagement known as ‘second screen’ as demonstrated through AMC’s *The Walking Dead*. In second screen engagements, or what is often referred to as ‘story sync’ mode, a television show is synced with a companion device that is to be monitored simultaneously during a television show’s premier broadcast. Similar to the other moments of transmediality, the second screen mode derives from a television industry that is aggressively developing elaborative content and added levels of immersive interactivity around their television content. Unlike other cross-platform extensions that function as a way to keep viewers engaged beyond an initial on-air broadcast, second screen engagements target a growing segment of television audiences that are watching television series while simultaneously using a secondary device such as a smartphone or tablet. Rather than a distraction to their television viewing experience, second screen users view this form of engagement as offering a new level of immersion and socialization around their favorite shows. Using a companion device to engage with television content is not entirely new, as reality TV shows such as *American Idol* have often encouraged viewers to use a second device to cast votes. The introduction of a story sync platform into a fictional television drama like *The Walking Dead*, however, does point to a new form of

engagement that wants to connect traditional viewing experiences with contemporary 'multitasking' viewer behavior.

With viewers increasingly being constructed as part of a transmedia experience of television, it is important to understand how cross-platform extensions like the second screen platforms evolve within the industry and what they can tell us about industry models of audience engagement. In the case of *The Walking Dead* "Story Sync," AMC Network offers audiences multiple opportunities for simultaneous interactive and social engagements. What distinguishes story sync from other instances of transmedia is the way it constructs audience experiences as part of a perceived real-time 'interactivity' with an on-air television broadcast. In a connected viewing context, the concept of immersion has less to do with the proliferation of textual elaborations as demonstrated earlier in models of TV-Web convergence, but more do to with the temporalities of television broadcasting, especially around notions of interactivity and televisual 'liveness.' Ultimately, the type of cross-media experience created by AMC's Story Sync demonstrates the complicated industrial processes involved as networks draw on earlier conceptions of television as a live medium in order to develop new forms of audience engagement.

### ***The Walking Dead* Story Sync: An Emerging Cross-Media Platform**

The hour-long horror television drama, *The Walking Dead*, produced by AMC and developed by Frank Darabont, first aired back in 2010 and is currently in its fourth season. Based on a comic book series of the same name, the show follows a

group of survivors in a post-apocalyptic United States overrun by “walkers”. Unlike *Burn Notice* discussed in Chapter 2, *The Walking Dead* uses a strict serial structure, with major narrative threads continuing from one episode to the next. Each episode will feature a minor threat or problem that the group must overcome, ranging from gathering supplies, to securing a site, fending of walkers or fortifying a position. Typically, these minor threats are in some way connected to the central threat of survival that is the main thrust of an entire seasonal story arc. Also interwoven into the main survival narratives are a series of personnel stories that reflect the characters’ struggle to maintain their humanity. In almost every episode characters are forced to make moral or ethical choices that will have positive or negative consequences for them personally or the group as a whole. In addition, the series has spawned a series of elaborative cross-media extensions that expand its story world beyond the on-air programming. This includes a website, flash games, comics, webisodes series *Torn Apart* (2011) and *Cold Storage* (2012), as well two console and PC games *The Walking Dead: The Game* (2012) and *The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct* (2013), with the latter acting as a prequel to the television series. Since its launch, *The Walking Dead* has seen a steady increase in viewership, becoming the most watched drama on basic cable with 12.4 million viewers tuning in for the season three finale. The series has been met by mostly positive critical reception and is by all accounts held up as an example of quality programming.

At the mid-point of program’s second season, in February 2012, AMC launched its second screen app, or “Story Sync”. With second screen engagements the viewer-user launches the story sync application on a companion device such as a

tablet or smartphone via the Internet just prior to the start of a premier broadcast. When the television show starts, the second screen app goes live and lasts only for the duration of the on-air television broadcast. After the broadcast ends, the formal and temporal link established between the two screens is severed and the app goes dormant until the following week when the next episode airs. Typically, story syncs offer a range of content including snap polls, trivia, video, photos and real-time fan discussion. The real-time nature of the interactions that compose this platform make it somewhat difficult to locate the story sync platform within established models of transmedia. In many ways, the story sync platform represents a hybrid, or convergent platform, that draws on elements of both interactive gaming and social media. Whereas transmedia narratives disperse integral elements of a fiction across various media, story syncs will often contribute nothing to the unfolding of a story and relatively little in the way of textual elaborations. Instead, as will be explored shortly, story sync apps refashion and augment already produced televisual content to create a connected viewing engagement<sup>8</sup> that supplements the story playing out on the television screen. By attracting multi-screen viewers to their own second screen platform, rather than users posting on other social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter during on-air broadcasts, networks are better able to leverage fan communities, as well as extend the reach of their corporate sponsors through second-screen advertising. Although story sync technology has the capacity for a

---

<sup>8</sup> In a recent collection of essays entitled, *Connected Viewing: Selling, Streaming & Sharing Media in the Digital Age*, the authors argue that connected viewing is an emerging mode of viewer engagement that creates new relationships between audiences and media texts. In their contributions, Hye-Jin Lee, Mark Andrejevic and Ethan Tussey contextualize and theorize second-screen platforms as a form of connected viewing.



greater range of narrative and stylistic elaborations, television networks are currently using story syncs primarily as a form of real-time social engagement in an effort to foster interactive viewing around their original programming. This is perhaps one of the reasons why television scholars have largely ignored second screen forms of engagement. In fact, what critique does exist can largely be located on technology blogs and entertainment business forums. In a post on tech blog *GigaOM*, for example, entitled “Can *Breaking Bad*’s Story Sync Get Viewers to give up their DVRs?”, the author evaluates the technology for its newness and capacity to split a viewer’s attention between on-air content and a companion device. While the author seems to position the technology as a distraction overall, she concludes: “Second-screen viewing is definitely not a fad, and leaning into the curve of distracted audiences isn’t a bad strategy, especially when you can also simultaneously encourage real-time engagement.”<sup>9</sup>

This type of dismissive glance by critics is perhaps understandable considering the expansive types of cross-media expressions being developed in video games, tie-in novels, webcomics or websites for TV. Indeed, since Henry Jenkins first published *Convergence Culture* back in 2006, there has been a tendency to focus on instances of transmedia storytelling over other cross-media and social TV initiatives. However, the dismissal of second screen engagements as a form of distraction for an increasingly distracted television audience ultimately fails to recognize the complicated industrial strategies and potential audience pleasures that are unique to this form. In fact, as patterns of media use become more

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://gigaom.com/2012/09/09/can-breaking-bads-story-sync-get-viewers-to-give-up-their-dvrs/>

integrated with mobile technology and multi-screen experiences, second screen engagements become an important example of shifting network practices, technological augmentations and new forms of user engagement affecting screen media in the digital age.

