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## ARTICLE

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# Transmedia narratology and transmedia storytelling

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## Abstract

The term transmedia storytelling has gone viral in media studies. But to what extent does it label a truly new phenomenon, different from the older concepts of adaptation and transfictionality? What does it really mean to tell a story through different media and under what conditions is it desirable? In this article, I examine several types of projects that could be considered as 'transmedia storytelling', without necessarily fitting within the paradigm of 'West Coast' (i.e. Hollywood) transmedia, and I look at three types of discourse associated with the phenomenon – the industry discourse, the fan discourse and scholarly discourse – in the hope of distinguishing scholarly discourse from the other two and defining some of its goals.

## Keywords

transmedia storytelling, narratology, industry discourse, fan behaviour, mythology, transfictionality, media definition, 'east coast' vs. 'west coast' transmedia, top-down vs. bottom up transmedia, Star Wars

## *Narratología transmedial y transmedia storytelling*

## Resumen

*El término transmedia storytelling se ha viralizado dentro de los estudios de medios. ¿Pero hasta qué punto sirve para definir un fenómeno realmente nuevo, distinto de otros conceptos antiguos de adaptación y transfictionalidad? ¿Qué significa realmente explicar una historia a través de medios diferentes y en qué condiciones es deseable hacerlo? En este artículo, examino varios tipos de proyectos que podrían considerarse transmedia storytelling pero que no encajan dentro del paradigma de la narrativa transmedial de la «Costa Oeste» (léase Hollywood) y estudio tres tipos de discurso asociado al fenómeno: el discurso de la industria, el discurso de los fans y el discurso académico, con la esperanza de diferenciar este último de los otros dos y de definir algunos de sus objetivos.*

**Palabras clave**

transmedia storytelling, *narratología*, *discurso de la industria*, *comportamiento de los fans*, *mitología*, *transficcionalidad*, *definición de medio*, *narrativa transmedial de la «Costa Este» y de la «Costa Oeste»*, *narrativa transmedial de abajo arriba y de arriba abajo*, *La guerra de las galaxias*

**1. Introduction**

The title of this article could at first sight seem redundant. Isn't 'narrative' pretty much the same thing as 'story', and, consequently, isn't 'transmedia narratology' pretty much the same thing as 'transmedia storytelling'? When I began using the term 'transmedia narratology' (Ryan, 2004), I meant that narratology should recognise storytelling media other than written and oral language, even though language is probably the most ancient and the most powerful means of narrative creation. I also advocated a comparative study of the narrative power of different media. So much attention has been devoted in the meantime to non-literary and non-verbal forms of narrative that this suggestion has become self-evident. But with the rise of the phenomenon of transmedia storytelling – not a new practice by any means, but one that is receiving tremendous publicity due to mega-hits such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* – one could easily jump to the conclusion that transmedia narratology is the study of transmedia storytelling. The concern of transmedia narratology is actually much more encompassing. It includes questions such as: what is the narrative potential of media and of the modalities that they encode; how can the narrative affordances of a given medium be emulated in another medium; what is it that the narratives of a certain medium can do that others cannot, and so on. None of these questions require the analysis of a transmedia franchise. Yet transmedia storytelling remains a legitimate concern of transmedia narratology.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I propose to compare and contrast three types of discourse: the industry discourse, the discourse of fans as it relates to the industry discourse and, lastly, the discourse of narratology. My leading question will be: how can we free the study of transmedia storytelling from the hype of industry discourse and open it to narratology?

Before I move on, I would like to comment on the notion of media, which stands at the centre of the phenomenon of transmedia storytelling. Media are very difficult to define and categorise because the term media, or medium, is not an analytic category created by theoreticians to serve a specific purpose, it is a word of natural language and, like most of words of language, it has different meanings. But by virtue of the principle of Occam's razor we should

not multiply definitions gratuitously if we can do the job with fewer of them. I have found it useful to base media theory on two definitions proposed by the Webster English Dictionary (Ryan, 2004):

1. A channel or system of information, communication, or entertainment.
2. Material or technical means of artistic expression.

While definition No. 1 concerns the transmission of information, definition No. 2 concerns the creation of information out of diverse semiotic substances. In line with definition No. 1, examples of 'media' are the press, TV, radio, the Internet and the various delivery systems made possible by digital technology. According to definition No. 2, examples of media are culturally recognised forms of expression, such as music, dance, painting, sculpture, literature, comics and computer games. The two categories are not mutually exclusive; for instance, digital technology qualifies as a medium in both of these senses, since it has evolved new forms of expression, such as hypertext or video games, in addition to functioning as a powerful channel of communication.

