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# A ‘Step into the Abyss’?

## Transmedia in the U.K. Games and Television Industries

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### ABSTRACT

This article uses a media industries studies perspective to investigate the current state of transmedia production in the United Kingdom. Analyzing the discursive statements of a range of industry participants from both U.K. television and games industries, the authors reveal a series of contradictions and misunderstandings that may be limiting the effectiveness of multi-platform projects. By comparing overlapping discursive patterns around attitudes to risk, measures of success, authorship between the two industries, and repeated concerns over the balance of creative and commercial imperatives, the authors argue that existing hierarchies of power between media industries threaten to derail future convergence.

### KEYWORDS

Commissioning, Media Industries, Mobile Gaming, Risk, Transmedia, U.K. Television, Video Games

### INTRODUCTION

*While the technological infrastructure is ready, the economic prospects sweet, and the audience primed, the media industries haven't done a very good job of collaborating to produce compelling transmedia experiences... much greater coordination across the media sectors is needed to produce transmedia content. (Jenkins, 2006, p. 109)*

A decade since Henry Jenkins's landmark book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), it is unclear what progress has been made in creating and defining transmedia narratives and experiences that occur “across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 97-98). While scholars and industry professionals appear wedded to the term, with “Transmedia Producer” a commonplace credit in U.S. television programs such as Marvel's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Whedon, 2013), it remains a broad catch-all label that covers disparate examples of narratives, promotional materials, merchandise, and/or fan activities that shift, develop, and cross-fertilize across different media platforms. Scholars have made varying claims for the viability and success of transmedia, yet the broad focus has remained on textual analysis of individual films (*The Matrix*: Silver & Wachowski, 1999), television programs (*Lost*: Abrams & Lindelof, 2004) and producers (Tim Kring, Damon Lindelof), or assumptions around an increase in fan participation and engagement (Jenkins, 2006; Mann, 2009; Hills, 2010; Evans, 2013; Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). This article offers a new perspective on debates about what transmedia can offer by moving away from the products of transmedia experiences to the people

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who make them (or who struggle to make them) and how they describe changes to existing practices. Through an analysis of practitioner testimony and experience within the U.K. television and games industries, the article demonstrates another side to transmedia: how media workers discuss their role in transmedia production; how media companies define their interactions with partners from other media; and how the discourse around the institutions and broadcasters who want to develop transmedia projects is based around control and hierarchy rather than participation and expansion.

Havens, Lotz and Tinic have claimed that the study of media industries has taken “a more prominent role in cultural studies research at this particular historical juncture... [of] digitalization and globalization” (Havens, Lotz & Tinic, 2009, p. 235). Yet the recent expansion of production and/or media studies and/or cultural industries studies has rarely overlapped with the parallel developments claimed around transmedia production and cross-media convergence. Valuable macro- and micro-level studies have explored different aspects of the film, television, and games industries (Kerr, 2006; Caldwell, 2008; Lotz, 2009; Kerr, 2012; Perren, 2013; Banks, 2014), but few investigate the push toward such collaborative work across media and media partners, and how that is complicated by industrial “talk” around notions of risk, success, and industry cooperation. Equally, explorations of media convergence offered by “digital optimists” (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) have tended to lose sight of the “particularities and diversity of formerly distinct practices” (Deuze, 2009, p. 144) within those industries. While this article is not explicitly developing a “digital pessimists” view, we will demonstrate that bringing a media industries studies approach to bear on the claims made for transmedia reveals how industry discourse has identified sites of both conflict and opportunity. At the same time, it reveals how established hierarchies and business models are being defined as restrictions to any potential innovation.

In the only study that combines similar concepts and approaches, Denise Mann has identified new expectations (within the U.S. television market) for “high-concept, high-profile, multi-platform television blockbusters--also known as ‘transmedia franchises’--that... spawn a multitude of spin-offs” (Mann, 2009, p. 99). While her focus is on *Lost* and writer-producers Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof, the article remains important for demonstrating that claims for convergence often overlook “the negative cultural impact... [and] heightened demands placed on television writer-producers” (Mann, 2009, p. 99). The television industry’s insistence on focusing on a sole creative talent (the showrunner) at the expense of other symbol creators within the planning, development, and delivery of a transmedia project works to privilege the notion of individual authorship in a highly collaborative process. Although Mann acknowledges this limitation, her attention rarely strays beyond the boundaries of the television industry to consider the interplay and inter-relations created by the push toward transmedia or multi-platform experiences, where a range of different media and production expertise has to co-exist. Broad statements about networks or broadcasters adjusting to this (apparent) new paradigm belie a system where hierarchies are reconfirmed or established around existing medium-specific status. While Jenkins called for greater media collaboration to ensure transmedia success, such a call elides the fact that the push toward transmedia has challenged existing structures and common sense ways of working within a range of industries.