Initially, the emergence of AMC's story sync can be traced to the growing recognition on the part of networks that certain segments of television audiences are consuming multiple content streams simultaneously. Back in 2003, Anna Everett was one of the first to describe a type of 'multitasking' behavior that was a result of a radically transforming media environment, in which audiences were "becoming more adept at processing and appreciating the gestalt of digital technologies' multimedia barrage" (8). While Everett was attempting to rearticulate theories around spectatorship in response to digitalization, the television industry has been equally obsessed with shifting patterns of engagement and consumption in the digital age. In 2011, for example, Nielsen published a report that found 70% of tablet owners and 68% of smartphone owners used their devices while watching television.<sup>10</sup> More recently, a 2013 report by BI Intelligence<sup>11</sup> found that 85% of smartphone users have reported second screen-linked behavior at least once a month, over 60% reported doing so on a weekly basis, and between the ages of 18-24, over 80% are reported to use their phone while watching TV. These types of reports published by Nielsen and BI Intelligence may seem like just one more piece of interesting data collection in a bloated arena of technology research that focuses

---

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2011/in-the-u-s-tablets-are-tv-buddies-while-ereaders-make-great-bedfellows.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/second-screen-industry-set-to-explode-2013-7>

on the smallest details of consumer behavior. However, as a formidable player in the digital media realm, the television industry has demonstrated time and again its ability to analyze early patterns of media use, and respond with strategies that manage the instabilities of new technologies and consumer practices brought on as a result of digitization. As Caldwell writes:

... television engage and even welcomed the [digital] threat, proving that its historic prowess in entertainment, programming, and the economic realities of electronic media distribution gave it a set of comprehensive corporate skills well suited to tame the wild speculations of the dot-com world. (42)

As an industry, television has become increasingly focused on developing simultaneous and ancillary digital dreams around its programming, and as a result, is well-suited to embrace new forms of engagement. In this way, the industry does not see multitasking as a form of inattentiveness directed toward their programming, but rather, it sees multitasking behavior becoming a suitable site for transmedia development that can be layered with traditional television practices.

As a case in point, *The Walking Dead: Story Sync* was developed as part of AMC's ongoing strategy to create cross-media experiences for its television programming. In developing the story sync platform, AMC Network partnered with *Echo*, a technology firm specializing in the development of real-time platforms and second screen applications. While AMC's investment in second screen platforms can be situated in line with other cross-media initiatives, the partnership with Echo represents significant movement towards the development of properties that compliment the linear viewing experiences. Up until recently, transmedia has been

conceived as a non-linear and serialized form, whereas with story sync engagements, the emphasis is on the simultaneity of the cross-media experience. This is an important shift in cross-media development as networks experiment with new technologies and textual innovations that have a direct impact on traditional linear viewing experiences in real time. In discussing the launch of story sync platform for another AMC show, *The Killing*, Mac McKean, AMC's senior vice president of digital media, explained, "We know a significant portion of our audience is engaging in social media and other second screen applications while they watch these shows, so our goal with 'Story Sync' is to offer the best experience possible with authentic elements carefully integrated with the creative on television."<sup>12</sup> In his comments McKean situates story sync as an 'official' platform for socialization that engages viewers while also offering additional curated content that supplements the story playing out on TV.

As already highlighted, the goal of story sync is not to expand a story world by offering additional narrative threads, but to create a value added experience for viewers who tune in to the premier broadcast. As a corporate strategy, creating a successful second screen platform can potentially create new revenue opportunities by bringing more advertisement to users who access story sync application through their mobile phones, tablets and computers. Also, the dispersion of attention between multiple screens may also function to actually re-capture viewer attention who may otherwise be engaged in parallel multitasking activities such as tweeting on Twitter or posting messages on Facebook. By integrating a second screen

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2013/05/31/amc-launches-the-killing-story-sync/185270/>

platform with a television show producers can potentially refocus attention back on network content, keeping users engaged with the real time broadcast, while also fulfilling their desire to engage across multiple screens. And, while not the focus of this thesis, it should also be pointed out that second screen engagements as a new engagement form are, as Mark Andrejevic argues, “tied up with issues of exploitation in the interactive media in which every action of users can be captured and put to work by marketers and advertisers” (409). Any future consideration of second screen engagements should endeavor to highlight the ways in which networks can potentially exploit the data gathered from second screen users via polls or discussion towards their on-air or ancillary production. Still, as is the case with most transmedia properties, mass acceptance isn’t necessary from an industry point of view. Even if a network like AMC can capture a small percentage of viewers who engage in second screen behavior it will generate further opportunities for advertisement and sponsorship, let alone the cross-channel benefits of a highly engaged television audience.

The story sync application itself is accessible either through AMC’s website or a downloadable app for tablet or smartphone, and uses a simple point-and-click interface that allows users to switch seamlessly between two primary windows: the curated content and a discussion forum. The content updates occur anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes and range from approximately 30-35 updates over the course of an episode. The format consists of a series of images, graphics, videos and sounds, many of which are then layered with interactive features that are carefully tied to the narrative progression or themes of the on-air broadcast.

Initially, the story sync always begins with a Prediction, in which the user selects the character they think will kill the most walkers over the course of the episode. This is the first interactive poll a user participates in and it's only at the end of the episode that a Kill Count graphic reveals which character did in fact kill the most walkers, thus allowing the user to see if their prediction was correct. Aside from the Prediction and Kill Count categories that book end the story sync run, the rest of the updates don't follow any specific order, but are determined by sixteen pre-established categories, some of which I analyze more closely below. The categories are:

Category	Format	Description
Prediction	Poll	Asks the user makes a selection based on what he/she thinks will be revealed later in the narrative. Always begins the story sync by asking user to select which character will kill the most walkers over the course of an episode.
Freeze Frame	Photo	A screen capture from current episode.
Flashback	Photo	A screen capture from a previously aired episode. Includes text referencing the earlier event and episode title.
Judgment	Poll	Asks the user makes a selection based on what they think are the motivations behind character(s) actions are, or what they think about certain plot events.
Remember	Trivia	Asks the user to make a selection based on previous knowledge of <i>The Walking Dead</i> TV show.
Decide	Poll	Asks the user to identifying with a character or plot event and make a selection based on what choice he/she would make in that situation.
Kill Shot	Image	A screen capture of a person/walker being killed.
Gore Gauge	Poll	Asks the user to make a selection from one (barely bloody) to five (total bloodbath) based on how gory an image is considered to be.
Instant Replay	Video	A short embedded video clip that replays a sequence for the current episode. Typically involves an action sequence.
Weapon	Graphic	An image of a weapon used in the show with the weapons design specifications.
Advertisement	Graphic	A advertisement from sponsors
Before the Break	Photo	A screen capture from before a commercial break that occurs right after.

Tactical & Morality	Poll	Asks the user to make a selection based on the tactical and moral implications of a narrative event. Includes four options: tactically right/morally right; tactically wrong/morally right; tactically right/immoral; tactically wrong/immoral.
Graphic Origins	Photo/Graphic	Juxtaposes a screen shot from the TV series with a graphic image from the comic.
Sneak Peak	Video	A short promo video for next week's episode.
Kill Count	Graphic	Includes the total number of walkers killed and who got the most kills. Comes at the end of story sync content and bookends the prediction that users make at the start.

