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BENEATH STILL WATERS:
AN EXPLORATION OF TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVES
AND TWITTER FICTION

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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Media Theory: Convergence Culture, Transmedia Texts, and Social Media Narratives

“‘Immersive storyworlds’ are defined by large backstories that cannot be neatly summarized; an ensemble of characters within the current narrative and across its larger history; substantial reliance on program history; a wide variety of creative forces over time; a serialized structure of storytelling; and a sense of permanence and continuity within the fictional universe” (Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013).

Twitter has recently emerged as a surprising force in the world. Through events such as the 2011 Arab Spring and the recent unrest in Ferguson, we have seen that social media can give a voice to the voiceless and render the invisible visible. We shape our own narratives when we post things we want to remember, allowing the Internet to become a mirror that reflects both the joy and the troubles of the world we live in. Our relationships and memories exist across multiple channels. Online, we celebrate our triumphs and grieve over tragedies. We learn how to process new developments and wonder what will happen next. These moments of fleeting community allow us as individuals to feel momentarily connected within a virtual network, creating a unique social space for human interaction.

In today’s complex media landscape, content flows across multiple platforms from commercial print, film, and television to participatory social media websites. Leisure sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, and Facebook are taking on a hybrid identity, where entertainment, personal experience, and advertising battle for dominance. We as consumers create our own media culture through the process of deciding what we want to connect with, such as the television shows we watch, which people we follow on social media, or the opinions we choose to share. The collective determines the tone of the conversation, but the individual can pick and choose which threads to follow. Henry Jenkins refers to this significant shift in media consumption as ‘convergence culture,’ defining it as the “move from medium-specific content towards content that flows across multiple media channels, towards the increased

interdependence of communications systems, towards multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006). With these concepts in mind, my project *Beneath Still Waters* develops a fictional transmedia story that explores how this new media culture empowers users to navigate the complexity of life on an individual level. The project will use Twitter as a central storytelling platform for a narrative that unfolds across multiple websites. Using the ideas behind convergence culture as well as the presence of personal narratives embedded within Twitter, *Beneath Still Waters* demonstrates that transmedia practices offer unique storytelling opportunities, tailored to today’s interconnected audiences by encouraging active participation in the creation of texts.

As consumers diversify their patterns of engaging with media as a result of convergence, stories are increasingly relying on more than one medium to exist. Transmedia storytelling refers to the building of a complex fictional world comprised of multiple parts across different platforms, where each component is tailored to excel in a specific medium and makes a valuable contribution to the whole. Jonathan Gray refers to these components as *paratexts*, a term which “stems from the meaning of the prefix ‘para,’ defined by the OED as both ‘beside, adjacent to,’ and ‘beyond or distinct from, but analogous to.’ A ‘paratext’ is both ‘distinct from’ and alike — or intrinsically part of — the text” (Gray 2010). When done well, paratextual elements offer new ways to make sense of or interact with a fictional world. Each separate part can be self-contained, and each part can serve as an entry point into the larger narrative, but overall this experience adds to the audience’s understanding of the whole story. In order to fully experience the depth of a transmedia story, “consumers must assume of the role of hunters and gatherers,

chasing down bits of the story across media channels [...] and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer experience” (Jenkins 2006). To encourage this active audience participation, transmedia storyworlds need to be ‘inhabitable’ (Gray, 2010) by offering a rich, multifaceted experience so that readers feel compelled to immerse themselves in the story’s environment and track down the paratexts. The intended audiences for this type of experience are not passive receivers of pre-constructed messages but instead “people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined” (Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013).

As a result of media convergence and the development of transmedia practices, stories today are taking advantage of this new active, engaged audience by producing increasingly serialized, intricate narratives that unfold over a long period of time. This trend is visible in recent television shows such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Lost*. Enabled by the technological advances of recording devices as well as streaming platforms like Netflix, television narratives can now break away from procedural plots and develop sophisticated story arcs with a large cast of characters that “demand a committed and engaged reader, one who [tracks] down each new installment and [makes] links between chunks of information dispersed across the unfolding narrative” (Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013). This development of highly serialized content is also evident in social media websites, which depend upon an individual user cultivating a dedicated audience of serial consumers who return to a page repeatedly for updates to continue following a story. While social media stories do not necessarily adhere to conventional understandings of plot, suspense, and resolution, social media such as Twitter is “inherently episodic, consisting of posts, comments, and updates that are published over time:

the environment par excellence where seriality might flourish” (Page, 2013). The concept of seriality entails a part-whole relationship between smaller units that, over time, construct a larger narrative. The updates users post about themselves, found in the timelines of Facebook or the Twitter feed, gradually accumulate and build up a digital life history, which a reader can piece together in fragments. Each post, which may vary in content from the post before, can be linked to previous updates through the knowledge of a single user as narrator, so that “in order to perceive the sequence of status updates as a coherent whole, one must adjust perspective away from seeking linear connections between individual entries in isolation and ‘fill in the gaps’ between status updates, online and offline experience to assume an evolving version of the writer’s account of their life” (Page 2010). In other words, both social media and transmedia practices depend upon strikingly similar behavior from their audiences: a willing investment in an ongoing story, participatory culture, the ability to connect scattered segments to a cohesive whole, and a desire to follow a story over a long period of time. I chose to situate my own transmedia project within social media interactions because social media users naturally have to use transmedia strategies in their everyday lives; the concept of drawing an audience from one platform to another is easily recognizable through standard social media practices, such as linking, liking, commenting, sharing, and retweeting, and I will be strategically using these practices to develop my narrative.

It is also important to note that transmedia texts have historically been linked to advertising and the opening of new consumer markets. In a time when conventional advertising does not reach many consumers, a multi-platform story opens up spaces that provide marketing opportunities. Naturally, different mediums attract different market niches, and this is where

media producers see the economic benefit of a horizontally-oriented entertainment experience with roots in a variety of sectors. However, with this market imperative comes a tension between creative and advertising impulses. Corporate forces do not always dedicate the proper resources to create viable paratexts, instead producing clumsy marketing pieces that seem shoehorned into the rest of the text. In order to avoid creative disconnects that result in “uninspired paratexts that do little to situate either themselves or the viewer in the storyworld” (Gray 2010), it is especially important that transmedia stories are conceived in transmedia terms from the beginning, which allows the paratextual elements to become an organic, fluid part of the narrative’s development. The text can potentially serve as a platform for commercialization but primarily it must tell a story. A successful transmedia text relies on both impulses collaborating consciously. In a similar way, Twitter offers tremendous possibilities for both commercial and creative uses. There is a constant push-pull relationship between corporations using the medium for marketing ends and single users experimenting with the boundaries of the medium for purely artistic or imaginative ends. Although *Beneath Still Waters* will not be delving into the commercialized side of transmedia because I will not be seeking to monetize my narrative, I will be consciously using transmedia strategies to create a complex, immersive narrative experience in order to engage a dedicated audience.

While older media forms used static stories that did not rely on active consumption, today’s culture of convergence depends upon audience participation and desire to inhabit a storyworld for themselves, as evidenced by the recent development of increasingly serialized content visible both in traditional and social media. In a world that has become saturated with multiple streams of information, audiences are becoming highly conscious about the different

experiences various mediums can offer. Users learn to navigate through multiple networked communities that each facilitate different forms of content, adapting their practices according to each specific site's architecture; for example, although Tumblr and Twitter both call themselves 'microblogging' websites, Tumblr generally supports image-based content while Twitter's content is largely text-based. As media moves outwards across multiple platforms and contains multiple paratexts within a single fictional storyworld, it allows creators to execute "more ambitious and challenging works" (Jenkins 2006). In the end, this is what I want to achieve with my project; I hope to create a narrative that fully explores the possibilities of a networked media world as a unique platform for creative use and audience engagement. Rather than pursuing a straightforward path with a beginning, middle, and end, transmedia storytelling allows new and complex story structures to emerge and expands immersive narrative possibilities.

Media History: Transmedia Storytelling in Film, Television, and Social Media

Human experience can be thought of as a series of continuous, overlapping stories that interact in unexpected ways. Our days are made up of personal narratives involving characters, conflicts, and resolutions that we interpret to help us make sense of the world. Historically, we have told these stories through art, poetry, theater, novels, film, and television, and today we are finding a voice online in social media. The tools we use to tell tales are constantly evolving, becoming more dynamic, engaging, and participatory than the printed page or moving image. The history of transmedia practices speaks to the way in which stories “evolve in response to their contexts of production and reception, and they have characteristics that are reconfigured ... from their earlier counterparts” (Page, 2013). Innovative creators, enabled by technological developments, have experimented with methods of storytelling that suit a more interactive, networked audience. *Beneath Still Waters*, a fictional transmedia narrative based primarily in Twitter, draws from the history of transmedia practices and seeks to engage with multiple platforms in the online world to create a single, cohesive story.

Transmedia became a viable method of storytelling through film franchises that expanded their cinematic plotlines across other mediums, evolving side stories and minor characters in different formats to enhance the original narrative. *The Matrix* (1999), a franchise in which humankind’s reality is revealed to be an elaborate computer-generated simulation, represents one of the most ambitious attempts at transmedia storytelling. After the success of the first film, writers/directors Andy and Larry Wachowski developed a plan that would extend the narrative across multiple platforms, in theory to “[integrate] multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium... Each step along the way built on what has

come before, while offering new points of entry” (Jenkins 2006). *The Matrix* franchise expanded from films into a series of animated shorts, comic books, and a video game called *Enter the Matrix* (2003). Instead of serving as redundant adaptations or mere marketing extensions, each text contributed new storylines to the overall narrative. Audiences who followed the trajectory of various motifs across different mediums experienced a unique transmedia universe.