The idea of medium as channel of transmission has been criticised, notably by Walter Ong (1982), on the grounds that media are not passive pipelines through which information is sent and recovered, unchanged, at the other end. This is why I like to visualise media as the heads of pastry bags. The formless substance of the frosting is put into the pastry bag; it is squeezed through the head, and it comes out in a decorative shape. Different pastry heads produce different shapes. If stories are conceived as a mental construct, they can exist in the mind as pure meaning, which means as pure narrative potential; but the act of encoding will actualise this potential by shaping it into a distinct narrative. Selecting a medium for a narrative idea is like choosing a pastry head. Just as some heads are better than others depending on the kind of decoration you want to create, similarly, some media are better than others depending on the type of narrative material and on the effect you want to achieve. It could be argued that my analogy does not accurately describe the creative process, because most creators specialise in one medium and so they are much more likely to ask 'what kind of story is the best for the medium I have in mind?' than 'what medium is the best for the story I want to

1. I do not make a distinction between transmedial and transmedia. I used transmedial in my early work, but now I bow to the dominant usage and I use transmedia.

tell?', but in the case of transmedia storytelling, narrative material is a given, and the problem is indeed a choice of pastry heads, so that the frosting can be turned into ever new cakes.

If transmedia is going to be a truly innovative form of storytelling, it should involve media in definition No. 2, and not simply in definition No. 1. For instance, a story delivered in book form, as an audiobook on a CD, through Amazon's Kindle or on the Internet would not be a case of transmedia storytelling.

The rise to prominence of the idea of transmedia storytelling in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is mainly due to the popularity of Henry Jenkins' writings about contemporary culture. It is he who identified the phenomenon and put a label on it. In our brand-crazy culture, receiving a label is tantamount to coming into existence. The 'coronation' of transmedia as a mode of storytelling came when the Producers Guild of America issued a manifesto defining transmedia and officially recognising 'transmedia producers' as potential members of the association:

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.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Two models of transmediality

If there are people who call themselves transmedia producers, and if this occupation is recognised by the Producers Guild of America, the fruit of their efforts, transmedia storytelling, must really exist. Yet, the issue of what kind of works qualify as transmedia is highly debatable. The elusive nature of transmedia storytelling is reflected in the contrast between East Coast vs. West Coast transmediality, two terms proposed by Brian Clark (2012), a self-proclaimed East Coast developer best known for a Facebook post titled 'Transmedia is a lie'. West Coast stands for what most of us understand by transmedia; namely, the commercial mega-franchises of the Hollywood entertainment industry, such as *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and *The Matrix*. East Coast means anything that is not West Coast.

### 2.1. Here are some possible East Coast forms:

**1. Transmedia journalism.** An example of this form of transmedia is a website about the Sochi Olympics that contains a variety

of documents: text, videos, photos, oral testimonies, aimed at depicting the Olympic complex as a Potemkin village, that is, as a luxurious façade that hides human suffering. Personally, I find transmedia to be a very appropriate mode of presentation for non-fictional projects because news stories naturally come to us through multiple media: newspaper articles, TV spots, audio, books and movies. This kind of project can be treated like an archive or a database, which means that the user can pick and choose which media objects to consume.

**2. Installations** that require the simultaneous use of multiple media, both in the sense of media as a means of expression and media as a delivery system. An example of this would be *Mapping Ararat*, a project commemorating the attempt to create a new Jewish homeland near Niagara Falls by a 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish activist named Mordecai Noah. The installation involves three media: augmented reality (AR) technology, which allows the participants to see the buildings of the planned community; an audio-guide, which gives background information; and a paper map, which guides them through the installation. In this case, all three media must be activated for the story to be properly told.

**3. Alternate reality games (ARGs).** In these games, players reconstitute a story as though it were a jigsaw puzzle by following a trail of clues that comes to them through various delivery systems: mostly from websites on the internet, but also mobile phones, email, posters in the real world or even live actors. Here, media function as channels of information. It is necessary to follow the entire trail of clues to complete the game. While these games have a narrative core, they are played more out of an interest in solving problems than in discovering the story.

