

Article

# Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations



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## ABSTRACT

**Theoretical and analytical considerations around the development of transmedia projects are evolving, but are still widely open, probably because transmedia storytelling is a relatively new subject that does not yet have its own specific methods and methodology of analysis. Moreover, transmedia projects are complex phenomena involving multiple dimensions, such as narrative, cultural context, marketing, business models, and legal framework. Currently, the usual approach gives place to methodologically separate analytical perspectives related to some of these dimensions. This article first discusses the elusive concept of transmedia storytelling and later presents analytical considerations outlining relevant aspects that can contribute to perceive the process of developing transmedia projects. The significance of these discussions is to address essential features of the design process behind transmedia projects and contribute to support the analytic needs of transmedia designers and the applied research in the interest of the media industry.**

## INTRODUCTION

Theoretical and analytical considerations around the development of transmedia projects are evolving, but are still widely open, probably because transmedia storytelling (TS) is a relatively new and elusive subject that does not have yet its own specific methods and methodology of analysis. Moreover, transmedia projects are complex phenomena involving multiple dimensions, such as narrative, cultural context, marketing, business models, and legal framework. Currently, the usual approach gives place to methodologically separate analytical perspectives related to some of these dimensions. Jenkins assumes that dealing with “transmedia is especially challenging – in part because the topic represents an intersection between fields of research that are normally held as methodologically separate” (2010a: 943).

Scholars and media professionals have been applying different methodological approaches and methods to better understand the structure behind TS (Long 2007; Dena 2009; Scolari 2012; Saldre, Torop 2012). Usually the methodologies of analysis used to address transmedia projects vary from semiotics (several kinds of semiotics), narratology, sociology, and ethnography to economics, marketing, branding and so forth. The methods incorporate quantitative and qualitative analyses and can be based on interviews, comparative studies, narrative analyses and documentary research, for instance.

Indeed, a plurality of perspectives could be included in an analytical approach interested in understanding a transmedia narrative as a whole. Here, however, the emphasis relies on the essential features of the design process behind transmedia

projects aiming to support the analytic needs of transmedia designers and the applied research in the interest of the media industry. Analysis is being employed as the essential component of the binomial analysis-synthesis approach within the design process (Dubberly *et al.* 2008; Liestøl 2003).

## DISCUSSING TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

Before discussing analytical considerations for transmedia project design, it is necessary to address a more fundamental issue: What could be understood as TS? Firstly, it is important to stress that there is not yet consensus on what exactly TS means, but although the definition of TS is still open, it is certainly possible to trace its main characteristics and follow its footprints. Starting from the word transmedia itself, there is the prefix *trans-* in combination with media. This Latin prefix means beyond, through, transverse, conveying the idea of transcendence. Consequently, the word transmedia would then go beyond, transcending a variety of media. Geoffrey Long (2007: 32), moreover, suggests that “the term ‘transmedia’ should be considered an adjective, not a noun,” i.e. a word able to describe and to qualify a substantive.

In this context, the use of the term transmedia to depict a particular form of storytelling emerged in 1991, when Marsha Kinder published the book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. In her book, she defines “commercial supersystems of transmedia intertextuality” (1991: 3) as referring to relevant franchises distributed on multiple media platforms. Nevertheless, the term TS was first coined in 2003 by Henry Jenkins in his article published by *Technology Review* (2003). Three years later, he improved the concept and published its definition in his notorious book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006).

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each

new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. (Jenkins 2006: 95–96)

Carlos Scolari defines TS as “a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.). TS is not just an adaptation from one media to another. The story that the comics tell is not the same as that told on television or in cinema; the different media and languages participate and contribute to the construction of the transmedia narrative world” (2009: 587). Christy Dena highlights that TS is all about a storyworld unfolding across media platforms (2009: 18) and Geoffrey Long emphasizes that TS is the art of worldmaking (2007: 28). I propose TS as referring to, at least, integrated media experiences that occur amongst a variety of platforms. A transmedia narrative tells altogether one big pervasive story, attracting audience engagement. It is not about offering the same content in different media platforms, but it is the worldbuilding experience, unfolding content and generating the possibilities for the story to evolve with new and pertinent content.

Regardless of all the effort to specify TS and differentiate it from other concepts, there are still conceptual confusions around it and several other terms that, to certain extend, are commonly considered synonyms, such as intermedia (Dick Higgins, 1966), multimedia (Bob Goldstein, 1966), cross-media (Paul Zazzera, 1999), multimodal discourse (Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, 2001), superfiction (Peter Hill, 2001), multiple platforms (Stephen Jeffery-Poulter, 2003), screen bleed (Matt Hanson, 2003), networked narrative environment (Andrea Zapp, 2004), transmedial world

(Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca, 2004), distributed narratives (Jill Walker, 2004), hybrid media (Jak Boumans, 2004), media mix (Mizuko Ito, 2005), cross-sited narratives (Marc Ruppel, 2005), and deep media (Frank Rose, 2011).

### **TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING, CROSS-MEDIA AND MULTIMEDIA**

Probably the most referred terms alongside TS are cross-media and multimedia. Are they really synonyms? No, definitely not, but this answer is not unanimous. It seems the answer will plausibly rely on personal preferences. Starting from the prefix *cross-*, there is the indication of movement, of action across something, and the idea of intersection. Hence, the word cross-media would carry on the essential meaning of a variety of media that intersect each other. For instance, considering Drew Davidson's definition of cross-media, it would be difficult to differentiate it from TS:

Cross-media Communications are integrated, interactive experiences that occur across multiple media, with multiple authors and have multiple styles. The audience becomes an active part in a cross-media experience. It is experiences that occur across the Internet, video and film, broadcast and cable TV, mobile devices, DVD, print, and radio. The new media aspect of the "cross-media experience" typically involves some level of audience interactivity. (Davidson *et al.* 2010: 4)