As a branded cross-media initiative, *The Walking Dead* story sync can be situated along similar lines as other transmedia texts in so far as it creates interactive features that fit into the narrative diegesis of series. The Kill Shot and Gore Gauge categories, for example, feature images of graphic horror violence that are prevalent throughout the television series. The interactive polls found in the Prediction, Judgment and Decide categories will often generate questions to reflect the same moral and ethical dilemmas faced by the characters. These categories, at times, will direct the user to identify directly with a character on the show. For example, the story sync that accompanied the episode “The Suicide King” (Season 3, Episode 9) asked the user to Decide ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ based on the following question: “If you were Rick, you’d let Tyreese and his group stay.” This update occurred moments after a scene on *The Walking Dead* in which Rick must decide whether to let a group of survivors take shelter in a prison his group had taken refuge in. Conversely, the user may also be positioned outside of the narrative diegesis and asked to make a choice based on their own knowledge and interpretation of a character’s action or motivation. In the same story sync run, for example, the user was asked to Judge what is worse for Rick’s group: a long standing member leaving (Option 1: Daryl

Leaving) or a another person joining who they've had problems with in the past (Option 2: Merle Joining). The Tactical and Morality Matrix, however, stands as the best example of a story sync category that reflects narrative themes of the on-air broadcast. Here, the user is asked to make a choice based on the tactical and moral implications of a narrative event by selecting one of four options: 1) tactically right/morally right 2) tactically wrong/morally right 3) tactically right/immoral, or 4) tactically wrong/immoral. The four choices mimic the same choices characters are confronted with during each episode, as the primary tension of the series is created between characters doing whatever it takes to survive and trying to maintain their humanity in the process. Still, regardless of the category, each one demonstrates a high level of intertextual play with both narrative patterns of cause and effect, as well as the complex character psychology that plays a crucial role in television series.

Additionally, at a mechanical level, users simply monitor the companion device using the 'update clock' located at the top of the screen to determine when the next content update will be made available. As updates occur, different levels of engagement will be required depending on the specific category of the update, with most interactions only taking a few seconds to complete. The Freeze Frame, Flashback and Kill Shot categories, for example, only require the user to momentarily switch attention from the on-air broadcast to their story sync device just long enough to absorb the information contained in the graphic or photo before returning their focus back to the television. Other categories such as Judgment, Decide and Remember require the user to physically interact with the device by



clicking or tapping the screen. For example, Gore Gauge requires the user to rank an image based on how gory it is on a scale from one (barely bloody) to five (total bloodbath). After making their selection, the user is then able to click on a 'view results' tab to reveal the overall polling percentages that have been correlated among all the story sync users.

The nature of *The Walking Dead* story sync platform can further be observed by considering how a perceived link is created between the on-air transmission and story sync content. In attempting to understand the dialectical relationship between real-time second screen engagements and television, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of remediation highlights the way different mediums "appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real" (65). Bolter and Grusin go on to suggest that media can be divided into two principle contradictory stylistic practices: transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. Transparent media attempts to isolate the viewer within the story or virtual world, "bravely denying the fact of mediation," hypermediacy is "explicit" and "import earlier media into a digital space in order to critique and refashion them" (53). As a new media technology, AMC's Story Sync falls into the latter category by literally importing on-air content in the form of screen grabs or content graphics and refashioning them to interactive and stylistic additions on the story sync device. This leads to a heightened level of mediation rather than diminishing it.

The Kill Shot, for example, uses a close up of a person or zombie being killed and will occur on the story sync device moments after the viewer has seen the live

action being played out on their television screen. While this fixed image of violence would offer very little to the unfolding of *The Walking Dead* story, it plays a crucial role in the formal composition of the story sync platform and user experience. While the Kill Shot is the most basic form of textual repurposing, a more complicated strategy emerges as programmers start to layer interactive features onto their screen shots. For instance, in the episode entitled “Home” (S03E10), the user was asked to make a Judgment on whether they ‘Like’ or ‘Dislike’ a potential romantic relationship between two characters (Alex and Carol). The poll occurred moments after a scene on *The Walking Dead* where Alex informs Carol how he ended up in jail as they work together on fortifying the perimeter of a prison compound (the main setting for Season 3). As a result of the flirtatious subtext that underscored an otherwise expositional scene, story sync programmers decided to tease out the potential romantic tension between two characters on the story sync platform. In order to accomplish this a medium two-shot of the two actors was used with an added text overlay that simply read: “Alex and Carol?”. The screen grab and text was then layered with the integrative poll features two options: “Yes” or “No”.

Interestingly, these types of interactions on the story sync bring to the surface certain subtexts that would have traditionally been the job of the viewer to uncover and interpret. Although certain categories use original graphics specifically designed for the story sync, the majority of content is developed using the screen capture process described above. Significantly, the screen captures functions to create a link between the on-air broadcast and story sync content allowing programmers to generate new content for each category while also maintaining the same structure

week to week over the course of a season. It is this process of augmentation and repurposing that represents the primary characteristic of the story sync form.

In considering the dynamic marriage between contemporary television and connected viewing platforms, we begin to see how AMC's story sync creates an equally dynamic relationship between technology and text as demonstrated in other instances of transmedia. The repurposing and augmentation of textual elements from *The Walking Dead* series to the story sync invites different types of interactions, with the viewer-user both selectively interrupting textual information as well as interacting with the device directly with their actions having reactions on screen, all the while watching the on-air broadcast. Certainly, these types of interactions might give critical pause as interactive polls, for example, only allow users to select from a set of pre-determined options. These restrictions could potentially impact the user's imagination limiting alternative readings of narrative events or character psychology. Prediction and Kill Count, for example, create an interpretive framework of *The Walking Dead* as being all about a competition to kill. This, of course, is not the case, with most acts of violence against walkers creating deep emotional psychological problems for the characters, especially in the earlier seasons. Although it remains to be seen exactly how audiences are negotiating story sync content with the depth of story being played out on screen, I would argue that most story sync users are quite able to navigate the intertextual play that exists between the interactive engagements on story sync, which may not always reflect the narrative reality of the television series. One also has to ask to what degree the type of interactions, intertextuality and linked connections described above function

towards creating an immersive experience of connected viewing television. In this regard, what is particularly noteworthy about the cross-platform flow demonstrated by AMC's story sync is the high level of viewing intensity and focus that is required to monitor and engage multiple content screens at the same time. And, while it is difficult to say with any certainty absent further audience research, I would suggest from personal experience and asking a small informal sample of other story sync users that second screen engagements can be just as immersive as traditional linear television watching experiences.