However, despite its innovative strategies, *The Matrix* franchise’s execution of its transmedia components had some notable problems. The video game *Enter the Matrix* was a “viable generator of ‘canonical’ plotline”, meaning that it was closely interwoven with the film’s storyline and defined certain plot points that would become important in the sequels (Gray, 2006). Not all audience members were prepared for the hypertextual, interconnected logic of the franchise, which depended heavily on a deep knowledge of all the transmedia extensions. In short, *The Matrix* relied too much on its transmedia content and the individual texts were not enjoyable in their own right. Although the franchise’s intent to create a new, interconnected mode of storytelling was innovative, *The Matrix* reflects an “ongoing tension and task for producers of paratexts: how to create and pitch them successfully to address both the general audience and various forms of fans. *Allowing* fans, and giving them room to play, is often of vital importance, but *requiring* that all viewers be fans is an immodest and potentially destructive move” (Gray, 2006).

Television has also undergone a significant transition as shows have been able to “tap into the expanded cognitive capacities of networked audiences” (Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013). ABC’s *Lost* (2004-2010) exemplifies television’s shift towards highly serialized narratives, transmedia storytelling, and an increased investment in audience’s engagement. *Lost*’s premise

seems simple at first—the show follows several survivors of a plane crash who are left stranded on a mysterious tropical island and are forced to work together to survive. However, the show’s narrative hinged on a complex, extensive mythology, complete with hidden clues embedded within individual episodes that encouraged multiple viewings in order to grasp all of the layers of meaning. *Lost* achieved this depth through posing a central mystery — what exactly is the mysterious island? — which was constantly alluded to throughout the series. This overarching question creates an “endlessly deferred narrative” which postpones resolution in favor of prolonging the story arc, drawing out a series of interlinked mysteries (Hills, 2003). Endlessly deferred narratives encourage a level of investigation from their audience, providing a type of quest for hardcore fans to generate informed theories and interpretations of the show.

Throughout its run, *Lost* resisted pinning down its various storylines, allowing audiences to continue to speculate until the show ended. The show also continually referenced other places or stories that existed off the island, suggesting an unseen but extensive storyworld. Matt Hills coined the term *hyperdiegesis* to refer to “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nonetheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension” (Hills 2003).

Essentially, a hyperdiegetic narrative like *Lost* presents an intricate, defined space that leaves room for the audience to imagine a deeper mythology and a world beyond the show.

Although such a rich story seems suited for transmedia approach, the showrunners had not initially conceived *Lost* as a transmedia show. As the show began to generate more interest, a series of paratexts were developed to feed a growing audience’s desire to delve deeper into the mysteries of the show. Conceptually, transmedia extensions seemed like a natural way to fill

gaps in an endlessly deferred mystery, sustain interest between seasons, and generate a profit.

But, similarly to *The Matrix* franchise, *Lost* struggled to balance supplementing an internally coherent show with valuable and distinctive paratexts:

“The tie-in novel *Bad Twin* was seen by most as a fairly incoherent add-on ... [and] fans have not seen the other videogame and tie-in ancillaries as essential. The alternate reality game *The Lost Experience* extended the forensic model of participation most successfully, but the majority of fans either were dismayed by the overt commercialization of the game, or disappointed that the ARG’s narrative revelations did not seem to resonate within the core television series during season three” (Mittell 2007).

However unlike *The Matrix*, which pre-dated the ubiquity of Web 2.0, fans of *Lost* were able to take advantage of the Internet to combine their knowledge and collaborate closely to unlock the mysteries within the narrative. The participatory culture of the Internet facilitates collective intelligence, or the “ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members” (Jenkins 2006). *Lost*’s narrative complexity encourages encyclopedic impulses, as evidenced by a comprehensive, user-generated online guide called Lostpedia. Together, *Lost* fans collaborated to decipher the show’s many puzzles in order to uncover *Lost*’s hyperdiegetic narrative and vast storyworld. While my project will obviously exist on a much smaller scale and it won’t be nearly as convoluted as *Lost*, I am using similar strategies in terms of how I hope to engage an audience. My story revolves around a mystery situated a strange small town, a hyperdiegetic setting which is arguably a character in itself, and involves multiple characters and a sense of history or mythology. As I have been developing my plot, I am considering how “endlessly deferred” I want the narrative to be. I am intrigued by the concept of using paratexts to fill the gaps in an open-ended story, but I am also aware of the risk of creating an unsatisfying ending for readers. The creation of an inhabitable storyworld is challenging, but in order for an

audience to engage with such a complex narrative structure, I feel that it is essential for a successful transmedia text to be based in a strong sense of internal logic and depth.