**4. Augmented books.** An example is *Night Film* by Marisha Pessl (2013). The main physical support of the work is a standard book filled with multimodal documents, for instance fake webpages and newspaper articles. This is multimodality, not transmediality. The transmedial dimension comes from an app that can be downloaded onto a tablet or smartphone with a camera. By taking pictures of a bird symbol on some of the pages, the user can unlock additional content that could not be printed, or that would be too digressive to include in the book: content such as the heroine playing the piano, interviews with characters or the reading aloud of a fairy tale. For some reason, there are no videos in *Night Film*, but it is easy to imagine that future augmented books will include film clips and animations. In this case, media can be understood as a means of expression, since the additional content concerns information that could not be transmitted through writing.

2. Visit: <[http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc\\_nm#transmedia](http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc_nm#transmedia)>.

**5. Interactive TV.** Here I am thinking of projects that link a TV show to information available through other delivery channels. Such a project has been described by Elizabeth Evans (2015). The English TV show *The X-Factor*, a talent show, also had an app delivering interactive content throughout the show's run. The app provided behind-the-scenes information about the contestants, invited the viewers to evaluate the performances and asked them to predict how contestants would fare in the competition. The transmediality of this form of interactive TV resides in the double screens required to follow the show: the large screen of the TV and the small screen of the smartphone.

All of these projects involve what may be called a top-down use of media, by which content is deliberately distributed across multiple means of expression or delivery channels. But for many people these examples are not really transmedia. Real transmedia is the West Coast model, namely the expansion of popular storyworlds beyond their original medium.

**2.2. West Coast transmedia** includes novels generating films, films inspiring novels, TV series linked with ARGs, comics turned into TV series, computer games becoming films, and vice versa. But every narrative that achieves a certain degree of cultural recognition inspires such retellings and adaptations – think of the Bible, of Greek mythology, of Sherlock Holmes, of Jane Austen's novels and of the parade of comic-book superheroes that are currently invading the big screen: Superman, Batman, Captain America, and so on. This raises the question of whether there is something new and different about the West Coast model of transmedia storytelling. Let's use Jenkins' oft-quoted definition as a starting point for discussion of this question:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get *dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels*<sup>6</sup> for the purpose of creating *a unified and coordinated entertainment experience*. Ideally each medium makes its own *unique contribution* to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins, 2007, n. p., original emphasis).

By insisting on a coordinated and unified entertainment experience, Jenkins definition presupposes a deliberate, top-down distribution of content across many media. The examples of East Coast projects that I have given are all top-down, conceived from the very beginning as transmedia, but most if not all of the great West Coast franchises arise bottom-up, by exploiting the success of an already established monomedial narrative, and they grow in a random, uncontrolled manner. Take the *Star Wars* franchise: it is now a narrative system with a tight top-down management, but it would never have gotten

off the ground if the first trilogy had not been so successful, and if fans had not started creating all sorts of stories based on the Star Wars universe. One of the reasons we have so few truly top-down transmedia projects is that producers do not want to take the risk of creating the various media objects and then having the project fizzle out. Because it depends on media that are very expensive to produce, such as films and TV series or computer games, the West Coast model of transmedia is affordable for big corporations, but not for creative individuals.

If content is deliberately distributed among many media, this opens the question of the relation between the elements of the system. This relation can be conceived in two ways: in one model, the parts fit together into a whole, and this whole is more than the sum of its parts. If that whole is a story, this means that users must gather all the parts for a satisfactory experience because stories are defined by arcs that lead from exposition to complication to resolution, and the whole arc must be followed in order to find out how it ends. But it would be very frustrating if a story were cut up and its content distributed in many documents belonging to various media, and if people had to hunt for these dispersed documents in order to put the story together. In the second model, the many components are held together by a common frame, which we may call a storyworld. Each medium tells a relatively self-standing story, although the bigger elements must generally be consumed before the smaller ones because they provide a broad background upon which the smaller elements can be built. These large elements represent what the media industry calls the Mother Ship. The more stories the users consume, the more they know about the storyworld, but it is not necessary to consult all the elements. Hardcore fans will know a lot about the storyworld, while casual users will know less, but both kinds of users can have a satisfactory experience. If this model is the correct one, transmedia storytelling is a misnomer – the phenomenon should be called transmedia world-building.

