Character-centred transmedia narratives Sherlock Holmes in the 21st century*

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Abstract

Characters have not been studied in depth by transmediality theories, which instead focus on the concept of world-building that belongs to transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006). The main theoretical issues around the central concept of transmedial characters' identity are addressed in this paper, and are applied to the study of the television series *Sherlock* (BBC One, 2010-). Lastly, a proposal is made to place transmedial characters at the centre of certain transmedial narratives, on the same level as transmedial worlds.

Keywords

transmedial character, transmediality, transmedia storytelling, character, transtextuality, transfictionality, adaptation

Narrativas transmediales centradas en los personajes. Sherlock Holmes en el siglo XXI

Resumen

Los personajes no se han estudiado con la suficiente profundidad en las teorías de la transmedialidad, que tienden a centrarse más el concepto de construcción de mundos que se asocia al transmedia storytelling *(Jenkins, 2006). En este artículo se tratan las principales cuestiones teóricas sobre el concepto central de la identidad de los personajes transmediales y se aplican al estudio de la serie de televisión* Sherlock *(BBC One, 2010-). Por último, se presenta una propuesta para situar a los personajes transmediales en el centro de algunas narrativas transmediales, al mismo nivel que los mundos transmediales.*

Palabras clave

personaje transmedial, transmedialidad, transmedial storytelling, personaje, transtextualidad, transficcionalidad, adaptación

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I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories.
(Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*)

1. *Sherlock*: Adaptation and transmedial narrative

Let us begin by questioning the relevance of yet another adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's detective. To date,[1] more than 200 adaptations have been made for film and television since the publication in 1887 of the first novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, the first of which was *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* (Arthur Marvin, 1903), a silent film lasting just over 50 seconds and made for the Mutoscope (Klinger, 2005, p. liii). Theatrical adaptations began in 1889, when the American actor and writer William Gillette reached an agreement with Conan Doyle to re-write the latter's original drama. The play *Sherlock Holmes* was thus staged by Gillette in the United States until 1932, with more than 1,300 performances. The play was adapted for television and radio, and still continues to be performed (Klinger, 2005, p. xxxiv).

We must also bear in mind that, from the outset, Conan Doyle's best known work, the four novels and 56 short stories of the Holmesian canon, gave rise to numerous pastiches and parodies. According to Leslie S. Klinger, the first imitation was the anonymous parody *My evening with Sherlock Holmes*, which appeared in *The Speaker* in 1891. There are innumerable pastiches, and they continue to appear in our modern times. Robert B. De Waal, author of the prodigious *The World Bibliography of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson: A Classified and Annotated List of Materials Relating to Their Lives and Adventures,* had counted more than 2,000 when his work was published in 1976 (Klinger, 2005, p. lvii).

The BBC One series *Sherlock* (2010-) was created by Stephen Moffat and Mark Gatiss, who had the idea of situating the adventures of detective Sherlock Holmes and his friend and assistant John Watson in the present-day. Moffat and Gatiss are two scriptwriters and producers who are very well known both at home by the British public, and also abroad. Not only is Moffat the scriptwriter of the cult television series *Doctor Who* (BBC One, 1963-), but he has also scripted and produced other shows, such as *Jekyll* (BBC One, 2007) and achieved international renown with his script for Steven Spielberg's film *The Adventures of Tintin* (2011). Mark Gatiss has also collaborated on the scripts for *Doctor Who*. In addition to being one of *Sherlock*'s scriptwriters and creators, Gatiss also plays the role of Mycroft, the detective's brother. He has also written several fiction novels, directed BBC documentary series and produced *Doctor Who* radio plays, in which he also

acts the part of several characters. With such a background, it is easy to understand why the two scriptwriters wanted to adapt the detective's adventures, particularly since they are both admirers of Conan Doyle's character and they had already worked on other adaptations of this type.

