

WHAT IS TRANSMEDIA? PROJECTS AND THOUGHTS BEYOND THE BUZZWORD

Mariana Ciancia, Design Department,
School of Design, Politecnico di Milano,
Milan, Italy

Email: mariana.ciancia@mail.polimi.it

Abstract

Transmedia is a cultural paradigm that allows audiences to participate in the meaning-making process of narrative worlds. However, what does ‘transmedia’ really mean? There are so many voices and definitions, but the question remains: is transmedia a real practice able to foster multiple perspectives, allowing the development of widespread creativity and enhancing the role of the crowd? The aim of this paper is to expose the debate around the term and identify its key features in order to develop a design tool.

Keywords: transmedia, storytelling, audience engagement, framework, communication design

“Who killed Laura Palmer?” ... “Why so serious?” ... “Should Barbie take Ken back?” We are surrounded by such frequently communicated artefacts, or ‘calls to action’, in jargon. It is this sort of ‘we want you’ that drives people to interact with the surrounding stories; but what are the consequences?

The most important consequence is the breakage of the ‘fourth wall’, a metaphorical barrier between the public and the action that unfolds on stage, keeping reality separate from the fictional world. This dramatic convention is accepted by viewers, allowing them to enjoy those narrative universes that do not correspond to reality’s logic — allowing for the *suspension of disbelief*. A disruption of the fourth wall, used to surprise the audience and develop *metafiction* reflections, has become one of the key features of the transmedia phenomenon, which allows people to enter story worlds through the dissemination in different media of ‘points-of-entry’ (access points to the story), and ‘rabbit-holes’ (primary access points to the fictional world) [1].

We have therefore been witnessing the emergence of phenomena in which channels and languages that have broken their historical isolation allow a more dynamic use of stories: narrative environments that are capable of shaping society and influencing media habits.

Here we are, like Alice; when “the Rabbit actually [TAKES] A WATCH OUT OF ITS WAISTCOAT-POCKET,

and [looks] at it, and then [hurries] on”, we jump to our feet and run “across the field after it, and fortunately [are] just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge” [2]. We fall down, then, through a transmediated world which surrounds and welcomes us with open arms.

However, what does transmedia really mean? Is it only an adjective that we can use with other words, or is it something more?

Following thoughts [3] and projects developed over the years, the aim of this work is to identify the transmedia phenomenon as a possible approach to merging different languages, media and technologies, and to rethinking participatory processes. First, the paper will explore the various definitions of the word. Then it will briefly discuss the initial findings of my PhD research, which introduces a ‘transmedia design framework’ — a useful tool for those who wish to develop engaging environments and understand how aesthetic and economic issues work together in contemporary ‘design ecology’.

Tracking Transmedia

There are many, often contradictory, definitions of ‘transmedia’; thus we need to go ‘through the looking glass’ [4] in order to explore definitions developed by leading players in the ongoing debate.

The power of story | We heard the word ‘transmedia’ for the first time in 1991, thanks to Marsha Kinder, who coined the term in reference to the franchise entertainment super-systems that work “to position consumers as powerful players while disavowing commercial manipulation” [5]. The work of Professor Henry Jenkins was a theoretical improvement that defined transmedia storytelling as “Stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products” [6].

Transmedia is a real-world-building process, of which one of the best-known examples, also used by Jenkins, is *The Matrix* [7], an American science-fiction film written and directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski, and disseminated through different media that are self-contained, yet also work together to create a universe suitable for the era of collective intelligence [8]. There is a textual activator [9] for fans, who started to cre-

ate their own videos by making short films dedicated to *The Matrix*’s universe. A recent example is *Kaydara* [10], a 55-minute movie made by Raphael Hernandez and Savitri Joly-Gonfard, whose story takes place in that story world.