### **Story Sync: The Spectrum of Interactivity and Televisual Liveness**

The concept of interactivity has come to play a crucial role in discussions of contemporary television industrial practice, as networks are increasingly developing interactive engagement platforms around their television programming. Since digitalization there has been a longstanding debate that has attributed connotations of positive and negative value proffered onto distinctions between interactive media and television spectatorship. Elizabeth Evans, for example, writes, "the perceived difference between playing a game [interactive media] and watching a television program is intricately bound up with perceptions of the active/passive binary that informed early work on television audiences..." (94). The comparison between interactive media where the primary pleasure for audiences is that of control has been traditionally perceived as better than television where an audience's sense of control is limited to changing channels or turning off the TV. As Ellen Seiter writes:

In advertising, in new broadcasts, in education journals, the computer is often defined against, and pitched as an improvement on, the television set: where television viewing is passive, computer is interactive, where television programmes are entertaining in a stale, commercialized violent way, computer software and the Internet are educational virtuous and new. (120)

The perception of interactive media like video games as being more immersive because it offers increased audience agency compared to more passive instances of television watching has continued to find traction amongst new media scholars. However, there is a growing amount of research that attempts to complicate the passive/active binary. In her chapter, "Digitextuality and Click Theory," for example, Everett argues against the situational logic of passive/interactive viewership, and instead considers digital media's capacity for immersive bodily experiences that not only engage our senses of sight, sound and touch, "... but they also present a point-and-click fetish object of unlimited choice and sensory experience" (16). Other scholars have similarly focused on the complicated relationship television has with interactive media. Marie-Laure Ryan, for example, describes two types of interactivity: "selective" and "productive", with the former describing activities that include evaluating or interpreting a television text, and the latter dealing more with active participation in a text's construction (2001: 211-212). Similarly, Andrew Darley has argued that watching TV or film is interactive in and of itself as it offers a greater level of semiotic resonance and semantic depth compared to interactive media (164). More recently, Evans in her discussion of transmedia games has argued that 'interactivity' should not be viewed as some monolithic concept, "but a

spectrum that covers subtle distinctions between different activities based on both interpretation and physical action..." (96). Indeed, what all of these nuanced approaches have in common is their ability to move beyond models determined by technology or content to illustrate levels of interactivity based on a freedom of audience intentionality.

While these approaches have adopted a more complex understanding of interactivity and television than has traditionally informed early television work, the introduction of second screen engagements of the type described here further complicates our understanding of the television medium. Indeed, the multiple levels of interactivity that AMC's story sync platform invites operates across a wide spectrum of both physical and cognitive interactions that are constructed as part of perceived interactivity with the narrative progression of *The Walking Dead*. In order to create the selective and productive interactions, to use Ryan's terms, programmers as we saw earlier use screen grabs as a way to generate the temporal link between what audiences are watching on their TV and the interactions taking place on the story sync device. Additionally, users are also asked to weigh in on plot or character action. In the episode "Home" (Season 3, Episode 10), for example, a scene on the television series shows survivors debating on whether to abandon the prison fearing a pending attack by the Governor. After this scene occurred, the story sync user was asked to Decide whether the group should: 'Run', 'Attack' or 'Make a Stand', with 76% of users choosing to Make a Stand. In this example, the potential for control was created by the story sync and captured in the words: "They should...." While a certain level of pleasure may be experienced by knowing where

your vote stands in relation to other story sync users (the social feature), arguably, the most potent form of pleasure is derived from the impression that a story sync user could actually control the events taking place in the present. Of course, this impression of control is pure illusion, as the user is no doubt aware they have no actual control over the narrative events of a scripted television show. Yet, in the case of story sync engagements, we may be able to identify how the user becomes complicit in the illusion, with the story sync experience cultivating a type of wish fulfillment that could surpass any form of interactive gaming. From an industry point of view, the ability to create even the perception of interactivity with its on-air broadcasts is a powerful tool towards immersing audiences in their television programming. The importance of interactivity and immersion in this context relies on the ability of story sync content to function in real-time creating a 'live' situational viewing experiencing for audiences that cannot be easily repeated outside of an initial on-air broadcast.

The relationship television has with the concept of "liveness" dates back at least to 1974 when Raymond Williams first introduced the notion of 'flow' as a way of explaining how television programming orchestrates individual segments into a temporal continuity of texts to hold the viewer's attention from one segment to the next. While Williams' notion of flow would go on to spark a wide range of debates, William Uricchio has argued, the concept of flow "has been deployed most consistently in the service of defining a televisual essence" (34). This essence that Uricchio refers to has most often been used to characterize broadcast television as primarily a 'live' medium. In attempting to question the ontological definition of

television as live, and attempting to undermine naturalizing assumptions that equated television 'liveness' with the real, Jane Feuer in her seminal essay "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology", explains how "Raymond Williams invokes the concept of flow as a way of explaining the effect of immediacy and presence the experience of television gives" (15). In her work, Feuer initially points to how the television industry was capable of postulating equivalence between time of event, time of television creation and transmission viewing time despite the fact that most television programs are not broadcast live. In her analysis of *Good Morning America* Feuer describes a process of segmentation where network producers construct a 'unified' flow by constantly alternating between fragmented media (commercials, local and network sources). She argues convincingly that through its mode of address and spectator positioning the program "propagates an ideology of liveness in order to overcome fragmentation" (17). Importantly, Feuer situates television within a historical specific set of technological innovations, textual logics and industrial practices all of which play heavily off the term "live television."

Williams, of course, was writing in what became known as the 'broadcast era' that began around the 1950s. In Williams' time certain conditions existed that allowed television programmers a large degree of control over their audience. After the late 1970s, however, new government regulations, syndication, the increase in television channels, and the introduction of the remote control and VCR started to "signal a shift away from the programming-based notion of flow that Williams described, to a viewer-centered model" (Uricchio 35). The transition from the



broadcast era to an era of 'narrowcasting' opened up a swell of niche channels allowing television audiences a much larger window to select the shows they wanted to watch. Indeed, with digitalization, media has become even more versatile and fluid. William Boddy, for example, has argued that the invention of the PVR and other digital recording technology destabilizes traditional notions of the nature of television. As Boddy writes:

This new form of time shifting is merely one sign of the ways in which digital technologies, at least in the eyes of many current industry leaders and pundits [in the United States], are eroding the experience of simultaneity and liveness that has traditionally been seen as both part of television's essential nature and central to its relation to the nation. (103)

Indeed, television audiences today can watch the same content on projectors, television sets, computers, smartphones, tablets and gaming consoles. Moreover, most audiences in North America have a perceived increase in agency as they can watch their shows outside the temporal structure of broadcast television through On Demand, online streaming and PVR-based services, essentially allowing them to create personalized flows by segmenting their own digital content streams.

Ultimately, the ability to separate out individual texts from the televisual flow and access content anywhere at any time destabilizes television's historically and ideologically self-propagating assertion that it is essentially a live medium.

Although the television industry has gone to great lengths to manage and exploit the new temporal relationship between audiences and television programming brought on by digitalization, the emergence of second screen

engagements suggests networks have not fully abandoned their endeavors to exploit the effects of immediacy and liveness. As Bolter and Grusin have suggested old media players like television remain focused on “exploiting digital technologies to enhance their medium’s claim to immediacy” (185). In the case of Story Sync, AMC cultivates the sensation of immediacy by propagating equivalence between the time of its on-air transmission and the real-time interactive and social story sync content taking place on a companion device. As we have seen, this constructed sense of simultaneity with the narrative world of *The Walking Dead* is achieved in a variety of ways including the use of screen grabs, real-time fan discussion and the interactive polls that users participate in over the course of premier broadcasts. Additionally, in its promotion of its story sync platform, AMC goes to great lengths to alert the viewer that engaging with the story sync outside of the premier broadcast will contain spoilers that could disrupt the natural progression of the unfolding narrative. Arguably, however, it is the sensation of the perceived real-time interactivity with the story world, which creates the deepest level of immediacy with the on-air transmission. As the user monitors the update clock on the story sync device, the user is in a constant state of bodily suspension preparing for the physical and mental shift required to migrate between platforms. Yet, through these formal properties there is a sense that the two media are connected, which ultimately re-orientates users back to a position of presence and immediacy within a transmediated televisual medium.