The series *Sherlock* is mainly produced by Harstwood Films for the BBC. Three seasons, each with three episodes, have been broadcast, plus two Christmas specials. Each episode lasts around 90 minutes, in the tradition of series in which the minutage and production quality are on a par with that of a television film. The first season was broadcast between July and August 2010, and the second in January 2012. The third season, which was preceded by a 2013 Christmas special available on the series' website and YouTube channel, was broadcast in January 2014. In 2015, another Christmas special was broadcast, previewing some elements of the forthcoming fourth season, which is scheduled for 2017.[2]

The transmedial development of the series by the official platforms includes authorised guides, the BBC's official website, the production company's website *Sherlockology*, and the application created by The Perfect Factory, a company specialising in transmedia, that enables us to *help* Sherlock solve a case on the streets of London. Furthermore, a manga adaptation first published in Japan in 2012 was published this year in English by Titan Comics.

The BBC's website provides a list of episodes, character sheets and videos, interviews, news, digital encounters with the series' creators, links to some of the characters' blogs and interactive features, such as 'Could you solve a crime like Sherlock?', although one of the most interesting elements is the interactive trailer announcing the third season. *Sherlockology* provides details of the different episodes as well as information about the members of the production team, filming locations and an online shop offering props from the show, along with clothing and merchandising.

However, these platforms seem insignificant in comparison with the unofficial fan sites. Rich in intertextual references, they provide endless material for wikis, fan fiction discussion forums and platforms, where series' followers contribute their creations based on the world and characters of *Sherlock*, not to mention the popularity of internet memes inspired by the series, which bear witness to the sheer pervasiveness of *Sherlock* on the Internet. By way of example, at the time of writing there were nearly 45,000 contributions available on the website Fanfiction.com. The number of *Sherlock* fan fictions in English, Spanish and other languages is just slightly fewer than for other television series such as *Glee* (FOX, 2009-2015), *Supernatural* (WB Television Network, 2005-) and *Doctor Who,* three series that can also be analysed from a transmedia perspective.

1. See, for example, <https://www.arthur-conan-doyle.com/index.php?title=Conan_Doyle_on_screen > [accessed: July 2016].
2. Visit: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1475582/episodes> [Accessed: July 2016].

In addition, followers of Sherlock Holmes as a literary character must also be considered as a potential public, in particular those who participate in *The Great Game*, or *Sherlockiana*, literary studies about the detective as a real, historical figure, a phenomenon that also includes writing pastiches and collecting memorabilia. Certain societies are particularly noteworthy, including The Baker Street Irregulars, founded in the United States in 1934, and the Sherlock Holmes Society, active in the United Kingdom since 1951. This follower base of the detective's literary adventures is definitely taken into account by their creators. An analysis of any of the series' episodes suffices to show that it can be interpreted in two ways: at a superficial level, for those who are not familiar with the minutiae of the detective's adventures; and at a deeper level, for the followers of the literary canon and numerous adaptations for film, television and theatre.

This exchange between fans is evidenced, to a certain extent, by the presence of multiple messages with different hashtags from the series that are left on the bulletin board of the Sherlock Holmes Museum, the house located at 221b Baker Street in London that recreates the abode of the detective and his assistant described in the Holmesian canon, as well as the messages left in the guest book. Sherlock's transmedial character rests on solid turn-of-the-century foundations: new fans visit the historic locations they recognise as the legendary past of the 21st century detective.

Image 1. Image taken by the author of the article in October 2014.

Your disguise is not difficult for one of my powers to fathom.
(*The Doomsday Book, Detective Comics #572*)

2. Transmedial characters and narratives

The idea of *world* is at the core of the *transmedial storytelling* concept and of a broader theory of transmediality (Jenkins, 2003, 2006; Long, 2007; Dena, 2009; Scolari, 2009), including proposals such as the ones outlined by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Ryan, 2014; Thon, 2015) on transmedial narratology.[3] Indeed, according to Jenkins, the technique of *transmedial storytelling* is "the art of world-building" (2006, p. 114), a technique whereby a narrative world or universe is expanded or enlarged through different media so that consumers have to access these worlds through these media and platforms and, more interestingly, share the information obtained and their own creations, inspired by these worlds, by communicating in forums, blogs, wikis or social networks.