We argue that the experience of transmedia production cannot be fully explained by approaches that offer textual or fan-centric analysis that looks only at the results of such production policies and strategies. Such methodological strategies are exemplified by the work of Elizabeth Evans, which largely focuses on the technological determinants of transmedia production and distribution strategies (2011, pp. 40-64), or that of Matt Hills, which argues that *Torchwood* (Davies, Gardner & Tranter, 2006) tie-ins act as transmedia “fanagement” which caters for specific fractions of fandom who might otherwise be at odds with the unfolding brand (2012). As described in the methodology section below, this article departs from existing scholars of transmedia by adopting a production studies approach similar to that found in field-defining works by Caldwell (2008) and Mayer, Banks & Caldwell (2009). Yet we also depart from current work in the production studies and transmedia fields by moving outside the dominant U.S. television industry examples. While the study of a “particular national context

and a particular industry... [is] increasingly challenging given the interconnections among media industries” (Lotz, 2009, p. 27), the article will demonstrate how representatives from U.K. production discuss the relationship between the local and the global, and remain wedded to the specificity of British media and perceived notions of national identity. This article uses the experience of interaction between the U.K. television and games industries (where many putative transmedia projects lie) to consider the shifting power relationships and compromises that exist across media, a partial response to Alisa Perren’s call for that media industry studies “that provide comparative approaches across media... [to] help scholars to move beyond an attachment to media specificity” (2013, p.169). As such, the article is framed around two specific overlaps: between two media (games and television) and between two theoretical approaches (production studies/media industries and transmedia). The next section will address the latter through the project’s methodological choices and decisions. The article will move on to consider the former through an analysis of discourse found within the separate industries: notably around commissioning structures, reduction of risk, debates around commerce vs. creativity, and competing industrial economic structures. It will conclude with a cumulative analysis of the current debates being framed around transmedia partnerships in the U.K. context.

## Methodology

To acquire knowledge of, and assess, the current industrial discourse around transmedia in the U.K. media industries, our CREATE project, “Games and Transmedia” ran two roundtable workshops (in December 2013 and May 2014), to which a series of participants from the games and television industries were invited.<sup>1</sup> The choice of roundtable events was led by a desire to move away from existing methodological processes in media industries studies: the solo interview, analysis of trade press discourse, ethnographic workplace observation (at meetings, in offices, on set), or participant-observation at industry events or conferences (Murray, 2005; Caldwell, 2008; Levin, 2009; Lotz, 2009; Banks, 2014; O’Donnell, 2014). In place of these industry-defined sites, we selected more neutral venues, led in part by an awareness that the different industries involved (games and television) rarely shared the same communal or industrial site, so any industry-specific space would necessarily privilege one industry over the other. More broadly, removing participants from expected locations (the office, television studio, or conference hall) was also designed to reduce (at least in part) the hierarchical structures that can be found in industry spaces.

Our choice of roundtable workshops over solo interviews was designed to create a forum where interaction and debate could occur, where individual participants had more opportunity to steer the conversation and ask questions of each other, rather than being led solely by the investigators. In this sense, the workshops functioned as industry focus groups, seen as “a distinctive method for generating qualitative data on the basis of group interaction... [an opportunity] to explore the formation and negotiation of accounts within a group context” (Tonkiss, 2012, p. 228) To facilitate that interaction and exchange, both workshops were run under the Chatham House Rule, to allow “people to speak as individuals, and to express views that may not be those of their organizations” (Chatham House Rule, 2014). The adoption of this rule allows for the discussion to be recorded and material used in publications, but with no direct attribution, and without the identity or affiliation of any speakers being revealed. Participants were therefore free to express opinions without fear of suffering any reputational embarrassment at a later date.

Twenty-five participants were invited, from both industries, and across two workshops. The participants included a game director from Sony, a business affairs manager at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), independent games developers (across the U.K. and Europe), freelance television writers and producers, representatives from unions and industry networking groups (the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT), the Scottish Games Network, U.K. Interactive Entertainment), and the managing director of a cross-media production company. Between them, the participants were able to share knowledge about a series of U.K. broadcasters (including the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV), games companies (Sony, Microsoft, Rockstar), independent production

companies in both sectors (The Project Factory, Hartswood), and provided a discursive framework from which to identify both a “jet plane” and a “helicopter” view of the current place of transmedia within the U.K. context (Havens, Lotz & Tinic, 2009). Following Caldwell (2008) the goal here is not to claim that these media practitioners are the source of authentic truth about production cultures. Instead, the article intends to demonstrate that an examination of practitioner discourse across two distinct industries (that are alleged to be converging) reveals how perceptions around the concepts of transmedia and cross-platform work to shape social, cultural, and economic relationships within the wider industries.