Admittedly, ‘televisual liveness’ is not quite the right word to describe emerging instances of connecting viewing engagements. For many television

scholars, the television medium creates a sense of transparent immediacy and televisual liveness by holding the viewer in an immediate relationship with its content through a linear flow. However, the notion of television as a linear flow is complicated in the context of transmedia as audiences are increasingly accessing television content and ancillary digital streams across various media channels. This seems especially true in instances of second screen engagements where television audiences are constructed as part of a simultaneous multi-platform flow rather than from within a single platform. But how exactly does the sense of real time created by connected viewing engagement differ or resemble that of traditional conceptions of liveness? Equally, as networks attempt to direct, capture and interpolate television audiences, what kind of subject positing is being created by connected viewing experiences? While the full breadth of these questions are beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important that we consider how connected viewing experiences are constructed around notions of presence and immediacy, and that we start to engage in an ideological critique of “real time” much like we do televisual liveness. Still, what seems clear is that the proliferation and versatility of broadband-enabled devices has allowed television networks to transmit multiple digital streams across various platforms, and because television has continued its historical practice of the broadcast schedule with episodes released at a set time and date, television can offer forms of engagement that exploit the temporal structure of its programming. Whether users are addressing each other through the discussion forum, testing their knowledge through trivia, or engaging in a snap poll, there is a sense that AMC’s story sync users are participating in a live event that is ostensibly a product of

television's temporal framework. This type of engagement does create problems for certain viewers where the temporal continuity required by second screen engagements only works within certain time windows. As a result, viewers in Europe, for example, are unable to participate in AMC's story sync because of the difference in transmission times. Ultimately, in connected viewing context, the concept of live television is not as much about overcoming fragmentation as it is about creating a unified flow from fragmentation.

In exploring the complicated relationship between earlier conceptions of the television medium and second screen engagements it is possible to demonstrate how connected viewing experiences are not only immersive but how these experiences are creating new relationships between audiences and media texts in an increasingly real time digital space. As a new form of user engagement, AMC's story sync stands out as an example of the shifting patterns of cross-media use by both the television industry and television audiences. By focusing on the specific properties of AMC's story sync and the simultaneity of the cross-media experience created by such engagements, we are not only better able to observe the kinds of transformations resulting from connected viewing practices, but also start to rethink transmedia as primarily a serial form. Indeed, the real time intertextual play, interactivity and socialization that occurs between the story sync user and on-air television broadcasts further underscores the importance of transmedia criticism in evolving our understanding of how new forms of user engagement are being constructed within contemporary television.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

The emergence of contemporary transmedia practice as an industry strategy has worked to complicate our understanding of the television medium in the twenty-first century. For audiences today, television is no longer one screen with a singular viewing experience, but many screens that allow for new modes of engagement and ability to pursue the experience of television into additional media. Even with the rapid technological growth in the 1990s, television remained relatively stable with networks focused on the direct broadcast of content to audiences. Today nothing about television is stable. Now we have a highly dynamic medium with networks developing television programming that can foster innovative cross-media experiences providing television audiences with opportunities to engage in an expanded storyworld through a variety of textual, interactive and social forms and viewing contexts. By offering new insights, user experiences and perspectives in the same fictional world, networks can encourage deeper engagement with their programming that sustains audience loyalty and promotes more consumption. Television as a traditionally understood broadcast medium does not simply disappear for audiences or critics in this new and rapidly evolving context. It is entirely possible for a viewer to tune in each week to watch shows like *Burn Notice* and *The Walking Dead* and not engage beyond the on-air broadcast. However, as we have seen earlier, it is equally possible that audiences

can and will engage with a vast, dynamic and self-actualized story network that offers multiple sites of engagement across a variety of platforms. Television is in a wholly new era where we are challenged to critically acknowledge this moment in media culture and distinguish transmedia from earlier conceptions of the television medium.

This thesis began by considering how television scholars have historically constituted television as either text or technology. As the television industry increasingly adopts a transmedia approach to its programming, there is a need to re-evaluate earlier distinctions by bringing into focus two aspects of transmedia development. First, are issues involving the practical development of a transmedia property, namely the complex interactions that exist between technology and content. Second, is the more scholarly pursuit of establishing a finely-tuned mode of transmedia criticism capable of more fully understanding the implications of these changes. What the analysis and case studies undertaken in this paper show is that in examining transmedia narratives for television, the concept of the 'platform' as produced by the text and the technology on which it is accessed, becomes central. Looking at websites for TV, for example, it became apparent that content functions differently on different platforms. As Elizabeth Evans argues, "technologies and platforms are not approached independently from each other but instead within a context of expectations and values created from experience with other media forms" (176). In the case of *Burn Notice*, viewers were given the opportunity to learn more about a character's backstory through reading the online comic, or dig deeper into the details of a storyworld through interactive game play, with each element

working to expand a particular diegesis and encourage consumption across additional media. The high degree of continuity and coherence that exists between the on-air broadcast and cross-media extensions located on *Burn Notice's* website demonstrate the complexity in which contemporary television programming is being developed and produced. It is also necessary to consider how these different platforms help shape each other and the overall experience of the viewer, something that was evident in the transmediated experience created for AMC's *The Walking Dead* via its story sync platform. In this case, a viewer's experience of an on-air broadcast was altered as they engaged multiple content delivery platforms simultaneously. In both cases, however, no media was seen to function in isolation of the other. The integration of new media technologies – the Internet, tablet, and mobile phone – into the development of television programming did not make television a redundant medium. In fact, it was quite the opposite, with television being produced within an increasingly constructed cross-media flow that is the product of the creative use of a complex media landscape, adaption to shifting social behaviors and audience expectations, and the creation of dynamic industry programming strategies.