However, it is interesting to note that the focus of the first theoretical publications on *transmedial storytelling* is on the *character*. The title of Jenkins' early, well-known article published in the *MIT Technology Review* in 2003 was precisely "Transmedial Storytelling. Moving characters from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling". In his reflection on the subject in connection with the large North American franchises, he began considering the status of characters that give rise to all sorts of ancillary material. However, he also added that:

> According to Hollywood lore, a good pitch starts with either a compelling character or an interesting world. We might, from there, make the following argument: A good character can sustain multiple narratives and thus lead to a successful movie franchise. A good "world" can sustain multiple characters (and their stories) and thus successfully launch a transmedia franchise.

Indeed, many things have changed in the thirteen years since that article and his work *Convergence Culture* (2006) were written, in particular the development of social networks and the economic and business changes in the media panorama, with giants of the entertainment industry and new modes of television consumption, from the Marvel Cinematic Universe to Netflix series, to name but a few. We must also recall that Jenkins borrowed the term *transmedia* from Marsha Kinder's book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games*, published in 1991, in which she studied the cross-media franchises of the Muppets and Ninja Turtles, based on

3. For a summary of these proposals and the different denominations of transmedial worlds, see N. Rosendo (2016).

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characters, using the term *transmedia intertextuality* to refer to this phenomenon of mobility between media.

> Like the previous half-hour syndicated TMNT television series, the new network Turtles show continues to feature the protean malleability and reflexive transmedia intertextuality of its amphibious heroes [The Teenage Ninja Turtles]. (Kinder, 1991, p. 126)

Although the importance of building characters and their conflicts continues to be at the centre of scriptwriting manuals and courses, the theory developed around characters remains a minor issue in many disciplines, particularly in studies on transmediality, compared to the theories on narrative worlds.

The main issue we must address in the case of characters that appear in different texts and media, written by different authors, is *identity*. How do we recognise Sherlock Holmes in *Sherlock*? How do we continue to perceive Superman, Conan or James Bond? This concern with establishing identity permeates the bibliography on the subject. In "Transtextual Characters" (2010), Brian Richardson points out that, from a narrative theory approach, there has to be a minimum consistency between the character and the essential aspects of the original representation; but he also indicates that this minimum may have been formed in a cluster of preceding representations (Richardson, 2010, p. 536). Moreover, following Hector-Neri Castañeda, Richardson highlights that these characters, which he calls *transtextual*, go through a process of *culturisation*, so that it is possible that some characteristics of the original text are not known by persons participating in the process. As regards transtextual characters from transmedial narratives, their identity requires an internal continuity, expected and demanded by their followers in the different media.

It is obvious that, here, Richardson refers to transmedial characters as characters of a specific franchise. In respect to the process of culturisation, we can only point to how the creators of Sherlock have taken into account not only the texts of Doyle's canon, but also all the preceding intermedial processes, from Sidney Paget's images to the most popular television adaptations. Another example of this process is Frankenstein, the quintessential postmodern monster, whose aspect in multiple adaptations, in particular in the Universal Studios 1931 film starring Boris Karloff, seems far from the creature that Mary Shelley described, and yet already form part of his iconic image.

On the other hand, what is the relationship of characters with their fictional world? Batman and Gotham City, like Sherlock Holmes and London, the hero and his territory, are very closely related. Through a semiotic approach, Paolo Bertetti (2014) also deals with identity and different types of transmedial characters, and their relationship with their fictional worlds.