Despite the extensive range of knowledge and experience at the workshops, we are aware of limitations to the snapshot of the U.K. games and television industry presented in this article. Given the focus on risk and risk-taking that dominated much of the debate around the development of transmedia, there was no voice from the television commissioners who seek out new projects, the department heads who set institutional policy (particularly at companies which have public service broadcasting remits), or the creative leads at other independent production houses. Methodologically, the roundtable discussions provided a strong forum for debate, yet inevitably allowed some speakers to dominate. While session chairs were able to draw contributions from all participants, persuasive and dominant voices remained, potentially closing down some avenues of discussion. While the workshop/focus group approach can be criticized for being less naturalistic than interviews or observation, we believe that the issues raised would not have been “easily observable ‘in the field’” and provided an opportunity for participants to raise their own concerns (Tonkiss, 2012, p. 234). The evidence of these participants, and these two industries, points toward a range of discursive strategies for speaking about the concept, and application, of transmedia or cross-platform projects. In the next section, we will discuss central issues within those strategies: attitudes to risk, different approaches to project development, measurements of success, and individual creative authorship.

## Television

*As somebody who is waiting for a bit of a twinkle in the eye of a commissioner of, if you like, ‘linear’ television... I see the very “waking up” just beginning to happen... [but] the moment you try to start talking about trying to reach other audiences with the same story, there’s a sense that somehow you’d like to move into a different department. (BBC documentary producer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014)*

The picture of the U.K. television industry provided by the workshop participants and explored through this section is one where transmedia projects--successful or otherwise--remain rare. As the above quotation suggests, this rarity is driven partly by the institutional nature of television commissioning within the U.K. industry. As this documentary producer notes, producers work hard to create a “bit of a twinkle” in a channel or genre commissioner, and are wary of pitching innovative projects within institutions where the commissioning process is compartmentalized across a range of individuals and where “buy-in” from different departments is required to develop cross-platform ideas. As this section will demonstrate, this concern over commissioning knowledge runs through much of the workshop discourse, and defines the current status of U.K. transmedia in terms of financial risk and a reliance on existing success. Creativity, the traditional counterpoint to debates on commerce within the creative industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2013), is largely absent, with individual creators or companies pictured as adrift in relation to transmedia development, at the whim of commissioner fiat, all searching for a stronger model of transmedia planning and delivery.

## The Commissioning Process

Commissioning structures within U.K. television are based primarily around a small number of broadcasters, with the main commissioning routes dominated by “a publicly funded and publicly owned broadcaster (the BBC), a publicly owned and commercially funded broadcaster (Channel

4) and two privately owned, commercially funded broadcasters (ITV, Five)” (Steemers, 2004, p. xiv). Over the last decade, these free-to-air services have seen increased competition from Rupert Murdoch’s British Sky Broadcasting (BskyB), an advertising-subscriber model that has significantly expanded its original U.K. comedy and drama commissioning. While other smaller digital channels do commission occasional programs, the bulk of U.K. television commissioning runs through these five organizations. As such, a limited number of genre and channel commissioners operate as significant gatekeepers for U.K. independent production companies. The commissioners function as sites of control around those concepts of creativity, innovation, technology, and intellectual property that are needed to fully develop transmedia projects.

Debates around commissioning can be framed around several “quotidian practices and competing goals” (Havens, Lotz & Tinic, 2009, p. 236). As one games developer participant noted, “‘TV people’ look at a transmedia project and think ‘we don’t have a formula to calculate the projections, therefore we can’t give money for that’” (workshop 2, May 6, 2014). This repeated assertion around risky projects, or the television industry being risk averse, underpins many of the debates around the slow uptake of transmedia in the U.K. It is notable that this comment from a games developer sees “TV people” (largely commissioners and producers) as a monolithic entity, whereas representatives from within television presented a more nuanced version of the commissioning process. However, even those nuanced accounts resemble existing work on American network TV series development. Workshop participants saw commissioners as making decisions that “have no reliable basis for predicting whether audiences, advertisers or critics will accept” the project (Bielby & Bielby, 1994, p. 1290), and accused them of relying on generic and imitative projects, or those that can be easily linked to existing critical and aesthetic reputations, where a rough “formula” exists to reduce economic uncertainty. This format-based approach to risk is, of course, common across the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Napoli, 2009), but industry workers see that structure set in opposition to new and innovative transmedia projects that are technologically or financially more complex (and thus, more risky).

### Reliance on Existing Success

Given the desire for a formula, and the wider claim that linear commissioners (at almost all U.K. broadcasters) were not always “digitally minded” (BBC documentary producer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014), most current U.K. transmedia was described as building upon existing success. Properties such as *Doctor Who* (Davies & Gardiner, 2005), *Merlin* (Capps & Murphy, 2008), and *Sherlock* (Gatiss, Moffat & Vertue, 2010) were hailed as strong examples of expansive narrative universes that could not “be contained within a single medium” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 97). While noting the dominance of fan-, cult- or genre-centered properties to transmedia success (emphasized by Brookey, 2010), the reliance on existing franchises was seen as crucial to current practice among commissioners and producers. Even here, however, the workshops raised issues. Although a program such as *Doctor Who* delivered content across platforms as varied as live musical performances at major theaters/arenas, web animation, online and console video games, it was acknowledged that “in the wider industry... [transmedia] is more of a challenge” (BBC business manager, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). The case study of *Doctor Who* was also challenged as a model for future success, given its piecemeal development, which took place over several years, with no specific transmedia strategy guiding those expansions. “There’s no easy way to show anyone commissioning... all of the revenue earning streams associated with that [program]... and no way to business model it, either” (BBC business manager, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). Through these discourses, genre was defined as both a problem (it is a way linear-focused commissioners offset risk and innovation) but also as a potential opportunity, particularly for transmedia in the science fiction, fantasy, or horror genres.<sup>2</sup>