Rather than approaching my project from a cinematic or televisual mode, I have chosen to base my narrative primarily in social media interactions that take place in Twitter. In terms of Twitter Fiction experiments, *Black Box*, written by Jennifer Egan for The New Yorker, is a well-known but somewhat flawed example. The hybrid poetic narrative consists of over 600 serialized tweets in the form of “terse mental dispatches from a female spy of the future” (Egan) and was released on The New Yorker’s Twitter feed for an hour each night, for ten nights. Egan spent a year experimenting with how to “control and calibrate the material” with an overall interest in “how to write fiction whose structure would lend itself to serialization on Twitter... because of the odd poetry that can happen in a hundred and forty characters” (Egan). The story began:

“People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you’ve seen pictures.”
 “The first thirty seconds in a person’s presence are the most important.”
 “If you’re having trouble perceiving and projecting, focus on projecting.”
 “Necessary ingredients for a successful projection: giggles; bare legs; shyness.”
 (Egan, *Black Box*)

Although Egan’s tweets themselves are beautifully composed, I feel that *Black Box* does not truly engage with Twitter as a medium and does not accomplish what I hope to do with my own project. This character’s “mental dispatches” occur in isolation on a website that is meant to be used for conversation and connection. Her tight, controlled phrases do not invite interactivity or engagement in the form of replies or responses; readers merely follow along. Furthermore before this project began, Egan did not actually maintain a Twitter presence herself, stating that tweets seemed “phony” and she felt “tongue tied” because “she [was] not entirely comfortable posting

tweets... [Egan had] only posted four tweets, including one apologizing for being spammed” (Haughney). If, as Egan states, she was interested in serialization on Twitter in particular, a familiarity with her chosen medium’s format and the content it facilitates seems essential. Seriality “optimally involves a correspondence between the boundaries segmenting the distribution or transmission of a narrative [...] and the boundaries that are incorporated into the narrative’s design.” (Page 2013). Egan’s choice of Twitter as a vehicle for this particular narrative’s design seems somewhat arbitrary; in the version posted on the New Yorker’s website, the story was serialized into 47 numbered acts, but the boundaries between these chapter-like segments did not appear on Twitter.

Black Box was later published traditionally in print for The New Yorker, evidencing the idea that the story seemed most interested in using the formal constraints of Twitter’s strict 140-character limit, rather than anything inherent to the medium itself. In addition, The New Yorker’s distribution of this story also points to a certain disregard for Twitter as a format and the changing modes of viewership. The concept of posting 60 tweets over the course of one hour each day uses ‘media-by-appointment’ model that is inconsistent with Twitter’s investment in liveness, which could have allowed the boundaries in Egan’s text to become more visible if the tweets had proceeded in real time with chronological gaps between her story’s acts. Rather than allowing the narrative to unfold naturally, this model of execution results in a rapid narrative pace that floods the Twitter feed and forces audiences to tune in at an appointed time. While I do plan to execute my story over the course of one week, and I will have to encourage an audience to follow the story during that week, the characters in my project will be tweeting in real time rather than at specific times of day. Plot points that take place five hours apart in the narrative

will appear five hours apart on Twitter, and this strategy will use the ‘live’ aspect of the medium to create a more immersive, realistic experience for readers.

The most influential transmedia text for my project is *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries (LBD)*, a modern adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* that took the form of a YouTube webseries and consists of several other social media platforms. The story followed Elizabeth ‘Lizzie’ Bennet, a Mass Communications grad student who starts a video blog (vlog) series for her series and discusses the trials and tribulation of her daily life. The series’ transmedia focus allowed the writers to build outlets for all of *LBD*’s large cast of characters to take on a life of their own and interact with each other, even if they did not have a significant presence in the official webseries. For example, an early exchange on Twitter between Bing Lee, Caroline Lee, and William Darcy took place before the characters ever made an appearance on Lizzie’s vlogs:

“Bing Lee: hey, @that_caroline @wmdarcy you'll never guess what I just did.
 Caroline Lee: @bingliest you're right. I won't.
 William Darcy: @bingliest what did you do now? I shudder.
 Bing Lee: @that_caroline @wmdarcy you know how I was threatening to buy a place while I was out here?
 William Darcy: @bingliest you didn't.
 Bing Lee: @wmdarcy I did
 Caroline Lee: @bingliest omg where?!
 Bing Lee: @that_caroline a place called Netherfield” (*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*).