### **Transmedia: The Intersection of Industry, Text and Audience**

In undertaking this research I set out to demonstrate how television content is becoming transmedia, sustaining a depth of experience across multiple platforms, and how we may be better able to critique and analyze various transmedia experiences. Having delved more closely into evolving transmedia practices in the

*Burn Notice* and *Walking Dead* case studies, there is greater realization that not only is content changing, but the television industry itself with the integration of transmedia into television production creating new forms of audience engagement. The focus on specific examples of successful transmedia platforms has allowed us to examine both the practice and process of contemporary transmedia and its impact on traditional media institutions like television, and how transmedia exists at the axis of industry, text and audience. One of the key observations evident in both case studies was how programmers engage in a type of self-reflexive analysis of their television programming to identify elements that can be repurposed for cross-media applications. In *Burn Notice* we saw a recurring on-air set became the subject of an interactive feature for the *Burn Notice* website in the form of Michael's Loft. This type of activity reflects John Caldwell's notion of a 'critical industrial practice' and 'conglomerating textuality' in which television networks respond to economic and cultural instabilities that result in new industrial strategies and practices. In a transmedia context, this type of professional mining of on-air content is the result of networks attempting to mediate the rapid adoption of new media technologies and shifting patterns of audience engagement and consumption around televisual programming. A network's ability to respond to emerging patterns of consumption, as well as identify, repurpose and augment its on-air content for textual elaboration across different platforms has become a defining characteristic of contemporary television production. The development of a second screen platform for *The Walking Dead*, for example, was AMC's response to certain segments of its audience demonstrating multitasking behavior via mobile technology during their on-air



broadcasts. By actively identifying textual elements such as character backstories or narrative gaps, both USA Network and AMC expand their source programming without collapsing the distinction between its traditional form as a broadcast medium and types of engagements that are being cultivated on new media platforms.

Traditionally, intratextual readings would fall to television audiences or critics who engage in the expanded reading and meaning-making process of television narratives. Similarly, in the past, online fan communities would emerge to discuss the complexities of a show's mythology, often identifying textual gaps and story contradictions, and filling in missing information based on their own experience of a storyworld<sup>13</sup>. However, as transmedia practices become more commonplace, such intratextual readings and analyses are increasingly falling under the purview of cross-media producers or digital content programmers. As television becomes something developed by transmedia producers, we might start to question to what extent fan activity is being closed down or encouraged by networks. For his part, Henry Jenkins sees transmedia narratives cultivating fandom by encouraging devoted audiences to dig deeper into a storyworld, allowing them to share their expertise and knowledge with others. As Jenkins argues, "these [transmedia] artists

---

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Mary Kirby-Diaz in *Buffy and Angel Conquer the Internet: Essays on Online Fandom*. McFarland & Company, 2009; Stein L. and Busse K. in *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series*. McFarland & Company, 2012.

are building a more collaborative relationship with their consumers: working together, audience members can process more story information than previously imagined” (96). In highlighting the collaborative and participatory relationship between fans and producers, Jenkins places value on the encyclopedic nature of transmedia narratives that can be drilled, practiced, and shared. In contrast, Matt Hills has argued that certain transmedia strategies represent a form of brand management, or “fanagement,” rather than “harmonizing fan activities and branding practices” (425). In his analysis of the TV Series *Torchwood* produced by the BBC, Hills argues:

transmedia storytelling targeted paratextually at fandom becomes a way of symbolically transforming production contingencies into hyperdiegetic continuity. But this ‘fanagement’ – the attempted management of fan readings, responses and activities – does not merely give fan what they want... it protects brand value by responding to fan criticism regarding errors and anticipating possible fan critiques. (425).

For Hills, transmedia is not simply catering to fans’ desire to dig deeper into a storyworld, it is also about seeking to manage fan expectations and criticism through a show’s textual ancillary rather than in the TV show itself. Hills sees this as problematic, potentially closing down certain fan readings and activities. Derek Johnson has similarly observed “the proximity of audiences and texts and their production invites conflicts of interest between fan and industrial forces, accelerating the potential for antagonistic relationships between the two forces” (74). While the subject matter of this thesis did not explicitly deal with fandom and

fan activity, the question of whether audiences are ‘closed down’ or ‘encouraged’ through contemporary transmedia practices is an important consideration when situating transmedia at the intersection of industry, text and audience.

In my analysis of *Burn Notice*, for example, the sheer volume of ancillary content and textual elaborations developed for the website made it difficult to locate story arcs or character backstories that were not dealt with by the show’s cross-platform producers. I also noted how the constant updating by producers and stars of the show on social platforms seemed to restrict social audiences’ ability to bring forward their own interpretations and readings, constantly delegating social users to the role of respondents rather than instigators of social discussion. There is a sense that contemporary transmedia practices are being used by networks as a way to control and manage all aspects of an audiences’ experience within a television text, making alternative modes of engagement outside official channels much harder to come by. Indeed, AMC’s story sync platform is perhaps the most explicit attempt of any current transmedia property to mimic the intratextual reading practices of audiences. In order to cultivate the illusion of interactivity, each week story sync programmers reflexively identify elements in the *The Walking Dead* that can be interpreted in multiple ways, which are then mirrored back to the audience via story sync updates. In the episode “Home,” for example, one of the characters struggles with the death of his wife, eventually delivering the following line of dialogue: “There’s gotta be a reason. It’s gotta mean something.” The scene in which this dialogue was delivered was complimented by a Judgment via the story sync platform asking the user to choose “It Means Something” or “Rick’s Just Losing It.”

For viewers, all the imagined interpretations regarding this character's state of mind are boiled down to two options created by programmers. A more problematic example came in the form of a Flashback earlier on in the same episode in which Andrea probes the Governor about his potential hostile intentions towards her former friends currently held up inside a nearby prison, to which the Governor replies: "As long as they leave us alone, we have no problem." For most viewers, this line of dialogue could be interpreted as sincere, disingenuous or somewhere in between depending on a viewer's own reading of the situation and knowledge of the characters and past events. For story sync users, however, their own intratextual reading of the on-air scene becomes interrupted as a screen capture of the Governor's daughter appears on the story sync platform in the form of a Flashback. The screen grab recalls a previous *Walking Dead* episode where someone at the prison killed the Governor's 'zombie' daughter. The appearance of the Flashback at that time during that on-air scene seems to clearly indicate he is being disingenuous, with other interpretations of the scene much less likely. In both the Judgment and Flashback, story sync producers mimic the same types intratextual readings as audiences, but because of their professional and privileged relation to the show, alternate readings or possible interpretations may be less likely for certain story sync users. Previously, in my analysis of second screen engagements, I highlighted the types of immersive pleasures cultivated around connected viewing experiences and AMC's story sync platform. However, we should not overlook or dismiss transmedia criticism that explores the types of intertextual strategies deployed by transmedia producers who increasingly mine their own storyworlds for ancillary

expansion as re-shaping fandom, and more generally, an audience's ability to construct their own fantasies and interpretations around their favorite TV shows.

The transmedia research in this paper also sought to consider exactly how audiences are mobilizing in relation to transmedia narratives as they migrate across a range of different platforms and viewing contexts. For many scholars studying transmedia there is a perceived increase in agency as audiences flow between different media platforms. Jenkins, for example, argues that in order to fully experience a contemporary transmedia narrative audiences must engage with a wider fictional world beyond a film or television program:

To fully experience any fictional world consumers must assume the role of hunters and gathers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience. (21)

Jenkins' argument locates a high degree of agency and meaning-making with audiences who are mobilizing in relation to texts spread out across multiple media. In a similar way, Evans suggests, "a transmedia fictional world is one where viewers can lose themselves in a range of different context and where a variety of values and conflicts concerning the relationship between text, viewer and technology come into play" (39) For her part, Evans does acknowledge potential conflicts that can arise as audiences engage with different elements of a transmedia text, and questions how new media technologies truly functioning in relation to audience expectations and experiences. Still, both Jenkins and Evans seem to avoid any substantial

consideration of industrial strategies that endeavor to construct and manage the movements of audiences across dispersed media platforms. Alternatively, John Caldwell, through his model of 'second-shift-aesthetics' has been more critical in examining the complicated relationships created as networks attempt to mobilize viewer engagement:

Instead of the linear textual compositing model inherent in supertext/flow theory, TV/dot-com synergies must now learn to master textual dispersals and user navigations that can and will inevitably migrate across brand boundaries. In essence, programming strategies have shifted notions of network program 'flows' to tactics of audience/user flows. (136)

Importantly, Caldwell identifies a particular logic of transmedia television in which networks utilize design strategies to encourage viewers to constantly 'flow' between a complex array of interconnected monadic points of consumption.