## Commerce vs. Creativity

Discursively, then, transmedia was regularly defined in relation to its status as a commercial venture rather than a creative one. The use of language around “formulas” and “models” relate to measures of success and ideas around repeatability, a key component of reducing risk and uncertainty. But participants particularly emphasized the importance of financial success as an expected measure and a guide for future commissions. The example of the *Sherlock: The Network* smartphone app was raised several times. Developed by independent producer Hartswood Films (producers of the *Sherlock* television series) with The Project Factory, the app was launched to coincide with the program’s third series in January 2014. Yet throughout the workshops, discussion of its success was based largely on commercial measures. For example, its £2.99 price point, or reaching number one in the U.K. App Store. Alongside that success, it also suggested a formula, “a good example to hold up to your boss and say ‘this can work,’ it’s not just a marketing exercise” (freelance writer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). The distinction here between “a good example” and “a marketing exercise” speaks to the tension between the commercial and creative nature of transmedia. *Sherlock: The Network* was described by one participant as “an interesting creative product in itself” but that same person immediately qualified that statement with “and it can be done in an affordable way” (freelance writer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). Creative success was never discussed as its own reward within transmedia, but was either a goal to be defined against, or closely linked to financial accomplishment. In terms of success measures, *Sherlock: The Network*—which, like *Doctor Who* before it, was challenged as an “exception, rather than the mainstream norm” (PACT representative, workshop 2, May 6, 2014)—was judged more on commerce than creativity, relied heavily on existing intellectual property and brand awareness, and therefore presented an uncertain model for lesser known television properties.

The absence of creativity as its own measure links to a particular lack in the discourse from the workshops—the notion of the symbol creator (the individual writer/producer), and their creative vision. Debates around the “showrunner” figure are dominant in U.S. accounts of television-led transmedia (Murray, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Mann, 2009; Cornea, 2009; Banks, 2014), but only passing reference was made to current U.K. symbol creators by our participants. Steven Moffat (writer and executive producer of *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*) was mentioned, but only in relation to a comment he had made that he did not “get” interactivity; *Sherlock*’s producer Sue Vertue was referenced in relation to *Sherlock: The Network*, but was discussed as the project producer/overseer, not fulfilling a creative role (freelance writer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014); while U.K. independent production company Kudos was described as “just stumped” by transmedia (games developer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). The absence of talk around creative vision, particularly given the presence of creative writers and producers at both workshops, appears to underline again a current assumption of transmedia as business practice not creative endeavor. Developing such projects was described in relation to technological skills, de-fragmentation of audience and “a sense of survival,” rather than the creative opportunities available.

## VIDEO GAMES

*Gaming is... much more likely to jump onto new business models – that’s why the gaming business is changing very fast... there’s a quicker cycle... [whereas in television] the business model has been fixed... it is much harder to make a change there. (freelance writer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014)*

In contrast to the lack of discussion of creativity around U.K. television and transmedia, the discourse relating to transmedia and the U.K. games industry was dominated by creative independence, ownership, and new models of working. Within this, notions of risk were defined in relation to size, with one independent game developer noting that developers could “do stupid stuff... if we mess up our game, two people have to eat noodles again... if you mess up a game [in a major studio] you lose 300 people their mortgage” (workshop 1, December 6, 2013). Crucially here, the language positions

the indie games sector as rebellious and risk-taking, similar to earlier descriptions of the games industry as “something of a maverick field of production within the creative industries” (Deuze, 2007, p. 205). The developer also divides the games industry between independent producers and larger companies/studios, a division discursively constructed around attitudes to creative freedom and risk management. As became clear through the workshops, the introduction of transmedia projects places that maverick attitude toward risk in direct contrast with the more rigid corporate and institutional structure found in larger games studios and television broadcasters. Here, convergence is positioned as a potential barrier to creativity, not a way to enhance it.