Jenkins further states that “the current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative, yet the most gifted transmedia artists also surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise” [11]. However, this expansion must be coordinated, as described by Jeff Gomez, the CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment, who uses the music metaphor to describe each storytelling medium as a musical instrument: “Different media should be considered as music instruments: put together, they form a symphony” [12]. He continues, “you don’t need a science fiction or fantasy story to spark up a transmedia narrative”. The “main criteria ... is that the story, brand or message lends itself to a rich world, real or imagined. This world needs to have a past and future, it must be populated with engaging characters, and there has to be something about it that makes us want to be a part of it” [13].

An example of this is *The Beast*, an alternative reality game built and executed to promote *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001), to anticipate the key elements of the film and to allow people to become active participants in the narrative universe. The game was characterised by the overlap of game space and real world, and is a clear example of what could be defined as *experiential space*: an environment in which people can interact, creating collaborative networks able to experience narratives spread out by non-linear communication systems through collective consumption. Cloudmakers.org, a *Yahoo!* discussion group founded on 11 April 2001, completed the game on 24 July in the same year [14].

The power of structure | The first key feature of the transmedia phenomenon is a storyline that is not reduced to a single story arc, but has grown to become a complete universe in which, using Christy Dena’s words, “each of these compositions are self-contained, but also have a continuing narrative that run through all of them” [15].

Geoffrey Long, who highlighted a difference between adaptation and transmediation by saying that “Retelling a

story in a different media type is adaptation, while using multiple media types to craft a single story is transmediation” [16], reinforced this thought in 2007. He recognised three types of transmedia storytelling: “ones that are designed from the beginning to be transmedia (hard), ones that are then developed as transmedia projects after the success of mono-medium project (soft)” [17] and “those with a mix of both (chewy)” [18]. Long further highlighted a better distinction between “*a priori* (before the experience) and *a posteriori* (after the experience) transmedia forms” [19], referring to a classification related to the experience.

Examples of *a priori* transmedia projects are *Pandemic 1.0* [20], *Iron Sky* [21] and *The Cosmonaut* [22]. *Pandemic 1.0* is a transmedia storytelling experience developed by Lance Weiler for Sundance Film Festival (2011) attendees and a global online audience, with a core short that tells the story of a pandemic disease. This is a common topic in linear narrative films, and in this case spreads through different media in order to test new business models and study the spreading phenomenon in social environments (in collaboration with Medic Mobile and FreedomLab). The peculiarity of these projects is that “In transmedia practice there is no single medium, no one single way of expressing or experiencing the world. There are many media that have their own production and experiential media cultures; and they can actually work together despite their differences” [23].

Iron Sky is a 2012 Finnish-German-Australian comic/science-fiction film directed by Timo Vuorensola, which tells the story of Nazi Germans taking refuge on the moon in 1945, following the Second World War, and later returning to conquer the planet Earth. Its main characteristic is the use of an alternative production workflow that fosters audience engagement through crowd-funding and crowd-sourcing processes, which are now being used to raise money for the sequel, *Iron Sky—the Coming Race*. The producers need their fans because “with *Iron Sky 2*, we want to go darker, we want to go crazier, we want to be more experimental” [24], so as not to compromise the integrity of the story to fit the financiers’ needs.

The Cosmonaut, a Spanish science-fiction movie produced by the Riot Cinema Collective, tells the story of Stas and Andrei’s arrival at Star City in 1967, where the Soviet Union was training the

first cosmonaut. The spectator follows the failures, successes and love struggle of the two characters and their friend/lover Yulia, a telecommunications engineer who they meet in Star City. Related to the new wave of ‘participatory’ cinema and rethinking of the industrial mindset, the main features are the application of a new model of production and distribution that involves crowd-funding processes, and the release of the film under Creative Commons licences, using social communication tools to enhance the role of the crowd.