In spite of it, as we emphasized earlier, it is possible to notice a largely accepted assumption in considering cross-media a broader term, a more generic one, which includes the whole process of communication and interactivity not restrict to audiovisual industry, and the main difference would be the emphasis of TS on the narrative. That is the proposition of this article. Corroborating this premise, Scolari distinguishes both concepts but, nonetheless, assumes that he uses cross-media and TS

as synonyms. His statement could sound paradoxal:

The concept of cross-media is widely used in the professional scope, although some countries like Italy also use it in the academic world. Transmedia storytelling – a concept introduced by Henry Jenkins in 2003 – is more specific and sounds much more theoretical. In general, both concepts refer to productions that take place through different media and platforms, such as social networking, YouTube, etc. On the other hand, Jenkins gave much importance to user-generated content. If we talk about transmedia storytelling, we evidence the narrative dimension of these productions, while cross-media is a broader term that also includes other dimensions, not only the narrative one. For my part, I use the terms as synonyms. (Mungolioli 2011: 128)

In addition to Scolari's considerations about the professional and academic scopes that tend to favor either the use of the term cross-media or TS, there are differences between the discourses from country to country and the preferences can also vary depending on the sector of media industries. For instance, TS is preferred in Brazil to the detriment of cross-media in both professional and academic contexts. In the United States, it is possible to identify the preference for TS in the moving pictures industries, especially in Hollywood. The terms are organically evolving in concomitance with the society they are inserted in.

Andrea Phillips acknowledges that although cross-media was until very recently considered the same as trans-media, "now, a consensus is growing that cross-media refers to releasing the same content (...) over multiple platforms" (2012: 19). Phillips' assumption follows the same orientation I proposed before, considering cross-media a broader term that differentiates itself from the specificities of TS.

Including multimedia in the discussion, it seems easy to comprehend that the prefix *multi-*, used in the formation of compound words, means many, much, multiple, and numerous. Indeed, the term multimedia was coined by Bob Goldstein to promote the 1966 opening of his lighting show in Long Island, USA. The light work presented music and visuals combined. In the 1990s, multimedia assumed the meaning of any combination of text, graphic art, sound, animation, and video that is delivered by computer. Pierre Lèvy, in his book *Cyberculture* (2001), discusses the variety of meanings that the concept of multimedia has acquired, including the use of multimedia, for instance, when the release of a film gives place, simultaneously, to the release of a video game, a TV series, T-shirts, toys, etc. In this case, he denominates that a “multimedia strategy” is being faced. Lèvy’s perspective is not the same that is being implied in this article. Despite the fact it has been argued that TS is not the same as multimedia, both terms are still being misused worldwide.

Apart from the confusions, there are several characteristics that can be traced to TS, such as being the kind of communication in which the storyline directs the audience from one medium to the next; the ability to build content over a variety of media; and the capability to exist not just by the juxtaposition of different devices and platforms, but to spread the common goal on the different platforms throughout an integrated production. While the definition is flexible, most often transmedia narratives include key story information over a variety of platforms, each used for what it does best; multiple entry points into the storyworld; and the opportunity for collective action rather than passive consumption. A transmedia story normally involves different dimensions, for instance, narrative spaces (location, characters, time, etc.), number and relative timing of the platforms (sequential, parallel, simultaneous, non-linear), and type of audience involvement (passive, active, interactive, collaborative) (Pratten 2011).

As a work in progress, in 2009 Jenkins issued *Seven Core Concepts of Transmedia Storytelling* (2009; 2009a; 2011) based on his talk at the *Futures of Entertainment Conference* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). The core principles he mentions are: (1) spreadability vs.<sup>1</sup> drillability<sup>2</sup>; (2) continuity vs. multiplicity; (3) immersion vs. extractability<sup>3</sup>; (4) worldbuilding; (5) seriality; (6) subjectivity (diversity of perspectives); and (7) performance (user-generated content).

These principles certainly contribute to the development of the field, but do not intend to end the difficult task of defining TS. Towards a more pragmatic definition though, in 2010 the Producers Guild of America (PGA) expanded their code of credits to recognize the transmedia producer. This decision, after a deliberate effort by Hollywood transmedia practitioners, such as Mark Gordon and Jeff Gomez, underscores the evolution and changes in the new media realm. PGA states:

A Transmedia Narrative project or franchise must consist of three (or more) narrative storylines existing within the same fictional universe on any of the following platforms: Film, Television, Short Film, Broadband, Publishing, Comics, Animation, Mobile, Special Venues, DVD/Blu-ray/CD-ROM, Narrative Commercial and Marketing rollouts, and other technologies that may or may not currently exist. These narrative extensions are NOT the same as repurposing material from one platform to be cut or repurposed to different platforms. (Producers Guild of America 2012)

- 1 Jenkins uses the preposition “versus” to indicate contrast – opposite sides of the same issue – but it does not mean that in the context of TS it is either spreadability or drillability, either continuity or multiplicity, and either immersion or extractability. All these features characterize transmedia stories.
- 2 Drillability refers to the possibility to explore, in-depth, the content of narrative extensions offered by a transmedia story (Caddell 2009; Mittell 2009).
- 3 Extractability refers to the possibility fans may have to take away with them aspects of the story, incorporating it in their everyday lives (e.g. memorabilia) (Caddell 2009).

Actually, the PGA definition seems to be strongly based on Jeff Gomez' propositions, especially his eight defining characteristics of a transmedia production, which include: (1) content is originated by one or a very few visionaries; (2) cross-media rollout is planned early in the life of the franchise; (3) content is distributed to three or more media platforms; (4) content is unique, adheres to platform-specific strengths, and is not repurposed from one platform to the next; (5) content is based on a single vision for the storyworld; (6) concerted effort is made to avoid fractures and schisms; (7) effort is vertical across company, third parties and licensees; and (8) rollout features audience participatory elements, such as Web portal, social networking and story-guided user-generated content (Producers Guild of America 2007).