### Specifics of the U.K. Games Industry

The present structure of the games industry in the U.K. involves all aspects of the games production value chain and, despite technological and structural changes in the global industry, is still regarded as “a significant development location in European and global terms both in relation to employment and revenues in real terms” (Kerr, 2012, p.130). Although behind the U.S. and Japan in terms of market share, the U.K. industry is punctuated by dominant successes such as mobile game *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012), which made \$568 million profit in 2013 and was subsequently floated on the U.S. stock exchange (Williams-Grut, 2014), and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), which generated \$800 million in sales within the first 24 hours of release worldwide (Goldfarb, 2013). Yet claiming any cohesion across the sector is difficult when 95% of video game companies in the U.K. are small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (HM Treasury, 2014). In contrast to the commissioning structure of U.K. television, shared around a small number of broadcasters, the U.K. gaming market is shared between larger studios such as Rockstar North or King, successful small companies or individuals such as Fireproof or Mike Bithell, and a multitude of smaller companies/individuals such as The Chinese Room or Terry Cavanagh. Although producing commercial and/or critical successes, the difference between the initial approaches to business development by large studios and independent developers respectively is a theme which was found threaded among the responses of our workshop participants in regards to transmedia planning.

### Measures of Creativity and Success in the U.K. Games Industry

Concepts of creativity and success were closely entwined in the discussion of games production and transmedia, which mirrored the television discourse around the need for recognizable franchises and intellectual property (IP). A “Triple A” title such as the *Halo* franchise was seen as a means of “selling the [narrative] universe to the audience” and “dominating on a platform” (freelance writer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). A hugely successful game series, with an estimated gross in excess of \$3 billion since the release of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001) for the Xbox (Sliwinski 2013), *Halo*’s transmedia expansion includes video games, web games, novels, comic books, a web series, and an anime. Although not a pre-planned transmedia project, *Halo* was able to dominate a platform, establish its IP brand, and expand beyond its initial medium; success here was measured in critical and commercial terms. As a contrast, workshop two featured discussion of the pre-planned transmedia project *Defiance* (O’Bannon, Murphy, & Taylor, 2013), launched in 2013 as an original television series and massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). The potential (if uncertain) success of *Defiance* was framed in two ways: (1) commercially (several participants linking success to a recent re-commission and the adoption of a free-to-pay business model)<sup>3</sup> and (2) in relation to judgements on the game component specifically. While noting it was not a big success financially, one independent games developer was quick to defend the game from criticism that it was simply a “tie-in” (workshop 2, May 6, 2014). Dismissing that term defined the *Defiance* MMORPG not as “themed bonus content in a generic shooter” but “an attempt to build a coherent world” (Edge 2013). Success was measured here in terms of strong IP that could support a multiplatform narrative world.

By discussing an example like *Defiance*, then, the participants shifted from strictly commercial measures of success to broader creative issues and ownership of IP. This may, in part, stem from the



dominance of independent game developers within the workshops. Rather than the traditional vertical stages of games development to distribution (Williams, 2002), production for digital platforms such as Android, iOS, and Steam has allowed games to be distributed directly to the consumer, meaning creative gambles can be taken for relatively little risk by individuals and small development companies. While *Halo* and *Defiance* represent significant financial investment, the participants claimed the low production costs associated with the independent sector allowed experimentation with new methods of creativity and the adoption of different business models such as crowdfunding. Similar to the “stupid stuff” quotation above, ease of creation was linked to individual expression, “I don’t care what platform it is; I don’t care what the technology is... what matters is I want to make this experience and I believe in that story, I believe in that character” (Independent game developer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). Artistic inspiration is presented as the lead concern within production, not economic welfare. Yet this emphasis on creative immediacy within the games sector—one participant spoke of contributing story elements to a transmedia app in just five days (freelance writer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014)—means that long-term transmedia planning is not necessarily a creative priority within that sector.

### Economic Reality and Risk Strategies

Low entry costs and digital experimentation might facilitate heightened creativity, but it rarely offers a strong economic framework within which independents can develop wider transmedia work. The measures of economic success within the indie sector, however, are dwarfed by the success of other entertainment industries, and it is the disparity between indie games success and success in a medium such as television that complicates notions of transmedia planning. While adopting different language, games participants again noted a lack of formula. “People don’t know it works until it works” (game developer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014), “transmedia is kind of like the fish with legs ... it’s the mutant that is always changing and sets a precedent for what might be the next thing to follow” (managing director, workshop 2, May 6 2014). Despite claims that the games industry is eager to embrace new business models, these statements make clear that planning transmedia remains difficult because the business model is too uncertain, too experimental, or, potentially, too removed from current notions of creative freedom and independence. Note also the uncertainty in the language. Transmedia is mutating, unknown, changing; it is a suggestion of an undefined monster, rather than an exciting business opportunity.

Equally, this new creation returns to issues that privilege economics over creativity or IP. One independent games developer stated that “I go into a [TV company] boardroom and say ‘[I need] £1 million’ [to develop a project] and they say ‘Why are you wasting our time?’ The numbers are so different” (workshop 2, May 6, 2014). The different economic realities of the respective industries points to a significant barrier between successful inter-sector relations. Without greater knowledge exchange, there will always be “orders of magnitude of money between different media, and this is part of the problem with transmedia.... [the guys] making hundreds of millions of dollars are not interested in developing anything in another medium that’s only going to make them a couple of million dollars” (workshop 2, May 6, 2014). Whereas the television producers struggled to get past institutional gatekeepers, games developers struggle to reconcile industrial structures and shifting economic perspectives.