Unlike Egan’s *Black Box*, the writers of *LBD* use Twitter for more than its formal constraints. This exchange establishes the personalities of Bing, Caroline and Darcy and also incorporates a reference to Austen’s text in Bing’s mention of Netherfield. All of the characters in *LBD* have multiple social media accounts through which they interact and reveal portions of the story and perspectives that are not necessarily represented in Lizzie's vlogs. These types of interactions embrace Twitter for what it is, rather than trying to force it into some tool that it isn’t. With its

simultaneous narrators and fractured storyline, this is not the kind of tale that could simply work on its own if printed out and placed in a magazine format; it is actually made for the medium.

LBD aired over one year and consisted of 100 official episodes as well as over 50 spin-off videos starring more minor characters. The interactions on Twitter and other social media platforms were concurrent in real time with the episodic plots and were frequently referenced in the videos themselves, pointing the audience towards the characters' accounts so that they could follow along with the secondary aspect of the story. The characters also used Twitter to engage her viewers in semi-frequent question and answer videos, in which Lizzie answers questions asked by real viewers. Viewers' cheeky references to *Pride and Prejudice*, genuine curiosity, and comments made their way into the fictional storyworld. While these viewers' comments never truly influenced or changed the direction of the overall story, the Q&A videos acted as bonus content for fans who had immersed themselves in the show and also added a level of reality to the narrative's conceit that Lizzie was a real vlogger. On the whole, *LBD* is a sprawling intersection of different forms that interact to form a cohesive whole. Each piece of the narrative was carefully designed to enrich and connect with the overarching narrative of the series.

Although new technologies and new audiences may threaten the media industry's traditional business models, a demand for new, compelling, and exciting stories will always exist. By studying past transmedia ventures, it is clear that while a consideration of the story itself is important, it is equally important to be attentive towards the audience's experience of the story. Less successful transmedia texts have relied too much on paratexts, creating a narrative that is spread too thin over too many platforms with unclear signposts for the audience. In order to address this, I plan to create a central 'hub' for the audience – a website that will aggregate the

most important pieces of my story in one place, rather than simply expecting my audience to follow every single thread in real time. I am also working to limit the number of characters and paratexts my story requires to tighten the narrative and eliminate possible redundancies. *Beneath Still Waters*' transmedia platforms will be chosen to facilitate content as naturally as possible, rather than forcing parts of the story on a platform that don't fit. As I am primarily designing my narrative for Twitter, I am consciously using the concepts of interactivity, conversation, and linking in order to create a cohesive and medium-specific text. The concept of transmedia storytelling, particularly using social media, is so new that a concrete creative model for successful execution does not truly exist yet. However, while the logistics of transmedia storytelling remains unclear, creators face a future full of opportunities to weave narrative threads in an out of another, stitch them together with a compelling story, and create complex, innovative pieces of work.

The Production Process: Fall 2014

When I was thinking about what kind of project I wanted to complete during my senior year, it was important to me that I combine the knowledge I have gained from Media Studies with my minor in Creative Writing. Throughout my Media Studies coursework, I have developed a strong interest in digital and social media and the way it shapes our culture and communication. In particular, my interests lie in how online platforms influence audience experience and interaction, fandom theory, and new methods of storytelling. In Creative Writing workshops, I have refined my writing abilities and experimented with form while implementing constructive feedback from my peers and professors. During spring 2014, I spent the semester studying graphic design in London at Central Saint Martins, an art school that emphasized concept development. My time there not only improved my graphic design skills, but also helped me develop a methodical framework for approaching open-ended creative projects from conceptualization through iterative drafts and final execution. The concept of transmedia storytelling, which requires interdisciplinary, cross-platform thinking, seemed like a natural fit for all of my various interests. Overall, this project allows me to utilize concepts I have studied in my classes and encompass them into a narrative embedded in the medium it seeks to understand.

My initial idea for the project was a transmedia webseries, similar to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, but I did not have the video production skills necessary to execute a webseries. I chose instead to shift my project to a more experimental format: Twitter. I was aware of several other Twitter Fiction experiments, so I knew the platform had a history of creative use, but none I had heard of actually used transmedia strategies. From the beginning, I wanted my project to explore

transmedia storytelling as a concept, using the tools and strategies of social media including linking, liking, retweeting, and commenting, to tell a cohesive narrative. A successful transmedia narrative isn't just the story of one character—it's the story of a world with multiple storylines that unfurl simultaneously and ask the audience to navigate through different threads. The idea of situating that kind of transmedia experience in social media like Twitter, which already asks users to navigate through a series of profiles and posts that collectively create a sort of “narrative” of a person's life, formed the basis of my underlying concept.