According to Jenkins, an important feature of transmedia storytelling is its distinction from adaptation, although both create a bridge across different media: "And for many of us, a simple adaptation may be 'transmedia', but it is not 'transmedia storytelling' because it is simply re-presenting an existing story rather than expanding and annotating the fictional world" (Jenkins, 2009, n. p.). Jenkins is certainly right to claim that transmedia storytelling is not the same thing as adaptation, but it would be wrong to exclude retellings of the same material in different media from transmedia storyworlds, because this would eliminate redundancy from these systems. On the contrary, retellings are the backbone of transmedia, and audiences love them because they enable people to relive stories and revisit their world in a different way. The *Lord of the Rings* and

3. Note that here Jenkins regards media as delivery channels, which means as technologies; but if my distinction is valid, he should speak of means of expression.

the *Harry Potter* franchises started out when popular novels were adapted for the big screen. Transmedia franchises typically present lots of overlap between documents, but because every medium has different expressive power, no two retellings will convey the exact same information.

Far from excluding adaptations, then, transmedia franchises can be described as a combination of adaptations with another long-standing narrative operation, the operation that Richard Saint-Gelais calls *transfictionality*. Saint-Gelais defines transfictionality as the sharing of elements – mostly characters but also imaginary locations, events and entire fictional worlds – by two or more works of fiction. This operation normally links literary works, and it relies on three fundamental operations: (1) extension, which adds new stories to the fictional world while respecting the facts established in the original; (2) modification, which changes the plot of the original narrative, for instance by giving it a different ending; and (3) transposition, which transports the plot into a different temporal or spatial setting, for instance when the story of Romeo and Juliet is set in New York City in the fifties. Of these three operations only the first is common in transmedia franchises, because it is the only one that respects the integrity of the storyworld. Operation (2), modification, creates non-canonical events that challenge the logical consistency of the storyworld; it is found in fan fiction, but fan fiction by definition is not canonical; as for operation (3), transposition, it conflicts with the main reason for the popularity of transmedia franchises: the loyalty of audiences to a given world and their desire for more information about this world.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. A comparative review of three discourses on transmedia

Let's now take a closer look at the three kinds of discourse that, respectively, promote, build up and describe transmedia.

#### 3.1. The industry discourse

One question I ask myself as a narratologist is what does it take for a story to spread across multiple media? In other words, what does it take for a fictional world and its stories to spark the public's imagination? To answer this question, I decided to study the discourse of the people who are supposed to know best, the people who write guidebooks on transmedia storytelling. I consulted three of them: *The Producer's Guide to Transmedia* (Bernardo, 2011); *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling* (Phillips, 2012); and *Storytelling across Worlds* (Dowd *et al.*, 2013). This last book was the most substantial,

but I find the title strange because it is suggestive of transposition – the migration of characters and plot to another world. In the vast majority of cases of transmedia, the storyworld remains constant because it functions as the container that keeps the various stories and their media together. None of the books told me how to build a blockbuster story or storyworld because that is a matter of talent and of luck and, as the saying goes, poets are born and not made. Still, reading the guidebooks provided an excellent opportunity to analyse the industry discourse and to distinguish it from the kind of scholarly discourse that narratologists should develop.

Out of these three manuals we can extract a rhetoric that is typical of the industry discourse:

- Hyperbolic praise: thanks to transmedia, storytelling will never be the same. “There's never been a more exciting time to be a storyteller” (Phillips, 2012, p. xi). Transmedia is “amazing”, “ground-breaking stuff”; a “fascinating idea” (Bernardo, 2011, p. xviii) that will require radically “new ways of thinking” about development (Dowd *et al.*, 2013, p. 35). The consumers are not readers, players or spectators but invariably fans, a term that suggests fanatic and uncritical devotion to storyworlds.
- Capitalist attitude: Narrative material and storyworlds are called ‘intellectual property’. The creators own this property, despite the tendency of fans and other writers to steal from it, and it's the owner's duty to protect their property. The purpose of transmedia storytelling is to ‘monetise’ intellectual property by spreading it across as many media as possible because each medium has its own devotees and increases the size of the audience. The value of an intellectual property is entirely a function of its popular success: in the entertainment industry, there is no such thing as “success of esteem”, no such thing as transmedia driven by as an artistic vision. As Jenkins *et al.* put it (2013), if your content does not spread, it is dead.<sup>5</sup>
- Emphasis on ‘giving the audience what they want’. In a study of the relations between speaker and hearer, Karl Renner (2010) distinguishes a speaker orientation, by which speakers express themselves and the audience must adapt to their individuality, from a hearer orientation, by which the speaker adapts to the desires of the audience. While speaker orientation is typical of high art, which is supposed to shake audiences out of their thinking habits, hearer orientation is typical of popular culture. The rhetoric of transmedia falls squarely in the domain of hearer orientation. The needs of audiences are expressed through eating metaphors; for example, one reads on the back cover of *Storytelling across Worlds* that the book gives you the tools

4. Transposition occurs in the weird new genre of the mash-up, represented by *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, a retelling of Jane Austen's novel.