The power of engagement | The core of transmedia projects, identified by Marsha Kinder in 1991, is the audience engagement, which allows people to be embraced by the narrative world and involved in its building. In his book *Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling*, Robert Pratten (CEO of Transmedia Storyteller) explains how “‘Transmedia storytelling’ is telling a story across multiple media and preferably, although it doesn’t always happen, with a degree of audience participation, interaction or collaboration”. He continues that “In transmedia storytelling, engagement with each successive media heightens the audience’ understanding, enjoyment and affection for the story. To do this successfully, the embodiment of the story in each media needs to be satisfying in its own right while enjoyment from all the media should be greater than the sum of the parts” [25]. This does not mean we must seek the highest possible degree of engagement, but that it is necessary to develop environments in which people can decide and shape their own engagement path in order to enjoy the content in a personal way.

An example of this approach is *The Spiral* [26], a pan-European transmedia project co-produced by seven broadcasters and spread through a television series, a LARP (live action role-playing game), an online scavenger hunt and the online construction of *The Warehouse* art community. The project left the contributors free to choose their own participation path, creating an environment “where everyone can participate the way they like and the way they feel” [27] — through involvement in the online artistic community and the LARP, or as intermittent contributors in the online game. A large audience chose to simply follow the television series.

Transmedia: What it is and what it could become

All these examples are grounded in their audiences’ participation in the meaning-making process of the story worlds, allowing the development of widespread creativity thanks to the success of the phenomenon, based on storytelling, collaboration and engagement.

In this way, alternative production pipelines that go beyond the ‘mainstream’ circuit sprout up and can be applied to several fields, from branding to social activism, from entertainment to the artistic world. The first question — what is transmedia? — can be answered by identifying three key features common to all the case studies.

The first is the building of a story world towards the construction of a complex ‘mythology’ [28] that covers every aspect of the story and the characters, from the relationships between the characters to the rules of interaction between audiences and the story universe. The story architect has to think about the narrative arc, the world setting and environment, the characters (their habits, motivations, feelings, back-stories and relationships), and the rules that allow people to engage with it, not forgetting free space for audience expression and further developments.

The second is the distribution of content: fragments, elements and characters referring to the same narrative universe are spread through different media, creating a choral expression. In this way, people can enhance their participation, choosing their path and engagement level through different channels.

The final feature is audience engagement, for which the main consequence is a mutation in the relationship between the mainstream media (‘top-down’) and participatory culture (‘bottom-up’ or ‘grassroots’), because the transmedia phenomenon allows audiences not only to access content in a different way, but also to participate in the meaning-making process. For this reason, during our design practice we need to be aware of contemporary media habits, in order to “start a dialog with” the “audience in such a way as to activate them, validate their participation and get them to advocate on behalf of the story” [29].

From a design/artistic perspective, the second question appears more interesting: what could transmedia become?

In reality, what may seem a technicality has become a real design practice, and one which is not restricted to big Holly-

wood projects, as demonstrated by the independent productions that have incorporated it. In fact, transmedia has proved to be an approach potentially able to support the construction of a ‘human landscape’, relying on storytelling ability to foster multiple perspectives, and allowing people to become aware of their leading role in the contemporary ‘mediascape’. Hence, it is important to identify guidelines that will allow us to apply this practice to other areas. To this end, the aim of my PhD research is the construction of what I call a Transmedia Design Framework, to help understand how aesthetic and economic issues work together in the ‘design ecology’.

In the informatics field, a framework is a reusable platform that allows programmers to develop solutions, focusing on specific software requirements; it can be considered a ‘boundary object’, as it can maintain its structure, yet is, at the same time, adaptable and open. This concept was developed in the field of sociology by Susan Star and James Griesemer to describe “objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” [30]. They further applied this analytical framework to their case study and identified four types of boundary objects: repositories, ideal type, coincident boundaries and standardised forms. Standardised forms aim to share methods and guidelines for collaboration among diverse work groups, a description consistent with the aim of the Transmedia Design Framework, which is intended to become a useful tool for

teams wanting to develop engaging environments.