What is clear from the example of the U.K. games industry experience of transmedia, then, is that there is a disparity between the successful transmedia project controlled by the larger companies, institutions, and conglomerates that focus on economic success (Scolari, 2009) and the desire for individual freedom and control of IP that has flourished in the independent games sector. Being a creative individual, and taking ownership of your own IP, currently appears to be more appealing than the ability to expand that IP into other compatible media. Several participants noted a reluctance to enter into working relationships with other industries, a reluctance fueled by seemingly incompatible values around legal barriers and profit-making. Such an attitude can be directly contrasted with the thoughts of a BBC business manager who noted ownership of IP is less important within his sector

than “what value do we get out of the exploitation of that IP?” (workshop 1, December 6, 2013). Such a sentiment suggests that planning transmedia projects across the game and television industries may struggle to prioritize the same values, a concept the final section will consider in more detail.

## ISSUES ACROSS MEDIA

*The creative industries... tend to look at ourselves as silo-d markets, and the connections between the two, between... television and games, have [historically] been through licensing deals... not actual convergence (games network representative, workshop 1, December 6, 2014).*

A frequent explanation offered in our workshops for the lack of transmedia work was the current hierarchical relationship between television production, marketing, and the games industry. This “silo-ing” of the respective industries creates a situation where projects rarely begin with a cohesive creative vision, agreed economic model, or a compatible vision for what constitutes success. The present interaction (and tension) between games and television programs was frequently described in negative terms, such as the “last minute” nature of commissioning, with games “tacked on the end” (games company manager, workshop 1, December 6, 2013), as an “afterthought” (games developer, workshop 1, December 6, 2013) an “add-on” (BBC business manager, workshop 2, May 6, 2014), or as “porting over” (games developer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). While the U.K. games market was dominated by tie-ins, adaptations, and franchises in the 2000s (Kerr, 2012, p.120), our participants stressed the need for a collaborative business model as opposed to the current system, where “transmedia is commissioned by... TV, movies” (games developer, workshop 1, December 6, 2014), rather than developed collaboratively.

### Television vs. Games: Hierarchy and Collaboration

The perception of industry hierarchy speaks to transmedia planning as typically a one-way process in which television has the financial backing and therefore (commissioning) power. This hierarchical model points to a continual cross-industry power struggle around money. The perception for at least one games developer was that “almost every single industry seems to look at the other ones as an opportunity to get some money out of them, and dupe them” (workshop 1, December 6, 2014). Such a view supports Jenkins’ observation that “[media] units compete aggressively rather than collaborate” (2006, p. 109). Yet describing this as hierarchical misses nuances around miscommunication and a lack of understanding of commissioning and production processes within the respective industries. It was suggested that television producers do not know “what it costs to make the game, in terms of time and investment” (independent games developer, workshop 1, December 6, 2013) and the question was raised of how a video game developer could move from “work for hire” to become “a more meaningful collaborator... [and] get some of the benefits” (BBC business manager, workshop 1, December 6, 2013).

The frequent use of a term such as “work for hire” delineated the experience of most games produced for television in which our participants had personal creative investment. It became clear, however, that issues around hierarchy lay not with a dispute between two different creative voices, but the absence of creative interaction, with games developers/companies more likely to deal with a television marketing department (which was commissioning a game late in the production process, often as part of a promotional push), than the original writer, director, or producer (the traditional source of creative ideas). This relationship has created a physical and symbolic break between symbol creators (the television writer/producer and the games developer), arguably leading to a devaluing of games that are produced for television. By extension, this returns to the need for a central or coherent voice, with participants favoring “someone who understands the value of transmedia...versus the marketing guys” (games network representative, workshop 1, December 6, 2014). While this need not

necessarily be the “showrunner” identified earlier, it was seen as an essential step toward reframing the games-television industry relationship away from the current last minute licensing model (above) to one where authorial intent held more sway, privileging a romantic view where symbolic creativity trumped commercial need.

## Transmedia and National Identity

Yet that desire for a central creative vision revealed that participants had shifting and uncertain definitions of what the “value” of transmedia actually was. In part, this related to defining or agreeing on a firm use of the term. Frequent invocation of *The Walking Dead* (Kirkman, Adlard, & Moore, 2003) for example, as an exemplary transmedia text revealed an unclear overlap between transmedia, convergence, and adaptation,<sup>4</sup> confirming earlier confusions around such terms (Bardzell et al., 2007, p.307). Reaffirming the perception of transmedia as an apparently “unknown” quantity, our participants’ interchangeable use of terms such as transmedia, cross-platform, tie-ins, and porting suggested a potential incompatibility between transmedia and current discourses within U.K. production. Here, there was tacit agreement across media: a documentary producer dismissed U.K. television commissioners as not being “digitally-minded” (workshop 2, May 6, 2014) while a games developer queried whether it was “in the national DNA to be digital?” (games developer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014).