Due to the scope and detail necessary for a transmedia story, I knew that I would need both the fall and spring semester in order to develop, write, and execute this project well. For my work this semester, I initially thought it would be possible to execute a version of the story from one character's perspective on Twitter while I continued to develop the plot. Throughout September, I focused primarily on my story's development and worked through several ideas to create the basis for an original plot that would work in an unconventional format. I started with a broad idea — a journalist uncovers a supernatural conspiracy in a strange small town — and refined the story from there. In particular, the supernatural concepts proved the most difficult to figure out; I wanted the story to remain grounded in reality while still incorporating an element of fantasy. I researched and took extensive notes on other works in the urban fantasy genre, the Salem witch trials, total solar eclipses, life in small towns, and various paranormal phenomena to help me develop my ideas throughout the semester. I also began considering how many characters would be necessary to include, because while I knew that while I couldn't possibly tweet for an entire town's-worth of people, including a range of perspectives could add more dimensions to the plot and make good use of the transmedia format. After working through

several different concepts and trying to organize my ideas, I decided to write a partial draft as a traditional short story because it was a format I was comfortable with. While I did not feel that this draft was entirely successful, it did help me commit to a certain direction and gave me a solid base to work from.

In order to develop the story component, I enrolled in a creative writing seminar to receive constructive feedback on my characters and plot. At the beginning of October, I workshopped the short story draft and submitted a detailed plot outline to my thesis readers. At that point, it became clear that my initial idea of executing the story from one character's perspective this semester would not be possible; the plot was highly dependent on the interactions and conversations between characters. I became concerned about what would constitute a "self-contained" project for this semester in keeping with the Media Studies department's guidelines. After discussing it with my readers, I decided instead to develop a website for my fictional town called Stillwater that would serve as an important transmedia platform in the story. The website would contain facts and background information essential to the main plot, setting certain ideas in motion while still acting as a self-contained project. Throughout the rest of the month, I continued to work on the narrative, incorporating the feedback I had received and heavily revising the first draft. I cut out unnecessary characters to tighten up the plot and narrowed down which specific platforms I wanted to use, settling on Twitter, Tumblr, and the Stillwater website. By the end of the month, I had written a second substantial draft, this time in Twitter format, to hand in to my writing workshop.

In the first week of November, I workshopped my second draft. The feedback I received was extremely helpful and helped me identify some areas I need to keep in mind as I continue to

work. In particular, there were places in the story where the characters' use of Twitter didn't seem entirely believable, so I will need to carefully consider the public/private divide of social media as I continue to write. I am aware that there will be certain places in the story that require a suspension of disbelief, but I want to ensure that the experience feels immersive and as real as possible overall.

At the Work in Progress presentation, I received a question about the spontaneity or interactive potential for this project. While some authors have used interactive, improvisational model very successfully, I was hesitant to make my project dependent on audience interaction. That level of participation requires a huge amount of engagement. The authors who have executed those types of projects already have a massive fan following so it was easier to invite people into a collaborative experience. Asking audience or fans to follow along is one thing — and since my story's structure is so complex, I feel that I am already asking quite a lot — but requiring that they collaborate is even harder. However, that's not to say that I won't leave any room for audience interactivity. In the case of an audience member tweeting to one of my characters, I would be prepared to respond to them "in-character." I am also considering places where I can have characters ask some open-ended questions that could invite responses. These responses wouldn't add or detract anything from the story, but it provides an opportunity for those who want to participate to do so. The work or participation of the audience in my mind is their ability to follow a story across these multiple platforms and being able to piece together separate parts of a narrative.

By the end of November, I developed the entirety of the Stillwater website, which I built using Wordpress. I manipulated several photos licensed by Creative Commons using Photoshop

to add elements of reality to my fictional town. The website also contains a blog, where I used the comments feature to post as a variety of different fictional Stillwater townspeople to give the blog a sense of reality and interactivity. All of the content on the website is directly linked to my overall plot, but it still functions as a self-contained story in its own way. In addition to the website and a third draft of my story outline, I created Twitter mock-ups of five different scenes using Illustrator as a proof of concept for the format. I chose each scene to highlight a different functionality of the medium, such as the use of @ replies, livetweeting, links, hashtags, or retweeting, in specific parts of the narrative.

Reflecting back on my process in relation to my research on transmedia storytelling, I am glad I chose to develop the town's website while I figured out the plot. My work this semester ensures that the Stillwater website functions as a viable paratext in its own way; it serves as an entry point into the larger narrative, but it still conveys a self-contained story within the blog posts and website content. It was particularly important to create an immersive storyworld with enough detail and depth to sustain it across multiple platforms. The town of Stillwater functions as a hyperdiegetic setting, to use Matt Hills' term, to support a wider fictional universe. All of the details I reveal are significant in some way, whether they set up a plot point or serve as background information to develop a sense of reality for the town. Since the form of social media is responsive and readers can question plot points as they happen — rather than a more static form like a novel, where readers only consume the text as a finished whole — I feel that it is especially important that readers feel there is a sense of logic underpinning the story. Figuring out which details needed to appear on the Stillwater website helped me solidify my ideas about the town so that if a reader questions something in the story as it is happening, I feel that I can

provide an answer that makes sense within the storyworld.