5. I regard Jenkins' treatment of transmedia storytelling as more promotional than critical, and therefore as closer to industry than to scholarly discourse.

to meet the “insatiable demands of today’s audience for its favourite creative property”. The role of the transmedia designer is to create and encourage this craving for more content.

- Interactivity as a way to save old media. In the digital age, traditional media such as TV, film and books need to reinvent themselves in order to survive, and the way to do that is to become more interactive and participatory. It could be said that the process of jumping from one platform or medium to another is a form of active involvement, but this means that the audience of transmedia is by definition active since users have to consult many documents. But the authors of advice books have in mind more substantial forms of interactivity. According to Dowd *et al.*, transmedia “assumes that viewer/users are part of a growing participatory culture that does not desire just to watch but to interact, comment, help shape the course of the content and look for (hidden) answers” (Dowd *et al.*, 2013, p. 31). This statement contains two practical pieces of advice. The first, to let users help shape the course of events sounds good on paper, but in practice it could lead to disaster. As Bernardo observes, if you give your audience power over the story they will get rid of the antagonist, solve all major problems and erase all the drama (Bernardo, 2011, p. 53). The second piece of advice, to have people look for hidden answers, is much more feasible. The creation of problems to solve will motivate users to get together and exchange information in order to crack the code. The validity of this advice is demonstrated by the popularity of ARGs and by the intense fan activity generated by particularly hermetic narratives such as *House of Leaves* or ‘S’, the recent brainchild of J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst. But these are monomedial works; encouraging audiences to solve problems is therefore not a distinctive feature of transmedia storytelling.

### 3.2. The fan discourse vs. industry discourse

The contribution of the discourse of fans to the development of transmedia franchises has been so well documented, especially by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture*, that there is really nothing that I can do here beside restating its importance. Fan discourse takes two forms: a creative one, manifested by fan fiction, remixes, amateur movies, and participation in cosplay events; and a critical one, manifested by online discussion groups and by comments on Amazon. Both of these forms demonstrate the power of stories and of their worlds to form communities. If today’s culture is participatory, it is as much in the sense of motivating fans to worship together at the altar of a cult narrative as in the sense of encouraging collaborative creation. In other words, you do not have to write fan fiction to participate in the *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* community.

Active fan participation can be either a bottom-up, grassroots, spontaneous phenomenon, or a behaviour dictated top-down by the entertainment industry. An example of a top-down attempt to inspire active participation is a display at my local supermarket (Figure 1), which appeared in September 2015, a full three months before the release of the latest *Star Wars* movie, *The Force Awakens*. With publicity like this, it is no surprise that *The Force Awakens* became the top grossing film of all time.

While it takes the spontaneous discourse of fans to create the kind of cult narratives that make transmedia development profitable, the relationship between the fan discourse and the industry discourse has often been strained. Jenkins recounts the efforts by the Lucas company to encourage, but also to control and limit fan production through the creation of a website, *Starwars.com*, where some fan creations are displayed, for instance the movies that won the annual fan movie competition, which is judged by George Lucas himself. But in submitting their work, fans give up their intellectual property rights to the Lucas, and now Disney, companies. For, as Jim Ward, an executive of the Lucas company puts it, “We love our fans... But if in fact someone is using our characters to create a story unto itself, that’s not in the spirit of what we think fandom is about. Fandom is about celebrating the story the way it is” (quoted by Jenkins, 2006, p. 149).