Such notions of nationality fueled two further debates that defined attitudes toward transmedia: one around the untapped potential within the U.K., the other around a potential inferiority complex between the U.K. and other nations. In the former, there was incredulity that the U.K. television and games industries were not doing more to work together. While noting they were still “individual silos,” one freelance writer stated the U.K. had “some of the biggest and most successful games companies in the world, film companies, TV, publishers, writers too... it would be amazing if we could get Working Title working with Rockstar ... to co-produce projects on a really big scale.” (workshop 2, May 6, 2014). Here, the combination of specific national (creative, commercial, and critical) excellence in different media echoed U.K.IE CEO Jo Twist’s claim that the games industry could tap into a national identity “full of history, quirks and loveliness... [and] see more and more of ourselves as a nation reflected back into our games” (Smith, 2014). Therefore, while transmedia may appear to move outside traditional local or national borders, it is clear that creative personnel in the U.K. stress their pride in being able to exploit and work with talent close to home, and produce products that speak at a national and international level.

Yet the second, parallel debate on nationality works to challenge that, implicitly returning to the idea that digital DNA is something best located in other countries. One games developer noted that successful transmedia would not come from the U.K., although “it ought to” (workshop 2, May 6, 2014). That “ought to” partly addresses the potential inherent in the dream Working Title-Rockstar partnership mentioned above (or other strong untapped cross-media pairings), yet the language suggests a perceived problem with the U.K. that cannot respond to this digital project. In part, this discursive strategy positions the U.K. in competition with international creative hubs that were defined as risk-takers around digital content. Transmedia was linked to companies with digital experience like Netflix, Amazon, and Microsoft rather than the BBC or Channel 4, with the former seen as having a natural affinity with integrated digital production processes. As one developer put it, “Naturally, if I [was offered] one single meeting [for either] Netflix or the BBC, I would choose Netflix ... [because the BBC] is still about ‘broadcasting’ so much” (workshop 2, May 6, 2014). This striking dismissal of the BBC’s current digital outlook means that although the game developer may have felt that U.K. production “ought to” be a viable competitor in the transmedia market, at present it does not appear as if the U.K. industries have the resources and/or the will to mount a challenge. At a time when relations will naturally be sourced internationally, the U.K. industry was framed as lacking IP that could compete on the international stage.

Alongside the U.K. industry's lack of digital DNA was a sense of its long-standing inferiority complex in relation to U.S. (and other) media. While one participant noted this was traditionally discussed in relation to film, recent television successes from the U.S. and debates around transmedia seem to have exacerbated that trend. This was framed in psychological and economic terms: "do we see ourselves being able to monetize content... are we patient enough? Are we [thinking] long-term?" (BBC business affairs manager, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). Here, the industry (and, by association, the nation) lacks strategic vision, and is failing to play at the correct level--the dream pairing of Working Title and Rockstar reduced to just a dream, rather than a potential. Equally, the size of the U.S. was seen as beneficial, giving more space for smaller IP to thrive. The size of the U.K. (and U.K. industry), by contrast, reiterated the reliance on franchise, meaning "you need to have pretty much a global brand, like *Sherlock* or something similar, to have that level of potential market" (freelance writer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). As a contrast to the U.K.-U.S. relationship, other countries were also seen as eager competitors who also thought digitally, notably Scandinavian television, which has a production system more used to co-funding (rather than centralized commissioning) and technological expertise from ex-mobile phone engineers setting up cross-media companies. Given existing hierarchies, the apparent advantages found in the U.S. and Scandinavian markets, and the global dominance of non-U.K. companies such as Netflix, Amazon, and Microsoft, then, turning U.K. production digital was seen as uphill battle.

While participants clearly erred on the side of caution in making firm predictions around the future of U.K. transmedia (lack of firm definitions, and the recurrent descriptive terms around it shifting, changing, and mutating are the most obvious linguistic representations of this), it is worth noting one strong seam of digital optimism that was apparent throughout. This initially arose from a discussion of children's television as "instinctively interactive" because of the audience's status as "digital natives" (creative director, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). This utopian notion of the "next generation" extended beyond children's programs, however, with transmedia creativity often linked to low budget, grassroots projects: "someone [new] is going to do a small game and a YouTube series, and suddenly it's just going to blow up. They're going to have 10 million followers and big money starts flowing in" (independent games developer, workshop 2, May 6, 2014). This language echoes wider claims that participatory audiences will undermine traditional media structures through activities such as digital creation and sharing (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). While such claims have been challenged (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, pp. 313-340; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008) they continue to circulate in popular discourse, and can be seen throughout both workshops. Yet two key factors within that last quotation are more important for the purposes of this article: (1) the insistence on the need for the next generation to take the lead on transmedia reaffirms the lack of certainty and leadership in current practitioners; (2) whatever the source of the initial creative act, financial reward remains the key measurement of success.