Although the PGA initiative to recognize the role of transmedia producers pleased both scholars and media professionals and is considered an historic move because the Guild rarely backs new credits, their proposed definition reignited the debate around the concept and caused controversy. The main concerns are the strict minimum of three narrative storylines, the fact that the definition seems to favor franchises in detriment of other TS applications, and the omission of video games<sup>4</sup> from the list of media platforms (Dena 2010; Thompson 2010; Jenkins 2010).

## TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING TYPES

The overall assumption is, at this point, that the transmedia space<sup>5</sup> is large enough to embrace distinctive types of stories/experiences. However, neither the terminology nor the quantity of different categories are yet ultimate. Christy Dena refers to two main transmedia types: The first one is a col-

lection of mono-medium stories (she calls it intracompositional), commonly known as a franchise, in which a book, a film, and a video game, for instance, all contribute distinct stories to one overarching storyworld; the second type is a collection of media that tells one story, for example, an entertainment program that takes place on TV and on the Web simultaneously (2011: 48). Andrea Phillips, within the US context, refers to West Coast vs. East Coast transmedia types: "West Coast-style transmedia, more commonly called Hollywood or franchise transmedia, consists of multiple big pieces of media" (2012: 13). East Coast transmedia, on the other hand, "tends to be more interactive, and much more web-centric" (*ibid.*, 14). Robert Pratten (2011), even though with different nomenclature, describes nearly the same types, but also considers a third one, which incorporate the other two: **Transmedia franchise**, **portman-teau transmedia**, and **complex transmedia experience**. His perspective is considered here the most pertinent because embraces more explicitly the inherent complexity of transmedia projects.

Transmedia franchise, according to Pratten, is a series of individual media outlets, such as a comic book, a TV show, a film, etc. Each media platform involved is independent except that they cover different narrative spaces, such as prequels and sequels. The "classical" example of this model is *The Matrix* (1999) by the Wachowski brothers. In between each feature film, additional content (including graphic novels, animations, video games and memorabilia, for instance) were released to give the audience a richer understanding of the storyworld and to help keep fans engaged. Other examples could be TV series *24*, *Mad Men*, *Heroes*, for instance.

Regarding franchises, it is essential to take into consideration the issue around adaptation and transmediation. TS, according to Jenkins (2006: 96–105), is unlike the current licensing system, which typically generates works that are redundant. Any composition that does not make a distinctive and

4 The Guild already informed that video games were excluded from the list of potential media by oversight and that it will be amended to include games.

5 "Transmedia space appears as a notion that integrates meta- and intercommunicative levels, presuming the interpretation of the same message as the sequence of proto- and metatexts described in different discourses and fixed in different signs systems and media." (Saldre, Torop 2012: 41)



valuable contribution does not offer a new level of insight and experience. Redundancy can burn up fan interest and may cause franchises to fail.

When the topic of transmediation is first breached in conversation, often the initial response is something along the lines of, 'Oh, like the Lord of the Rings films!' Well, no. Not quite. Retelling a story in a different media type is adaptation, while using multiple media types to craft a single story is transmediation. (Long 2007: 22)

Jenkins and other researches, such as Geoffrey Long, clearly exclude adaptation from the TS realm. Christy Dena, on the other hand, interrogates this issue in her thesis (2009: 96–175) and suggests that, in opposition to the main argument by Jenkins, not every adaptation is necessarily redundant. Saldre and Torop also include adaptations of a text in the realm of transmedia, justifying that intersemiotic translation “is the building principle of all transmedia texts, no matter whether they are transmedial at birth, extended to be transmedia after initial success or regarded as transmedial *post factum* in the cultural memory” (2012: 32). Carlos Scolari tries to conciliate both points of view and this perspective can be the appropriate resolution to the issue, especially taking into consideration the unlimited variety of scenarios in the realm of transmediality:

Transmedia narratives can be represented as a centrifugal process: from an initial text a narrative big bang is produced, in which new texts will be generated to reach user-generated content. From this perspective, transmedia storytelling generates a textual galaxy. The intersemiotic translations follow more linear (from book to screen, from comics to television, etc.) and less explosive paths. Can we consider adaptations a particular form of transmedia narratives? I do not believe that it is an issue to discuss. If we con-

sider that every translation is a process of text transformation, in which you always lose and win something, maybe the adaptations could be incorporated as one of the possible strategies of transmedia narratives. (Mungioli 2011: 130)

Returning to the second type of TS, Pratten's portmanteau<sup>6</sup> transmedia model is defined as multiple platforms contributing to a single experience. The story content is distributed simultaneously throughout different media platforms and each platform contributes significantly to the whole story. For instance, an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) covers a single narrative across multiple platforms – each alone insufficient to carry the complete narrative but like puzzle pieces they must be assembled to complete the story (Pratten 2010; 2011). Indeed, an ARG is an interactive narrative that blends real life treasure hunting, interactive storytelling, and online community. ARGs are complicated series of puzzles involving coded websites and real world clues, such as newspaper advertisements, phone calls, and text messages. It connects the player to the real world and to other players as well. Many game puzzles can be solved only by the collaborative efforts of multiple players. Most notorious examples of this kind of game are *The Beast* (2001), connected to Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*; *I Love Bees* (2004), linked to the release of the video game *Halo 2*; *Why So Serious* (2007), associated to Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knights*; and *The Maester's Path* (2011), related to HBO series *Game of Thrones*.

Complex transmedia experience, the third type of TS referred by Pratten, combines both franchise and portmanteau, offering the audience a widely experience. This kind of TS could be described as a hybrid produced by the interaction of the previous two types. A prominent example is the transmedia project *The Tulse Luper*

6 The French word portmanteau formally means a suitcase to carry clothes while traveling, but can also be understood as embodying several uses or qualities.