Conclusions and Future Actions

The first result of my research was the identification of transmedia practice as an approach that might overcome contemporary complexity through storytelling, collaboration and audience engagement. The aim of this work is to highlight the key features that are inferred from definitions and projects discussed above. What emerged is that transmedia practice is concerned with the building of a story universe through different channels, in order to enhance the role of the audience. It is a socially understandable paradigm, the growth of which requires specific skills and teamwork.

Therefore, the next step of my research (not the topic of this paper) will be the construction of a Transmedia Design Framework. Until now, I have defined different classes related to transmedia features that also answer the questions all designers need to consider in order to develop efficient, satisfactory, effective and enjoyable communication contexts: what, who, how, where, when and why? I wove these classes together with the six elements of Aristotle’s poetics, qualitative elements which structure a drama like an ‘organic whole’, translated for the human-computer activity by Brenda Laurel in *Computers as Theatre* [31]: action, character, thought, language, melody (pattern) and spectacle (enactment). This allowed me to identify three sub-classes, within which I am working to define the sets of procedures and tools that will complete the framework, and that reflect the main features highlighted in

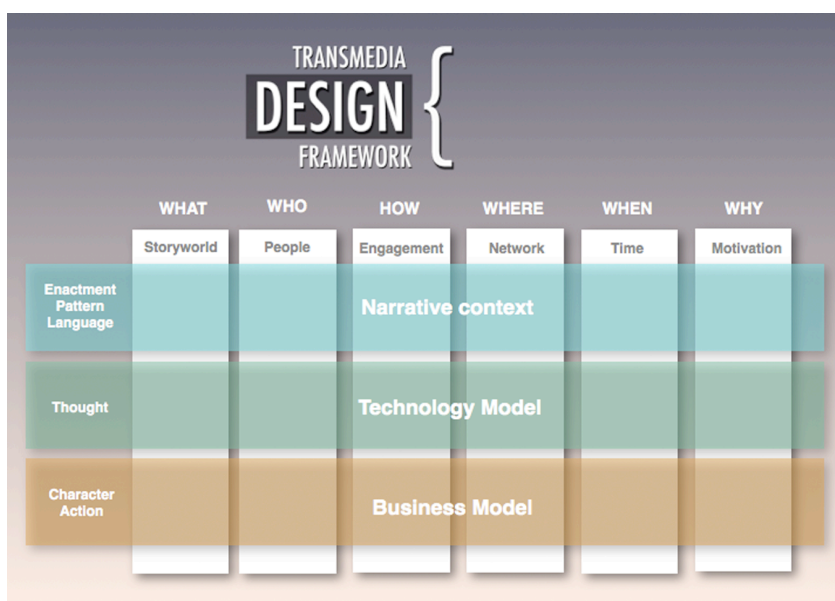
this work:

Narrative context | According to the idea that we live in a script’s society [32], it is possible to recognise the rising importance of the storytelling practice, and the consequent development of narrative environments founded on a complex mythology. Therefore, it becomes necessary to identify the possible story structures (e.g., linear, parallel and cyclic), and potential paths that allow people to consume and engage with the content.

Technology model | The emergence of crossmedia and transmedia structures has completely changed the role of the audience, showing that to overcome contemporary complexity it is necessary to find new ways for collaborative creation and the collective consumption of narrative worlds. Further, we have been witnessing a shift in the traditional relationship between the mass media (top-down) and participatory culture (bottom-up / grassroots). The main consequence is the need to identify the channels available to access the narrative universes, highlighting their key features.

Business model | In the contemporary communication scenario, the traditional production flows face a change in the distribution of financial resources, with the consequence that designers must deal with new approaches related to production and audience engagement. Therefore, it becomes necessary to highlight possible business models that projects can adopt, including the new processes which enhance the role of the crowd, and that constitute an alternative to the traditional production workflow.

Transmedia Design Framework – Classes and Sub-classes © Mariana Ciancia



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