The story the way it is (as created by the Lucas or Disney company) is a holy scripture, and it is sacrilegious to change anything in it because *Star Wars* is more than a story, it is a universal religion, the common mythology of the globalised world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And like any religion based on holy scripture, the franchise finds it of utmost importance to define a corpus of canonical works. When the Disney company bought the right to the *Star Wars* brand name from the Lucas company, it revised the canon in order to keep track of the facts of the storyworld, which had proliferated beyond control, and it only kept the six movies produced by Lucas, plus a TV series and an animated film produced in 2008, *The Clone Wars*. Everything else was expelled from the canon and renamed *Star Wars Legends*. In the parlance of Possible Worlds theory (Ryan, 1991), the corpus of the *Star Wars Legends* represents alternative possible worlds, which means descriptions of what could have been, as opposed to the canonical texts which represent the facts of the actual world of the franchise. But just as no religion can prevent alternative cults from branching out, the delimitation of a canonical corpus cannot prevent fans from exploring the realm of the ‘what could have been’, and from sharing their counterfactual productions. Meanwhile, the reboot of the franchise has brought an explosion of new films, comics, novels and computer games (no less than 21 in 2015 alone), all of which are part of the new canon.<sup>6</sup>

6. Visit: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star\\_Wars\\_canon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Wars_canon)>.

### 3.3. The discourse of narratology

How can the discourse of narratology distinguish itself from the discourse of the industry? I am not saying that narratology should entirely reject this discourse; the industry has come up with a vocabulary that can be useful to narratology, such as the terms reboot, Mother Ship and tie-ins, or with new practices involving old concepts, such as the contrast between canonical and non-canonical elements. Thanks to the industry discourse it is also permissible again to talk about content, a term that was considered taboo by New Criticism and deconstruction. Narratology should remain sceptical of the hype created by industry discourse and of its claims to radical novelty, but it should also avoid the temptation to declare that there is nothing new under the sun. As a combination of adaptation and transfictionality, transmedia storytelling has obvious roots in the past. Narratology does not need to start from scratch to deal with it; for instance, the principles through which a storyworld can be expanded in the same medium can also operate across media, and we can apply to transmedia most of what Saint-Gelais describes as transfictional practices. I am thinking here of principles such as extending the timeline, creating prequels and sequels, telling the story of secondary characters, extending the geography of the storyworld, telling the story from a different point of view and leaving some unresolved issues that can be answered in another narrative. These principles are timeless and independent of medium.

One difficulty for a narratological approach to transmedia is the size of most commercial franchises. As Jenkins observes, transmedia worlds are usually too large for anybody to know them in their entirety (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95). The sheer number of elements means that we need the kind of “big data” approaches advocated by Franco Moretti (2013) rather than the close reading usually favoured by literary scholars. Most approaches have been theoretical (such as mine) or enumerative, rather than engaged with individual documents. By enumerative I mean approaches that chronicle the number of tie-ins and the development of a franchise over time, but do not go much farther than listing the documents. Examples of this “big data” approach are Colin Harvey’s study of the *Dr Who* franchise (2015) and Rüdiger Heinze’s study of the *Alien* universe (2015). To restore close reading, it will be necessary to focus on the relations between a limited number of documents, such as the relation between the TV series *Lost* and the ARG devoted to the show, just as Jason Mittell (2014) has done, or the relationship between the *Star Wars* film *The Force Awakens* and the novel by the same name. The comparison of the novel and the movie should raise questions such as: does the novel help with understanding some of the more obscure points in the plot of the movie? Does it convey more information than the film

or does it slavishly reproduce the script in words? Can it stand on its own? How does the order in which users view the film and read the novel affect their experience?<sup>7</sup>

Given the commercial nature of most transmedia franchises, one possible topic of narratological exploration could be how the Mother Ship document is designed to open opportunities for narrative and transmedia expansion. Take the example of the plot of *The Force Awakens*, which can be considered the Mother Ship in the reboot of the franchise. It is number seven in a series of movies, but it takes place some 30 years after episode six – approximately the same time span that separates the release of episodes six and seven. This means that some of the characters from episode six are still alive; namely, Luke Skywalker, Han Solo and Princess Leia, and the same actors could be used. Consequently, there is some continuity between episodes six and seven, and fans will know that they are in the same world, a sense strengthened by familiar landscapes, technology and musical themes. The evil empire of episodes three to six and its main villain of Darth Vader have disappeared, but they have been replaced by equally evil antagonists: the First Order, a Nazi-like organisation, and Kilo Re, the son of Han Solo. Just as the real world produced, in succession, the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge and now the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the *Star Wars* universe will never stop generating evil powers, and we can be assured of an endless number of sequels even after the First Order is defeated. The 30 years between episodes six and seven allow a new generation of characters to take over the plot. These characters come out of nowhere, and this opens endless possibilities for telling their back stories. Another opportunity for expansion is to tell how the Galactic Empire of the past has been replaced with the First Order of the present. Most of the plot of *The Force Awakens* revolves around an attempt to find Luke Skywalker. A map revealing his location is hidden in a cute robot named BB-8, which makes a terrific toy to sell. The map was put into BB-8 by a character in the movie, but where the map comes from and who created it remains a mystery: a plot hole that the Disney company will be happy to fill though other money-making products. The film ends when the heroine Rey connects with Luke Skywalker, creating at once a sense of closure and an open ending, since we don’t know what she will ask of him and how Luke can help in defeating the First Order. Stay tuned for the next film. Or the next seven for that matter. Or the ten that could fill the gap between *Return of the Jedi* and *The Force Awakens*.