*Suitcases* (2003) created by British filmmaker Peter Greenaway. This pioneering project follows the journey of the main character Tulse Luper and the 92 suitcases he has archived and catalogued during his entire life. The result of this non-linear narrative consists of three feature films, 92 DVDs, TV series, books, websites<sup>7</sup>, blogs, online competitions, and exhibitions. The films present the story background and the most significant actions take place throughout other mediums. This complex transmedia experience reconstructs the life of the supposedly real character, piece by piece, across different media platforms. His enigmatic journey, filled with mysteries, secrets and objects, gives a place for audience interaction and engagement. *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* has a series of individual stories pertaining to a bigger pervasive storyworld, which characterizes a transmedia franchise, and is structured around a complicated sequence of puzzles that leads audience into solving a mystery, which distinguishes a portmanteau transmedia.

### PRO-ACTIVE AND RETROACTIVE TRANSMEDIA PROJECTS

Another relevant approach to TS is the timing of a transmedia project, i.e. when the starting process of developing a transmedia storyworld takes place. Drew Davidson (2010: 17) employs the terms **pro-active** and **retroactive** to refer to stories that are designed to be transmedia<sup>8</sup> from the beginning and to the ones that turned transmediatic afterwards. Pro-active transmedia projects are considered up front, full of ties planned from the beginning. An example would be *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Its website chronicles the story of three film students who have gone missing after going through a forest investigating stories of a witch. To further solidify the fiction in reality, a mockumentary, *Curse of the Blair Witch*, was aired on the Sci-Fi Channel just before

the release of the film, delivered as a documentary. Comic books, community of fans, and spin-offs, such as the video games *Blair Witch Volume 1: Rustin Parr* and *Blair Witch Volume 2: The Legend of Coffin Rock* are also part of the project. On the other hand, retroactive transmedia stories are the ones that start to be planned after the fact normally based on a successful preexistent project. This is the case when a book, for example, is already created and it is subsequently expanded to become a transmedia experience. Most Hollywood transmedia productions are retroactive.

### OPEN AND CLOSED SYSTEMS

Continuing to trace TS attributes, it is necessary to address the relationship between stories and audience. A crucial component of TS is interaction, but moreover participation. An interactive project allows the audience to relate to it somehow, for instance, by pressing a button or control, deciding the path to experiencing it, but not being able to co-create and change the story; a participatory project invites the audience to engage in a way that expresses their creativity in a unique, and surprising manner, allowing them to influence the final result. Participation occurs when the audience can, with respect at least to a certain aspect of the project, influence on the set of components, such as the story. Stories that are mainly interactive can be considered as **closed systems**, in which the audience can act but cannot interfere with the story. Closed systems presuppose interaction but not participation. Besides the interactivity, **open systems** allow participation, i.e. the audience can influence the result and change the outcome (Gambarato 2012: 75).

The Portuguese multiplatform production *Sofia's Diary* (2003) is an example of open system TS. The project was produced in different countries (Portugal, Brazil, UK, USA, Germany, Turkey, Vietnam, Chile, etc.), mixing TV, Internet, mobile and other media, such as books and magazines. Sofia, the protagonist, is a sort of virtual friend who interacts with the audience and allows people to participate in her life in a way

7 Access *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* main website: <http://www.tulselupernetwork.com/basis.html> (26 September 2013).

8 Drew Davidson uses the term cross-media communication instead of TS.



that their voices can be heard. The relationship between the story and audience was possible by daily SMS/MMS alerts sent by Sofia, voting service to decide next episode, premium call service with the summary of daily episode, blogging<sup>9</sup>, and e-mails, for instance. Participants could also communicate and get heard. As friends, they express their opinions in different ways (voting, discussing, blogging, etc.) to help Sofia to solve her dilemmas. The production company was able to effectively incorporate audience inputs, giving the possibility to participants to shape the content. Nuno Bernardo, responsible for *Sofia's Diary*, clarifies how it was doable in the beginning of the project:

When we started the show, there was no video element so therefore it was blog-based, SMS-based, and e-mail-based; we could write in the morning and publish in the afternoon. We would then wait for the results overnight and incorporate the viewer's desired plot-line the next day. (Bernardo 2011: 53)

An example of a non-fictional open system transmedia project in which people can participate and make difference is *The Great British Property Scandal: Every Empty Counts* (2012) by Channel 4. The TV channel launched a season of special programs to investigate the British housing crisis and discuss alternative solutions. In 2011, the TV series *Dispatches: Landlords from Hell*, an undercover investigation about the degrading conditions in which tenants are forced to live in the UK was launched followed by the TV series *The Great British Property Scandal*, which addresses the issue of unoccupied homes. *The Great British Property Scandal: Every Empty Counts* campaigns to bring Britain's empty homes back into use in order to stop the waste of one million empty homes in the UK. The campaign is web-based and also encompasses social networking and mobile application. The goal is to engage people

to report empty properties they know and lobby government and local councils to have a low-cost loan fund for the owners of empty homes who are struggling to refurbish their properties. According to the campaign website<sup>10</sup>, there are two million families in need of a home and the results achieved so far are: 120 000 petition signatures; ca. 8 000 empty homes reported (many of which have been brought back into use); £17 million allocated for new national low-cost loan funds in England, Scotland and Wales; and George Clarke, the TV series presenter and responsible for the campaign, was appointed Independent Empty Homes Advisor to the Government. In *The Great British Property Scandal: Every Empty Counts* website there are videos showing what they call "online heroes": Some of the participants who reported empty homes that are now back into use because of the campaign. The outcomes of this transmedia campaign are being crafted by their participants.