## CONCLUSION

*[A] cultural industry company (Company A) is reliant on other cultural industry companies (B, C, D, and so on) to make audiences aware of the existence of a new product or of the uses and pleasures that they might get from experiencing the product. (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 28)*

By adopting a media industries approach to transmedia, the article's analysis of participant discourse around transmedia in the U.K. television and games industries has revealed uncertainties and industry-specific practices that threaten to undermine this new production concept. Focusing on debates around risk, measures of success, business models, independence, creativity vs. commerce, and media hierarchies has constructed a picture of two industries unwilling to commit themselves to

a longer-term relationship than they have had in the past. As such, we note the following issues that, based on our research, are barriers that are holding back potential U.K. transmedia projects:

1. **Defining Terms:** Participants noted the wide spectrum of activities that can be considered “transmedia” (or cross-media), from a website to a narrative universe to fan-led expansions; while others argued most examples were not transmedia, but examples of “porting” across platforms. A clearer understanding of the term and how it applies across different industries, is key to ensuring industrial cooperation and understanding
2. **Commissioning Structures 1:** Given the perceived aversion to risk discussed within U.K. broadcasters and producers, commissioners need to be better educated in what transmedia is (above), with strong examples that demonstrate the range of creative and commercial options available
3. **Commissioning Structures 2:** Closer liaisons need to be developed between commissioners across different genres or responsibilities (for example, those responsible for drama, documentary, and interactive content), to allow for sharing of knowledge and experience
4. **Cross-Media Pilots:** While risk-taking (or the lack thereof) was key throughout, one immediate step would be to encourage creatives and producers out of their different industry silos to create small pilot exercises. These would, over time, build up models of transmedia for commissioners and other producers to see
5. **Transmedia Planning:** Potentially the most important barrier for the U.K. industries is the lack of any strategy or planning cycle. More effective planning would allow for inter-industry collaboration (rather than last-minute “porting”), build awareness of budgetary differences, and develop a more fluid and malleable system than the current development process

In light of those recommendations, we want to conclude the article by considering all those barriers in relation to one key concept: trust. Media industry studies have revealed “increasingly complex and boundary-breaking relationships between media companies” with the commercial reality being more outsourcing and sub-contracting of work to geographical disparate locations (Deuze, 2009, pp. 145-147). The U.K. context revealed through these industry focus groups, however, has demonstrated a desire for closer local networks as well as global ones. The role of such “informal contexts, social networks and social spaces” is to foster “new ties of trust... [and] help break down industry boundaries” (Banks, Lovatt, O’Connor, & Roffa, C., 2000, p. 463) and help create a system in U.K. transmedia where one partner is not “used to... being totally cut off from the rest of the creative world, because nobody cared about us” (games network representative, workshop 1, December 6, 2013).

If transmedia is “a kind of bridging thing... a bridging tool” (creative director, workshop 2, May 6 2014) that media industries use to lead audiences across a range of interrelated products, then bridges also need to be built across industry silos. The article’s analysis of practitioner discourse around hierarchy and partnerships recalls other producers’ claims of “being compromised, misled or plain cheated” (Banks et al., 2000, p. 460), and demonstrates the challenges in constructing such bridges. If media industries are more reliant on trust than other sectors (Banks et al., 2000), then the adoption of transmedia within those industries is currently at risk of exacerbating existing dysfunctional relationships, rather than promoting the need for partnerships and collaborations. Building the necessary bridges to create a U.K. transmedia industry will require trust at multiple levels. The project IP has to be developed and handled by all participants, with certainty around reward; media collaborations must be equal; symbol creators need to work in partnership; and broader knowledge networks need to be created to support the exchange of ideas, whether creative or commercial. Equally, financial models are needed that can effectively measure the contributions and successes of all aspects of the transmedia project. Without these developments, U.K. transmedia will always feel like “a step into the abyss of crossing platforms” (business development director, workshop 2, May 6 2014).



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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Games and Transmedia” was one of forty initial projects funded by CREATE, the Research Councils U.K.-funded centre for copyright and new business models in the creative economy.
- <sup>2</sup> Across both workshops, *Game of Thrones* (Martin, Benioff & Weiss, 2011), *The Walking Dead* (Kirkman, Adlard & Moore, 2003) and *Defiance* (O’Bannon, Murphy & Taylor, 2013) were the most cited television programs, largely in a complementary fashion; films such as *The Matrix* (Silver & Wachowski, 1999) and the *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) prequels were seen by workshop one as tarnishing the potential of transmedia.
- <sup>3</sup> The free-to-play model is one which provides players with an option of playing the game without paying, yet will still attempt to generate some revenue via in-game advertisements or micro-transactions to enhance or extend the basic playing experience (Jacobs, 2012).  
*The Walking Dead* IP currently includes a comic book series, an episodic video game, a mobile game, a board game, and two original novels. Yet the IP also covers the AMC television adaptation, which itself has spun-off a video game, an interactive online game housed on the AMC website, a social media game, and a board game.

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