Through my own research, we saw how 'flow tactics' were used consistently to promote connectivity between different platforms. For instance, USA Network has developed its interstitial programming to promote an active linking of content between its on-air broadcast and textual ancillary. This was demonstrated in *Burn Notice* when the show used interstitials to inform viewers they could learn more about character's backstory by engaging with the online graphic novel via the show's website. Similarly, USA created Burn Circle to reward users with merchandise based on how much content was consumed across a range of different platforms. Significantly, users that signed up for Burn Circle scored points based on the number of platforms accessed and not time, skill or expertise directed towards

the content being delivered. While on-air interstitials and Burn Circle represent external motivators, more problematic tactics were observed within the internal design of specific engagement platforms. For example, in the flash game *Covert Ops*, the game starts by asking the user to explore the inside of the interior of Ford's Saab 9-3 to find clues on how to move the game forward. Eventually, the user will be forced to click on the car's glove box, which triggers three objects to pop out: a car manual, a Burn Notice CD and a business card. Selecting the car manual or the CD will immediately take the user to the SAAB homepage or an online music store where the Burn Notice soundtrack can be purchased. It's only by selecting the business card that allows the user to continue the game. This type of internal flow tactic is designed into the platform itself and seamlessly transports users between points of consumption without their knowledge, exploiting both the interactive capabilities of interactive gaming technology and a fan's desires to delve deeper into televisual storyworlds. Interestingly, in the case of AMC's story sync for *The Walking Dead*, the flow tactics used by the platform seemed to create a more dynamic form of audience mobilization, as the cross-media application was constructed in real-time, focusing more on depth of experience. The fact that story sync users willingly engage two platforms simultaneously, absorbing content found on the on-air TV series and deploying it in the story sync platform and visa versa, was seen to enhance the overall experience of television watching for certain users. While the story sync platform did allow the AMC to extend its corporate brand and deliver more advertisements to viewers, the user was in a position of greater control during connected viewing engagements, with the ability to follow either the story sync or

on-air content at their leisure. In one sense, the types of flow tactics used by USA Network and AMC can be seen to assist viewers in making cognitive connections between dispersed textual elements and enhance the overall experience of television. However, they also represent *industrial motivators* that encourage the movement of audiences to multiple consumption platforms.

Clearly, the rapid growth of digital technologies and the high degree of interconnectivity has enabled television networks to cultivate and sustain immersive cross-media experiences. What is much less clear is how engagement platforms and narrative designs function to promote connectivity between different platforms. In a recent dissertation entitled “Visualizing Transmedia Networks: Links, Paths and Peripheries”, Marc Nathaniel Ruppel (2012) proposes a methodology for analyzing transmedia networks based on the recognition of external (brand markers) and internal (located in story) “migratory cues” that allow for the exchange of information between different platforms. For Ruppel, migratory cues give audiences tools to make narrative connections between platforms directly effecting how audiences interrupt transmedia texts and the structure of narratives themselves. In television, however, the ability for networks to manage the movement of viewers across their transmedia networks becomes an important part of a network’s overall corporate strategy. If viewers follow certain connective pathways in search of specific media, these pathways are not absent corporate interests attempting to capitalize on the migratory behavior of active audiences. Indeed, a key observation made in this research was how networks privilege certain forms of engagement over others, as well as rewarding certain types of audience/fan



activity. As a consequence, networks are becoming more adept at constructing transmedia texts both narratively and technologically, as a way to capitalize on emerging patterns of consumption. Ultimately, in a transmedia context, it may be worth considering how economic exigency may have less to do with interacting with any particular textual block than it does with mobilizing audiences in an accelerated transmedia flow.

### **Challenges of Transmedia Television Research and Criticism**

Transmedia marks an important shift away from earlier conceptions of television broadcasting where supposedly passive and undifferentiated audiences were seen as the byproduct of 20<sup>th</sup> century mass marketing. Having said that, it has become increasingly difficult to define television as a medium as it undergoes rapid, often unpredictable expansion and change. It seems like every week there are new forms of engagement and appropriations of new media technology as television networks attempt to remain a privileged form in an increasingly interconnected and complex media landscape. Indeed, the rapid expansion of new media technologies and the accelerated use of transmedia applications in television present numerous challenges for the type of research presented here. It is often difficult to situate audience attitudes and values in relation to transmedia texts as new media technologies and transmedia extensions are constantly in flux. There is also a decisive demographic divide as younger generations are seen to be more adept at accessing new technological forms that are often the subject of transmedia research. That said, as more people learn how to use new media technology, prevalent

attitudes and the current uses for transmedia are likely to change.

In many ways, it is difficult to distinguish industrial strategies of promotion, advertising, sponsorship and merchandising with the kinds of textual elaborations that are being integrated into television production. The development of transmedia content and viewing modes does not do away with traditional business models, policy and technological infrastructures. Rather, transmedia functions alongside and absorbs shifting industrial strategies affecting media, with advertisements, corporate sponsorship and brand promotion often layered with value-added story content. The interactive games analyzed on the *Burn Notice* website, for example, demonstrated a hybrid form that mixed textual elaboration, corporate sponsorship and advertisement. Similarly, AMC's story sync platform created a dynamic real-time connected viewing experience while simultaneously embedding its content with traditional commercial advertisements. By layering a multitude of media into a single entertainment platform, television networks are especially adept at creating content designed to be simultaneously engaged with and consumed on multiple levels. Additionally, the multiple layers of media being created around television establish a hierarchy of value between different elements despite emerging discourses around transmedia which position dispersed media texts along the same critical axis. In television, for example, the on-air broadcast remains the primary story upon which all other cross-media extensions are built. But we can also point to other sites of privilege within the same transmediated storyworld such as the

emphasis on computer and console games over flash games.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, transmedia critics have all but overlooked second screen platforms as they are often seen as not evolving textual threads and are more regarded as a distraction from the story being played out on TV.<sup>15</sup> There remains a lingering sense for many media critics that cross-platform initiatives are simply ways to ‘decorate’ the periphery; holding fickle audience attention, while never achieving the same level of textual complexity or immersive potential as the primary story being played out on TV. The research in this thesis was, in large part, motivated towards breaking down those prevailing perceptions by analyzing the intertextual connections found in successful cross-media engagements. Still, one of the many challenges of transmedia will always be the need to constantly validate and extrapolate the nuances of specific engagement platforms, while also being critical of how they function in service to a larger transmedia narrative. This research paper has demonstrated that it is possible to meet that challenge and draw broader critical insight into the development and evolving technological, social, cultural and economic implication of transmedia. No doubt both transmedia practitioners and critics have a long road ahead, and taking transmedia to the next level will require

---

<sup>14</sup> See Elizabeth Evans’ chapter on “Spooks Internet and Digital Gaming” (85-114) makes the argument that flash games play a crucial role in the television industry’s development of transmedia storytelling.