> A transmedia character is a fictional hero whose adventures are told in different media platforms, each one giving more details on the life of that character. (Bertetti, 2014, p. 2344)

For Bertetti, the characters, as fictional entities like the worlds and the stories, exist outside the text and outside the semiotic system in which they manifest themselves. For this researcher, there is no mutual correspondence between *transmedial worlds* and *transmedial characters*, since it is possible that the same character may not have the same world in the different texts and media in which it appears, which is what happens, for example, with Conan the Barbarian. For Bertetti, the world here is an *acted world*, so that different events narrated in one media or another, which differ, entail *different worlds* (like Conan's origins and youth, represented differently in the novels and its film adaptation), even though they continue to occur in the land of Hyperborea.

In the BBC's televised fiction, Sherlock lives in 21st century London, and not at the end of the 19th century. In DC Comics' one-shot comic *Gotham by Gaslight* (Brian Augustyn and Mike Mignola, 1989), Batman pursues an assassin who looks suspiciously like Jack the Stripper in late 19th century Gotham. According to Bertetti (2014, p. 2358), there is a different logic of construction of transmedia storytelling, centred in fictional characters, that differs from the construction of transmedia based on world-building and from the transmedial storytelling of Jenkins (2006). For him, the origin of this logic is the modern cultural industry between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, initially based on characters rather than on worlds.

On the other hand, Saint Gelais' theory of transfictionality (2011), which proposes a revision of the theory of fiction and focuses on literary texts, deals with the diegetic movements between different texts. In contrast with the previous proposals, for Saint-Gelais the character (or the world, or the storyline) do not exist outside the text.

> By transfictionality I mean the phenomenon whereby at least two texts, whether nor not by the same author, jointly refer to the same fiction, either because they take up characters, a previous storyline or participate in the same fictional universe. (Saint Gelais, 2011, p. 7)[4]

One of the most recurring manifestations of transfictionality is the characters' emancipation from the original text. In effect, for Richard Saint-Gelais, transfictionality is often expressed through the multiple incarnations of certain fictional characters, as in the case of Sherlock Holmes, Faust, Hamlet and Don Juan, James Bond and Hercules Poirot, characters that are recognisable through the works of different authors in multiple texts and involved in the

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4. Author's own translation from the original French text.

most varied situations. In respect of the matter of characters in connection with the *world* in which they move, Saint-Gelais refers to the concept of *emblem*:

> There is a solidarity between the character and his/her context, in which the character is to a certain extent the emblem of said context: the island of Robinson Crusoe, the London of Sherlock Holmes, the Saint Petersburg of Raskolnikov. (Saint-Gelais, 2011, p. 21)

One of the most significant moments of the consulting detective's existence is the confrontation with James Moriarty, which the British series covers in the episode "The Reichenbach Fall".[5] In this case, the action does not occur in Switzerland, but rather in the British capital, and the confrontation between Sherlock and his arch-enemy Moriarty takes place on the terraced roof of a hospital. Moriarty tricks Sherlock into falling off the roof, with John Watson as a witness to the scene. In the literary fiction of the story *The Final Problem* (*The Strand Magazine*, December 1893) Watson never saw his friend's body, yet here he sees him lying on the ground and, as a doctor, certifies his death. This ending to the second season and the interval of two years before the beginning of the third season generated, with the help of messages provided by the BBC and declarations by Gatiss and Moffat, a movement amongst the series' fans that was similar, to a certain extent, to the commotion caused by the death of the consulting detective in 1893. The material generated by fans in the form of memes and fan fictions included many theories on how Sherlock was able to escape death, since they knew that the *Sherlock* series was going to continue, just like they knew that Conan Doyle had to resuscitate his character eight years later in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (*The Strand Magazine*, 1901-1902)[6] and definitely in *The Adventure of the Empty House*, the story published in the same magazine in 1903. All this movement, which played with the well-known tradition of the literary series, was used by the scriptwriters and the production company to pay tribute to both the series' fans and to the consulting detective's followers in the 2013 Christmas special "Many Happy Returns", which was only broadcast on the BBC series' website and on its YouTube channel. This mini episode written by Gatiss and Moffat presents, through some of the series' characters, including Inspector Lestrade, the different theories put forward to explain how Sherlock was able to fake his own death. In addition to this transmedial development of the storyline, an interactive video shared through the BBC's official website, mentioned above, announced the third season and also explained, with the notice "He's alive… spoiler alert", the manner of Sherlock's death and return.