This analysis remains on the level of transfictionality; it does not address the issue of media selection. Ideally, the medium should be dictated by the nature of the content, but with a project as blatantly commercial as *Star Wars* it is better to invert the question and have the

7. This may, however, be a purely academic question, since nearly all readers will have already seen the film, a fact that the author of the novel may (or may not) have taken into consideration.

content dictated by the medium. Rather than asking ‘what is the best medium to tell how young Poe Dameron became a pilot in the service of the Republic?’, developers will wonder: ‘we need to reach the audience of Superhero comics. Which part of the *Force Awakens* would make a good candidate?’ The answer will be: the backstory of Poe Dameron because, of all the characters in the movie, he has the best credentials to make a superhero: male, young, handsome, dashing and daring.

Another question will be: ‘we need to attract gamers: how do we gamify the plot?’ In order to do that, the user will have to take the role of one of the characters, or perhaps become an entirely new character, and be given a series of problems to solve. What kinds of problems? How will the game tie-in with the movie? Because the storyworlds of most transmedia franchises are fantasy or science fiction, and because these genres are traditionally rich in action, it should not be too difficult to gamify their stories, since the medium of the video game relies so heavily on fighting, one of the easiest activities to simulate by computer.

Through my discussion of *Star Wars*, I hope to have suggested that even the most blatantly commercial franchises can reward a narratological approach. I envision the contribution of narratology to transmedia storytelling as divided into the following components: (1) A transfictional component that describes how stories belonging to the same storyworld are linked together; this component will assess the consistency of the storyworlds. (2) An adaptive component that studies how narrative content travels across media and how the properties of media affect the stories; this component will study how the various tie-ins take advantage of the affordances of their medium. (3) A mythical component that studies what turns stories and storyworlds into cult narratives, since popular success is the prerequisite to the development of transmedia franchises. This component may ask questions such as: why is it that the worlds of most franchises are either fantastic or science fictional?; why are comic-book superheroes so popular nowadays?; has *Star Wars* become a religion? and what kinds of mythical structures underlie the *Star Wars* storyworld? (4) An audience behaviour component that studies what people actually do with cult narratives in general and with today’s transmedia systems in particular. Active audiences are nothing new – there are examples in the Renaissance and 17<sup>th</sup> century of readers playing games based on popular narratives or impersonating fictional characters – but participation has certainly taken new forms thanks to digital technology. This component will ask: how many different media do standard audiences consult, compared to highly involved ones? How successful is the transmedia extension of the project? (Consider *The Matrix*: if the vast majority of fans limit themselves to the three movies, as I suspect they do, is the project truly transmedial?) It could be said that this audience behaviour component is more sociological than strictly narratological, but it is the trademark of postclassical narratology that its borders with other disciplines are no longer watertight.

What, in the end, is transmedia storytelling: a new way to tell stories, the narrative medium of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or a marketing ploy, what *The Economist*, commenting on *Star Wars*, has called the “industrialisation of mythology”? It may sound strange to regard ‘transmedia’ as a medium, since it would be a medium of media. But if we define media as means of expression, and if by using documents belonging to various media it is possible to create experiences that cannot be achieved with a single medium, then transmedia could very well be regarded as a novel means of expression and, thereby, as a medium in its own right. To achieve this honorary status, transmedia will have to find a way to exploit the resources of the media it uses and it will have to learn how to distribute narrative content among them without frustrating users; that is, without damaging the integrity of the individual components. At its commercial worst, transmedia is the highly profitable practice of giving audiences more of what they want. At its creative best, it could inspire audiences to leave the comfort zone of their favourite medium in order to get a fuller experience of the storyworld, thereby inviting people to reflect on the expressive power of media.

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Figure 1. Supermarket display advertising the *Star Wars* movie *The Force Awakens*, September 2015.

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