*Farewell Comrades!* – as an example of closed system TS – is an aspiring project involving television, online and print media launched in 2011 on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the USSR collapse. Although the project's tent pole is a six-part TV series documentary, equally relevant is the web-based *Farewell Comrades! Interactive*, produced by Gebrueder Beetz Filmproduktion (Germany) and Artline Films (France) in partnership with the TV channels ARTE and ZDF. The well-designed interactive website<sup>11</sup> allows the audience to closely follow personal life stories through 30 postcards written during the last 15 years of the Soviet era. Each postcard unfolds the story of the people featured in the documentary series alongside with an enriching collection of information about the people involved and their countries. *Farewell Comrades! Interactive* also com-

9 Access Sofia's Diary current blog: <http://www.bebo.com/sofiadiary> (26 September 2013).

10 Access the campaign website: <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/the-great-british-property-scandal/articles/home> (26 September 2013).

11 Access *Farewell Comrades!* website: <http://www.farewellcomrades.com/en/> (26 September 2013).

bines personal and official archive footage to expand the transmedia story. The fact that the project relies on real personal postcards contributes to the emotional connection appeal to bond stories and audience. The emphasis on the interactivity of the website naturally provokes audience interaction. However, the project was designed not to deliberately incorporate the audience insights. All the story development was already planned and controlled by the producers, which configures a closed system TS.

In association with these aspects involved in TS, it is worth mentioning that transmedia experiences should allow us both to dip into just one medium and have a great time regardless of what happens with other media, and also to explore other media in order to find more layers of meaning and get even more engaged with the whole experience (Davidson *et al.* 2010: 31). To achieve this goal, however, it is absolutely not an easy task.

Any single-medium work can in theory make an audience laugh or cry. But make an audience feel directly involved in the events in a story? Whether we're talking about responsibility for sending a woman to her murder, or perhaps instead saving her life or introducing her to her partner, you just can't evoke that feeling with a book or a movie. This is the power of transmedia. (Phillips 2012: 5)

All the above-mentioned characteristics, attributes and core principles of TS may be (or not) present in transmedia projects. However, an important aspect is to understand how these attributes (or the lack of them) are contributing to the development of such projects and what are the consequences derived from them. The main question would be, then, how relevant each of these characteristics is to the transmedia project? In order to undertake this matter, analytical considerations are presented in a methodical way.

## ANALYTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The following analytical considerations aim to outline essential features of the design process behind transmedia projects in order to support the analytic needs of transmedia designers and the applied research in the interest of the media industry, considering analysis as a crucial aspect of the design process that can lead towards synthesis (Dubberly *et al.* 2008; Liestøl 2003). Jay Lemke suggests that larger transmedia complexes have already grown beyond the capacity of individuals to cogently analyze them, which means that it may well take communities to investigate the transmedia phenomena (2011: 589). In this scenario, the considerations here proposed are oriented to address not the transmedia phenomena in all its possible scope, but rather to focus on the transmedia project occurrence in order to facilitate practitioners to better organize their approach to complex transmedia experiences. It is a possible way to build an objective analytical view of TS project samples, but it is certainly not restrictive. The analytical perspective may include, but is not limited to the questions and prepositions presented below. Other questions and layers of understanding can be considered and added as well. Qualitative and quantitative methods can be used according to the nature of the question and the availability of data, if it is the case.

Elizabeth Strickler, the Associate Director of Georgia State University's Digital Arts Entertainment Lab, presents *10 Questions* (2012) to orient the analysis of the structure of integrated entertainment projects in consonance with Jenkins (2010a) assumptions. The structure of the analytical considerations to be presented is based on some of her propositions, such as premise and purpose, audience and market, but expands the amplitude of them, incorporating specific concepts, such as negative capability, migratory cues, canon, and other matters like non-fictional characteristics, different kinds of viewers, and business model, for instance. Other relevant references are

key questions raised by Geoffrey Long in his analytical thesis (2007: 70–139). Aiming to facilitate the approach to these several aspects, a series of questions related to each of the topics considered is presented.

### 1. Premise and purpose

Nuno Bernardo advises that a transmedia story must be based on a premise and must state clearly what it is about (2011: 21). The purpose, the reason for which a transmedia project exists, is key to define not just how, where, and to whom the project is oriented, but above all to determine for what it serves. If the premise and purpose are not clear, it will probably be difficult for people to have the interest to engage in the project. Relevant questions that may be considered:

- 1.1. What is the project about?
- 1.2. What is the project's core?
- 1.3. Is it a fictional, a non-fiction or a mixed project?
- 1.4. What is its fundamental purpose? Is it to entertain, to teach or to inform? Is it to market a product?

### 2. Narrative

A narrative creates “a world and populate(s) it with characters and objects” (Ryan 2004: 8). Although there are different approaches to narrative, for instance, existential, cognitive, aesthetic, sociological, sociolinguistic, and technical, here the interest is in the direction of the structure storyworlds evoke in the TS milieu. David Herman, in his investigation “Toward a Transmedial Narratology”, discusses five sets of strategies that can be used to structure TS: a) processes and participants, which include particular roles to entities mentioned or implied in the narrative; b) states, events, actions – blends of interior states of participants, events and deliberated actions; c) temporal ordering – timeline; d) spatial configuration – storytelling entails configuring places and paths of motion in space; and e) deictic reference, which means the use of deictic expression (*here, I, now*) to place storyworlds in particular contexts (2004: 60–68). Direct questions that can be applied:

- 2.1. What are the narrative elements (such as plot, theme, characters, etc.) of the project?
- 2.2. What would be the summary of its storyline?
- 2.3. What is the timeframe of the story?
- 2.4. What are the major events or challenges offered by the narrative?
- 2.5. Does the project utilize gaming elements? Does the project involve winning or losing?
- 2.6. What are the strategies for expanding the narrative?
- 2.7. Are negative capability<sup>12</sup> and migratory cues<sup>13</sup> included?
- 2.8. Is it possible to identify intermedial<sup>14</sup> texts in the story?