The process of developing a mystery story – particularly in an unconventional format – was difficult but even though I still feel I have to refine certain plot points, the project has been a fun challenge. While I have enjoyed my work this semester, I am excited for the chance to actually execute an entire story from start to finish in the spring semester. After plotting out the story and developing the most complex, content-heavy transmedia platform for the narrative, my project for the spring would be the execution of the entire project on Twitter. The plot development and the creation of the Stillwater website set a solid foundation on which I can build the rest of the project and I look forward to the opportunity to develop the story and characters even further and ultimately see the entire project fully realized on social media.

The Production Process: Spring 2015

After plotting out the story and developing the most complex, content-heavy platform for the narrative in the fall, my overall project for the spring semester was the actual execution of the entire project. This included setting up all of the platforms, continuing to write and develop the story, creating a marketing campaign to attract followers, and releasing the story in real time from March 23 through April 24.

In January over winter break, I created all eleven character platforms (nine Twitter pages and two Tumblr blogs) to include profile photos, descriptions and other elements to give them a sense of history and reality. I also set up the Stillwater Project meta website using Wordpress, where I knew I wanted to aggregate the content from the different platforms for the duration of the project. In order to ensure that audiences will catch all of the different threads of conversation, I planned to use Storify to break up the story into acts to make it easier to navigate. Across all eleven platforms, I included a visible link to the meta website, which represented a centralized hub of information. The prominence of the link also alerted potential new readers that each individual platform was part of my wider transmedia project.

During this time, I also read Andrea Phillips' *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling*, which strongly influenced my approach for the spring semester. The book addressed many different aspects of transmedia projects, from writing specifically for a transmedia format to considering which platforms to use, creating a marketing campaign, and various production elements. In particular, I realized that I had to be quite conscious of the different types of audience experiences this project could offer. The ideal audience member would follow all the platforms and interact with the characters and immerse themselves in the world, but in reality,

those types of participants are a very small percentage of the total audience for any project.

Although the majority of my story was pre-planned, I still wanted to leave room for people to interact. If someone tweeted to one of my characters, I wanted to be prepared to respond “in-character.” While these responses would not necessarily change the direction of the story, they could potentially tap into the interactive component of social media and also add another level of reality to the story. To cater towards those who preferred to just read along without interacting, the meta site served as a convenient place to gather all the threads. It was also entirely possible that someone only followed one character on Twitter, and while they didn’t get the full version of the story, they still came away with a version of it. In addition, each single profile contained links and references to the other ones, so I felt that it was fairly unlikely that audience members would not eventually connect to another platform if they only encountering one. Another possibility was that someone would come in in the middle of the project, which is why the link to the meta site was featured so prominently to make it easy to access a clear start point and catch up with the narrative. This meta site also functions as as a comprehensive archive once the project ended in April.

February primarily consisted of refining the story further and continuing to plan out how exactly I would execute the story. Once I settled on a defined timeline and chose March 23 as my start date and April 24 as my end date, it became much easier to figure out how to pace the story and how much content I needed to write. I used Scrivener, a writing program with organization capabilities, to set up a day-to-day plan so that I knew definitively which story points were happening when. This program was crucial for keeping myself organized throughout the project and it certainly made the execution process much simpler. In addition, once I confirmed my

timeline would work, I began to schedule certain posts ahead of time using Wordpress's built-in blog post system as well as Tweetdeck, a service that helped me manage all nine characters' Twitter profiles as well as put in several key moments as I continued to write.

In March, I developed marketing campaign that consisted of two fifteen-second teaser trailers, a landing page with an email form, and a series of graphics to market the story. As a new creator without any sort of previous audience, I chose to use my own social media presence to promote the project to any built-in followers that I had. These posts directed people to a landing page I created using the meta website's project address, which gave a short overview of the story, included one of the 15-second teasers, and provided a form for email notifications once the project launched on March 23. In addition to this, I also wanted to try to attract attention from beyond my immediate circle and reach out to transmedia creators whose work had inspired me to do this project in the first place. I created over twenty personalized animated gifs that looked as though someone was typing a Twitter status update about the town of Stillwater and sent them via my personal Twitter account. Although most people did not acknowledge or respond to the image, I did receive some positive results. Notable creators and members of the transmedia community such as JC Hutchins, Steve Peters, and Michael Andersen followed the project's Twitter account as a result of the graphics. In addition, my use of the #transmedia hashtag in my promotional posts helped me gain followers as well, and a London-based transmedia company retweeted several of my posts and even gave the project a mention on their Facebook page.