<sup>15</sup> The authors of *Connected Viewing: Selling, Sharing, and Streaming Media in a Digital Age* (2013) are the first to offer a set of methods and perspectives for studying second screen engagements as a form of connected viewing.

developing well-established criteria for evaluating and criticizing how well a particular transmedia experience succeeds or fails. Transmedia is still in its infancy. But with the number of practitioners and media scholars now interested in transmedia it is only a matter of time before more advanced debates and critical insights emerge to further position transmedia as a legitimate medium in and of itself.

## Work Cited

- Aden, Roger C. *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages*. London and Tusaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999. Print.
- Boddy, William. *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television, and Digital Media in the Unites States*. Oxford University Press, 2004. Print.
- Bolin, Göran. "Media Technologies, Transmedia Storytelling and Commodification". *Ambivalence Towards Convergence: Digitalization and Media Change*. Ed. Storsul, Tanja Stuedahl, Dagny. Göteborg: Nordicom, Göteborgs University. 2007. 237-248. Print.
- Bolter, J. David and Grusin, Richard. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. Print.
- Brooker, Will. "Living Dawson's Creek: Teen Viewers, Cultural Convergence, and Television Overflow." *The Television Studies Reader*. Ed. A. Robert C. and Annette Hill. London: Routledge, 2004. 569-580. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Everything will Flow." *Flow*. 1:12. 2005. Web. 15 Feb. 2014.
- Caldwell, John T. "Second Shift Aesthetics: Programming, Interactivity and User Flows." *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*. Ed. Anna Everett and John Caldwell T. London: Routledge, 2003. 127-144. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Repurposing Content in the Culture of Conglomeration." *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Ed. Jan Olssen and Lynned Spigel. Durham, North Carolina, London: Duke University Press, 2004. 41-74. Print.

- Carroll, Noel. *Engaging the Moving Image*. New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press, 2003. Print.
- Clarke, M. J. *Transmedia Television: New trends in Network Serial Production*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013. Print.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990. Print.
- Curtin, Michael. "Matrix Media." *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*. Ed. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. 9-19. Print.
- Darley, Andrew. *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Ellis, John. *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*. London: Routledge, 1982.
- Evans, Elizabeth. *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life*. New York and London, Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Everett, Anna. "Digitextuality and Click Theory: Theses on Convergence Media in the Digital Age." *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*. Ed. Anna Everett and John Caldwell T. London: Routledge, 2003. 2-28. Print.
- Feuer, Jane. "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology." *Reading Television: Critical Approaches – an Anthology*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983: 12-21. Print.
- Gentikow, Barbra. "Television Use in New Media Environments" *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*. Ed. Jostein Gripsrud. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.

- Gillian, Jennifer. *Television and New Media: Must-click TV*. New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. Print
- Gripsrud, Jostein. "Television in the Digital Public Sphere." *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*. Gripsrud, Jostein., ed. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Hampp, Andrew. "How USA Network Built Character Ratings." *Advertising Age*. N.p. May 17, 2010. Web. 14 Dec. 2013.
- Hardy, Jonathan. "Mapping Commercial Intertextuality: HBO's True Blood." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 17:7 (2011): 7-17. Sage Publications Online. Web. 18 Dec. 2012.
- Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Torchwood's trans-transmedia: Media tie-ins and brand 'fanagement'". *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*. 9:2 (November 2012): 409-428. *Participations.org*. Web. 12 Feb, 2014.
- Mittell, Jason. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap*. Issue 58, Fall 2006: 29-40. Print.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006. Print.
- Johnson, Derek. "Inviting Audiences In: The Spatial Reorganization of Production and Consumption in TVIII." *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. 5.1 (2007): 61-80. Francis & Taylor Online. Web. 29 Sept. 2012.

- Kinder, Marsha. *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Print.
- Leavitt, Alex. "Watching with the World: Television Audiences and Online Social Networks." *Convergence Culture Consortium*. March 2011. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.
- Livingstone, Sonia. "On the Material and the Symbolic: Silverstone's Double Articulation of Research Traditions in New Media Studies." *New Media and Society*. 9.1 (2007): 16-24. Print.
- Long, Geoffrey. "How to Ride a Lion: A Call for Higher Transmedia Criticism." *Convergence Culture Consortium*. March 2011. Web. 14 Feb. 2014.
- Marshal, David P. "New Media as Transformed Media Industry." *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*. Ed. Holt, J and Perren A. Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Print.
- McCabe, Janet and Akass, Kim, ed. *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. London and New York: St Martin's Press, 2007. Print.
- Mittell, Jason. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap*. 58 (2006): 29-40. Print.
- Morley, D. and R. Silverstone. "Domestic Communications: Public Broadcasting in the Age of the Internet." *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1992: 201-212. Print.
- Proffitt J. M, Yune Tchoi D and McAllister MP. "Plugging Back into the Matrix: The Intertextual Flow of Corporate Media Commodities." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. 31: 3 (2007): 239-254. *Sage Publications Online*. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.



- Rose, Frank. *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories*. London and New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011. Print.
- Ross, Sharon-Marie. *Beyond the Box: Television and the Internet*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008. Print.
- Ruppel, Marc N. "Visualizing Transmedia Networks: Links, Paths and Peripheries." Diss. University of Maryland, 2012. *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses*. Web. Oct 13 2012.
- Ryan, Marie Laure. "Allegories of Immersion: Virtual Narration in Post-Modern Fiction." *Style*. 29:2 (1995). *EBSCO Host*. Web. 13 Dec. 2013.
- Sconce, Jeffrey. "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries." *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Ed. Jan Olssen and Lynned Spigel. Durham, North Carolina, London: Duke University Press, 2004. 93-112. Print.
- Seiter, Ellen. *Television and New Media Audiences*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. Print.
- Schatz, Thomas. "The New Hollywood." *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. Ed. Jim Collins et al. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Steinberg, Marc. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. Print.
- Thompson, Brooke. "A Criticism on the Lack of Criticisim." *GiantMice.com*, June 1, 2010. Web. 20 Feb, 2014.
- Thompson, Kristin. *Storytelling in Film and Television*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Thompson, Robert J. *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street blues to ER.*

Syracuse University Press, 1997. Print.

Ulin, Jeffrey C. *The Business of Media Distribution: Monetizing Film, TV and Video*

*Content in an Online World.* New York: Focal Press, 2010. Print.

Uricchio, William. "TV as Time Machine: Television's Changing Heterochronic

Regimes and the Production History." *Relocating Television: Television in the*

*Digital Context.* Gripsrud, Jostein., ed. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.

Wasko, Janet. *Hollywood in the Information Age.* UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2005.

Print.