### 3. Worldbuilding

The world the story inhabits determines the narrative itself, but moreover, the possibility to expand the transmedia story. As mentioned earlier in this article, transmedia storytelling is all about the unfolding of a storyworld across media platforms. A storyworld or story universe should be robust enough to support expansions, going above and beyond a single story. The world can be considered the primary character of the story of its own. Long reiterates the relevant characteristic of transmedia stories to be able to shift the emphasis from a more traditional character-building approach toward a worldbuilding one (2007: 129). Saldre and Torop (2012: 29) also underline the understanding of transmedia projects in terms of worldmaking by the broader scope of its applicability. In this context, there are basal aspects that could be inquired:

- 3.1. When the story occurs?
- 3.2. Which is the central world where

12 In the context of storytelling, negative capability means the ability to build strategic gaps into a narrative to provoke a sense of uncertainty and mystery in the audience (Long 2007: 53–59).

13 Associated to negative capability, migratory cues represent the ability for these gaps to function as directional pointers for intertextual connections within the storyworld (Long 2007: 139–166).

14 Refer to Grishakova 2010.

the project is set?

- 3.3. Is it a fictional world, the real world or a mixture of both?
- 3.4. How it is presented geographically?
- 3.5. How the world looks?
- 3.6. What challenges, dangers, or delights are inherent to this world?
- 3.7. Is the storyworld big enough to support expansions?

#### 4. Characters

Andrea Phillips suggests: "make your audience a character, too" (2012: 149). To create characters for transmedia stories is more than to describe who they are, what they like or dislike, and how they look. The features of the characters and the way they appear across all the platforms should be in unison. In addition, how the audience will engage with the story is one of the main specificities of transmedia projects.

Related reflection points:

- 4.1. Who are the primary and secondary characters of the story?
- 4.2. Does the project have any spin-offs<sup>15</sup>? If so, who are the spin-offs' protagonists?
- 4.3. Can the storyworld be considered a primary character of its own?
- 4.4. Can the audience be considered a character as well?
- 4.5. Are there non-player characters<sup>16</sup> (NPCs) in this project? If so, who are they and what kind of role do they play (allies, adversaries, helper figures, etc.)?

#### 5. Extensions

TS involves multiple media in which the storyworld will be unfolded and experienced. The strategy to expand the world presupposes the specification of what the outputs should be, for what they serve, which media will be used according to its purpose and the timeline the extensions will be released. The storyline will direct the audience from one medium to the next. Within the storyworld, the maintenance of continuity, or the logic of the story, should be observed throughout the extensions. The integration and interrelation of each extension are crucial for the coherence and plausibility of the story. Therefore, the following may be pondered:

- 5.1. How many extensions does the project have?
- 5.2. Are the extensions adaptations (the intersemiotic translation from one system to another) or expansions of the narrative through various media<sup>17</sup>?
- 5.3. Is each extension canonical<sup>18</sup>? Does it enrich the story?
- 5.4. Does each extension maintain the original characteristics of the world?
- 5.5. Does each extension answer questions left previously unanswered?
- 5.6. Does each extension raise new questions?
- 5.7. Do the extensions open up new possibilities for additional expansion?
- 5.8. Do the extensions have the ability to spread the content and also to provide the possibility to explore the narrative in-depth?

#### 6. Media platforms and genres

A transmedia project necessarily involves more than one medium and can also

15 Spin-offs are media outlets, such as TV series, comic book, and video game, derived from already existing storylines. The specific characteristic of a spin-off is the shift to a new protagonist that originally appeared in the main storyline as a minor or supporting character. A secondary character in a medium becomes the protagonist in the spin-off, adding a new perspective to the storyworld.

16 A non-player character (NPC) in a game is a fictional character not controlled by the player. It usually means that this kind of character is controlled by the computer.

17 Refer to Long 2007: 22–25; Mungioli 2011: 130; Scolari 2009: 587; Elliot 2004: 220–243.

18 Jenkins defines canon as the group of texts that the fan community accepts as legitimately part of the storyworld (2006: 281). Also refer to Long 2007: 33–34, 163–164; Dena 2009: 5–6, 98–123.

embrace more than one genre (science fiction, action, comedy, etc.). The logic behind TS is that telling stories across multiple media platforms enhances the possibility to have a more enriching and satisfactory experience within both fictional and non-fictional projects. Pratten emphasizes that TS “allows content that is right-sized, right-timed and right-placed to form a larger, more profitable, cohesive and rewarding experience” (2011: 3). Selecting the platforms that will be part of a transmedia project is the art of matching the right content to the right audience throughout the most appropriate way, which includes platforms and devices that are suitable to the challenge. Each medium has its own distinctive characteristics and should contribute to the whole transmedia experience. The platform timing, or roll-out, is equally important for the project design, i.e. when the platforms will be released according to the project objectives, business model and resources. Core points to be considered:

- 6.1. What kind of media platforms (film, book, comics, games, and so forth) are involved in the project?
- 6.2. Which devices (computer, game console, tablet, mobile phone, etc.) are required by the project?
- 6.3. How each platform is participating and contributing to the whole project? What are their functions in the project?
- 6.4. What are the distinctive characteristics of each media platform?
- 6.5. Identify problems that are specific of each medium.
- 6.6. Is each medium really relevant to the project?
- 6.7. What is the roll-out strategy to release the platforms?
- 6.8. Which genres (action, adventure, detective, science fiction, fantasy, and so forth) are present in the project?

## 7. Audience and market

Pratten stresses the importance “to offer

the right content, to the right people and [at] the right time” (2011: 19). Scoping the audience is fundamental to more appropriately deliver the transmedia experience. Discussing TS earlier in this article, it was commented about the crucial role audience plays in transmedia projects. This kind of project involves some level of audience engagement. The “Rules of Engagement” proposed by Mike Dicks and presented by Pratten (2011: 22) describe quantitatively that 75% of the audience is constituted by passives, 20% by players and 5% by producers. Although these numbers can naturally vary, it is undeniable that in the TS realm audience is taking multiple roles further away from mere passive spectators. In this sense, even the term audience (the group of spectators) may be not enough to describe people’s engagement in interactive and participatory transmedia projects. There are variable designations that are applicable in the context of TS, such as listeners, viewers, readers, players, and users. In the 1990s George Landow (1997), discussing hypertext narratives, renamed readers with creative power “wreaders” (reader + writer). As an alternative to characterize the emergence of a more complex kind of audience, in 2006, Stephen Dinehart coined the term VUP (viewer/user/player), relating TS to Richard Wagner’s concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork), in which the spectator becomes actor/player.