Once the project launched at the end of March, I had to constantly monitor my characters' accounts to ensure that the scheduled posts were going out as planned, update the Stillwater town website with comments from various townspeople, and organize all the posts

using Storify and compile them on the project website. Throughout the project's duration, I continued using the project's Twitter profile as well as my own personal social media profiles to provide updates on the project's progress. I monitored the project views on the meta site using Google Analytics, and the site received a steady number of views throughout the project. According to the statistics, visitors spent a fair amount of time on the meta site and often viewed multiple pages at a time. I also ended up with a higher percentage of returning visitors as compared to new visitors, meaning that the project was able to attract and hold interest to a certain extent. However, had I had more time to develop one, I know that a marketing campaign that continued throughout the entire run of the project would have been valuable in terms of attracting interest in the long term. In particular, I feel that the idea of creating a *Blair Witch*-style immersive campaign that blended fiction with a sense of reality could have potentially been very successful in creating more of an aura of mystery and intrigue around the story.

One of the biggest challenges in this project was figuring out the pacing. The story unfolded over about a month, which simultaneously managed to feel too long and too short. For the first two weeks of the project, I wanted to start off slowly to give myself and my potential audience time to figure out how the mechanics worked and allow time to explore the Stillwater website. The town and everything happening in it seemed very normal on the surface, but stranger elements would start creeping in as the weeks went by. The final six days would contain the bulk of the action and the number of posts and characters would increase significantly. Reflecting back on it though, I think it would have been more successful in capturing an audience had I introduced the driving mystery right away. The final six days felt very rushed to

me, particularly in comparison with the rest of the plot. I became aware of the pacing problem as the end drew closer, but unfortunately I had plotted everything out so much that I didn't have the time or ability to completely change course in such a short period of time. However, I feel that this kind of a pacing problem was not something I could have completely predicted before I actually executed it, so it remains a valuable lesson for me to have learned.

Another aspect I had some difficulty with was encouraging audience interaction. I knew that this would be hard from the beginning, but because I didn't have time to execute another marketing campaign during the project, I was not able to advertise the key interactive opportunities as effectively as I would have liked to. For instance, I built in an opportunity for people to ask the mayor of Stillwater a question for a digital Q&A session and I attempted to promote it over the course of ten days, but I did not receive any user comments on this post. However, I did receive a handful of comments on the Stillwater Town website from readers at other points in time, and I enjoyed responding to those "in character" to further the illusion of reality and reward them with a personalized message. The submitted comments blended in with the Stillwater townspeople's comments that I was posting myself, and there was no real way for other readers to know which comments were posted by me and which weren't. That was to be expected, for the most part, and I hope to keep researching successful techniques for encouraging audience interaction in a project like this.

In addition, I feel that I was a little over-ambitious with the story and the plot. I got caught up in creating a central driving mystery and adding in supernatural elements and trying to create a deep backstory, but in the end I felt like it was all too complex and most of it happened too quickly. I think my impulse to create a mystery story that would lend itself to the transmedia

format by encouraging audiences to search through the different platforms wasn't necessarily a bad one -- the story itself just could have used more refining. For my first venture into this type of online storytelling, perhaps I could have simplified the plot more so I could really focus on the writing, developing characters, and possibly explore other social media avenues. Due to the timeframe and certain limitations with my own technical skills, certain plot points or certain characters were not as well developed as I had envisioned. As the project went on, it became increasingly difficult to juggle all eleven platforms and keep pace with the quickening plot. On the other hand, this was my first time actually planning, writing, and executing an entire story from beginning to end and putting it in front of an audience. I planned as much as I could, but I still ended up having to improvise certain posts and work certain story points in at the last minute. It would have certainly been helpful to have another set of eyes on the story, as I did last semester, to ensure the narrative developed the way I wanted it to, but I remain satisfied with the overall project as an experiment in transmedia storytelling.

Overall, although the project had some problems with execution and pacing, I feel that *Beneath Still Waters* was a successful exercise and an extremely valuable learning opportunity for me. This type of transmedia project is rarely done by a single person, and for good reason. Trying to manage all of the moving parts, from troubleshooting technical issues to searching for online photos that resembled the town of Stillwater to writing for all of the characters, was a significant challenge. However, it was great to gain hands-on experience with each area and visualize how exactly a project of this scale could fit together, which made overseeing the final, finished product all the more rewarding. *Beneath Still Waters* allowed me to exercise a variety of skills, including concept and story development, graphic design, social media management,

marketing, and website creation. I thoroughly enjoyed seeing it come together after eight months of work, and I hope to take the lessons I learned from this project into other transmedia ventures in the future.

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