In a transmedial work the viewer/user/player (VUP) transforms the story via his or her own natural cognitive psychological abilities, and enables the Artwork to surpass medium. It is in transmedial play that the ultimate story agency, and decentralized authorship can be realized. Thus the VUP becomes the true producer of the Artwork. (Dinehart 2012)

Dinehart reinforces the notion of decentralization of authorship and what he calls transmedial play is the engagement with multiple media platforms within the same storyworld.

Both crossmedia and transmedia are obviously multimedia approaches, using largely of any available channel, tool and media to tell a story. The difference between the two is to ascribe to a consequent evolution in public demand. Content spread across various media (crossmedia) is no longer satisfying enough, viewers wants more, they are becoming VUPs and in viewing/using/playing want to participate, and to a certain extent create, the story themselves. (Iacobacci 2008)

Although viewer, user and player are definitely not the only roles the audience can play in transmedia projects, the acronym VUP has been used as an overall term to refer to this variability behind audience engagement in TS.

In terms of market, the financial issues around transmedia projects are not restricted to the “old model” (Pratten 2011: 81) to produce a film, for instance, in which it was necessary to raise finance first and mainly throughout investors. Transmedia projects can instead be low-cost and grass-roots audience builders. Different business models, such as free, premium, freemium<sup>19</sup> and crowdfunding<sup>20</sup> can be applied in the context of TS. Pertinent questions about audience and market to reflect on:

- 7.1. What is the target audience of the project? Who is the intended VUP?
- 7.2. What kind of “viewers” (real-time, reflective, and navigational<sup>21</sup>) does the project attract?
- 7.3. What kind of entertainment

does the target audience enjoy?

- 7.4. What kind of technology/devices are people in this group involved with?
- 7.5. Why does this project appeal to them?
- 7.6. Do other projects like this exist? Do they succeed in achieving their purpose?
- 7.7. What is the project’s business model?
- 7.8. Revenue-wise, was the project successful? Why?

## 8. Engagement

All the dimensions of a transmedia project, in a lower or higher level, are implicated in the experience people will have when engaging into the story. As it was discussed in the first part of this article, interaction and participation in closed or open systems are directly connected to the VUP approach to the project. Another pertinent aspect that can contribute to design a more or less engaging experience is the point of view (PoV).

Regarding the PoV, a transmedia project can involve first-, second- and third-person PoV isolated or in conjunction within the story and its extensions. The first-person PoV limits the audience to one character’s perspective, but can be more personal; the second-person is a kind of PoV that, although being the least common, can make the audience feel as if they are characters in the story; and the third-person PoV can be limited – closely to one character’s perspective – or omniscient – the most versatile PoV in which the narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in the story.

For example, different media might be used to present the differing accounts of multiple first-person narrators. The intense intimacy of the second-person point-of-view could present a powerful emotional draw for the audience. The third-person point-of-view can be used throughout the narrative or may be combined with the first- and sec-

19 Free, Premium (only available for sale), and Freemium (mix of free and paid) (Pratten 2011; Shmilovici 2011).  
 20 Crowdfunding is a collective cooperation of people who network and pool their money in order to support an idea, a project, a product, a research, etc.  
 21 Janet Murray argues that stories will have to work for two or three kinds of viewers in parallel: The actively engaged **real-time** viewer, who enjoys each single episode; the more **reflective** long-term audience, who looks for coherence in the story as a whole; and the **navigational** viewer, who appreciates the connections between different parts of the story and the multiple arrangements of the same material (Murray 1997: 257; Jenkins 2006: 119).



ond-person points-of-view to provide an interesting combination of perspectives. (Stackelberg 2011: 227)

An array of questions about how people are experiencing a transmedia project can be posed:

- 8.1. Through what point of view (PoV) does the VUP experience this world: first-person, second-person, third-person, or a mixture of them?
- 8.2. What role does the VUP play in this project?
- 8.3. How the project keeps the VUP engaged?
- 8.4. What are the mechanisms of interaction in this project?
- 8.5. Is there also participation involved in the project? If so, how can the VUP participate in the open system?
- 8.6. Does the project work as cultural attractor/activator<sup>22</sup>?
- 8.7. How does the VUP affect the outcome? What do they add to the storyworld?
- 8.8. Are there UGC related to the story (parodies, recaps, mash-ups, fan communities, etc.)?
- 8.9. Does the project offer the VUP the possibility of immersion into the storyworld?
- 8.10. Does the project offer the VUP the possibility to take away elements of the story and incorporate them into everyday life?
- 8.11. Is there an important goal that the VUP is trying to accomplish in the project?
- 8.12. What will make the VUP want to spend time accomplishing this goal?
- 8.13. What adds tension to the

experience? Are there any ticking clocks?

- 8.14. Is there a system of rewards and penalties?

## 9. Structure

The organization of a transmedia project, the arrangement of its constituent elements and how they interrelate to each other can offer concrete elements to be analyzed. A visual map or chart of its elements in space and time can facilitate the visualization of the project as a whole. Hayes suggests: "One or two very detailed charts will show how platforms, and the channels within them, are interconnected and how content and data flows around this technical ecosystem" (2011: 13). Regarding the structure, certain details can be contemplated:

- 9.1. When did the transmediation begin? Is it a pro-active or retroactive TS project?
- 9.2. Is it possible to identify any consequences for the project caused by the fact that this is either a pro-active or a retroactive transmedia story?
- 9.3. Is this project closer to a transmedia franchise, a portmanteau transmedia story, or a complex transmedia experience?
- 9.4. Can each extension work as an independent entry point for the story?
- 9.5. What are/were possible endpoints of the project?
- 9.6. How is the project structured? What are the major units of organization?
- 9.7. How could a map<sup>23</sup> of the storyworld be presented?

## 10. Aesthetics

Visual and audio elements of a transmedia project should also contribute to the overall atmosphere and enhance the experi-

<sup>22</sup> Cultural attractors are projects that attract people of similar interests and, consequently, they can begin to pool knowledge together. Cultural activators are projects that give audience something to do, some meaningful form of participation (Jenkins 2006: 95, 283).

<sup>23</sup> For some examples, refer to Long 2007: 15, 18, 33, 41, 43; Hayes 2001 and 2012.

ence spread throughout multiple media platforms. Design components, such as interfaces, color palettes, graphics, fonts, shapes, textures, sounds, and so forth characterize a transmedia storyworld and are powerful tools to attract and maintain audience engagement. The design elements do not function as mere illustration of the content. Actually, they are part of the story themselves. In this regard, a set of attributes can be considered:

- 10.1. What kinds of visuals are being used (animation, video, graphics, a mix) in the project?
- 10.2. Is the overall look realistic or a fantasy environment?
- 10.3. Is it possible to identify specific design styles in the project?
- 10.4. How does audio work in this project? Is there ambient sound (rain, wind, traffic noises, etc.), sound effects, music, and so forth?

In this article, hints of the trajectory of the elusive term TS were discussed together with the main characteristics of transmedia stories, such as its types, core principles, dimensions, timing, and the relationship between stories and audience. More specifically, analytical considerations were presented in a methodical way organized around 10 key topics aiming to (a) outline essential features of transmedia stories; (b) contribute to perceive the design process behind the development of transmedia projects; (c) support the analytic needs of transmedia designers; and (d) serve as applied research in the interest of the media industry. The analytical considerations presented in this article have been applied by my students – within the Master's Program in Crossmedia Production at Tallinn University Baltic Film and Media School, Estonia – with satisfactory results. Firstly, the students analyze<sup>24</sup> existing

transmedia projects, such as *The Truth about Marika*, *Med Man*, *Inside Disaster: Haiti*, and *The Beauty Inside*, according to the analytical model. Secondly, they plan, develop and execute their own transmedia projects. It characterizes analysis and synthesis mutually collaborating to each other. As a result of this process, for instance, a group of my master's students<sup>25</sup> developed *Apothecary Melchior* transmedia experience (Figure 1).

*Apothecary Melchior* fictional storyworld is based on the bestselling book series by Estonian author Indrek Hargla. Melchior is a 15th century apothecary, who solves crimes in Tallinn medieval Old Town, Estonia. By means of mobile devices, interactive locative narrative and augmented reality, the transmedia experience takes the audience back in time to the Hanseatic town in order to uncover clues, mysterious items and additional content. Therefore, the group of students developed an interactive sightseeing mobile application as a prototype to be used *in loco* (Figure 2). Besides the interactive application, the whole project is planned to involve multiple extensions such as, film, documentary, and puzzle games.

After all, what could be depicted and interpreted from these analytical considerations are the structure of transmedia projects and the relevance of each and every constituent of it. Premise and purpose, narrative, worldbuilding, characters, extensions, media platforms and genres, audience and market, engagement, structure, and aesthetics are fundamental for both designing a transmedia project and analyzing its pertinence.

## EMBRACING TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

As a matter of fact, transmedia is a buzzword that has been used (and misused) in the last couple of years. Scholars, researchers, and media professionals appear to feel comfortable enough to attribute a multitude

24 Access the students' analyses according to the analytical model presented in this article: <http://talkingobjects.org/portfolio-2/> (26 September 2013).

25 Access more information about the *Apothecary Melchior* and the students: <https://www.facebook.com/ApothecaryMelchior> (27 September 2013).



FIGURE 1. Poster of Apothecary Melchior transmedia project by Andrey Kulpin.





FIGURE 2. Structural scheme of the *Apothecary Melchior* interactive sightseeing mobile application by Andrey Kulpin.

of meanings to the word. Probably there is a substantial disparity between the reality of the market and its concrete samples of TS and the perfect theoretical frame that insists on confining TS to certain precise criteria. Olivier Godest (2011) even suggests including in the TS classification a specific type that he entitles “pure transmedia works”. This kind of transmedia project would be the one that meets all the basic criteria of the definition already mentioned; the one that is as we imagine it with all the TS principles we know, but that is still difficult to get. As examples of “pure transmedia works”, Godest mentions *The Blair Witch Project* and the ARG created for the launch of the HBO *True Blood* (2008) series. However, is there such a thing as a “pure transmedia work”? Well, if there is not yet a consensus around TS definition, it seems improbable to have an immaculate transmedia story though.

The design process in general and also specifically related to transmedia projects can be understood as involving the analysis and synthesis phases, or preparation and inspiration. Synthesis preceded by analysis, synthesis conformed according to the analysis, from synthesis to analysis or vice versa (Dubberly *et al.* 2008; Liestøl 2003). Inquiring on how designers move from analysis to synthesis, Hugh Dubberly, Shelley Evenson, and Rick Robinson proposed a model that shows this path and bridges the gap between analysis and synthesis based on other classic models, such as Beer model (1966) and Alexander model (1964). Moreover, Dubberly *et al.* discuss the relevance of the binominal analysis-synthesis throughout modeling in the design process, arguing that “it enables designers to develop larger and more complex systems and makes the process of working with larger and more complex organizations easier” (2008). In this context, the analytical considerations outlined in this article were proposed.

All in all, it is possible to infer that large broadcasters as well as independent media companies are already aware of the global developments in TS and understand

that this is the trend. TS is both a reality and a tendency worldwide and the prospect of TS is to grow and to improve rapidly. TS analysis can help this process.

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