This analysis allows us to deal with other matters regarding the identity of transmedial characters. What would be the sense of Sherlock Holmes without Doctor Watson or without his arch-enemy Moriarty? Without his deductive-inductive reasoning method, what interest is there in the detective? In their study of the character Batman (1991), Uricchio and Pearson suggest that his identity contains five key components: (a) his traits and attributes; (b) certain events, such as the original story or the pursuit of criminals; (c) recurring characters; (d) the setting of their adventures, as two *symbiotic* components of the character; and (e) the iconography associated with the character. For these two authors, without the presence of these five traits Batman is no longer Batman (Uricchio and Pearson, 1991, p. 186-187). Here, we might wonder whether the condition of requiring these five traits is also applicable to other characters. As stated earlier, Sherlock Holmes' most distinctive feature is his deductive reasoning method, which could clearly lose importance without the repetition of events, such as the resolution of cases. In the series, this method is expressed by a cyborg-type representation of the detective, with superimposed images of his thoughts, mimicking augmented reality or a virtual reality space. As for the iconography, although the detective's aspect has been modernised in Moffat and Gatiss' adaptation, some elements have been retained, such as the house at 221b Baker Street.

What interests us here is the idea of the character's symbiosis with the recurring characters and with his setting. However, we wonder whether all these elements must necessarily exist, or to what extent they may vary, without the character losing his identity. Let us consider, for a moment, the cover of number 572 of Detective Comics' *The Doomsday Book* (DC, 1987) and the chapter "God Save the Kingdom!" by Alan Davis and Paul Neary, in which Sherlock Holmes helps Batman solve a difficult case. The two characters, properly contextualised, share the same setting without losing the identity that makes them so recognisable to the public, as can happen in the most extreme cases of crossover. Saint-Gelais' concept of emblem suggests that characters transmit their protean quality of the world in the different texts through which they pass. If we consider, as proposed by Bertetti, that the variation of events entails the creation of different worlds, with time these will be parallel worlds, a very productive concept in the world of comics. However, the theory of transfictionality does not permit the existence of the character or the world outside the text, whereas Bertetti's proposal does. In order to place these concepts on the same level as recent theories regarding transmedial worlds, a different theoretical approach is needed.

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5. With a script by Steve Thompson, episode 3 of the second season, broadcast by BBC One on 15 January 2012.

6. Let us recall that chronologically, this adventure of Holmes and Watson is prior to the events narrated in *The Final Problem*. In other words, until *The Adventure of the Empty House* the followers of the detective and the doctor were not sure that the former would return.

3. Conclusions

We believe that the success of *Sherlock*, a transmedial product of great narrative complexity, is due, in part, to the fact that it is based on a solid tradition supported by Sherlock Holmes' and Arthur Conan Doyle's numerous followers, from the so-called *The Big Game*, predecessor of modern cultural industry's fandom testimony, to simple popular acceptance, constantly renewed since it appeared in 1887, and which has been used by the creators of the series. In digital times, Holmes is embodied in the transmedial character of Sherlock.

The series analysed uses adaptation as the point of entry of a transmedial product, taking advantage of the power of television for seriality, a feature of transmediality, and to develop its characters.

Sherlock, the fictional character created in the BBC's televised fiction, is, strictly speaking, a transmedial character who has to maintain continuity through the different platforms in which he is represented. Considered to be Sherlock Holmes in a broader sense, he is a transfictional (Saint-Gelais), transtextual (Richardson) and transmedial (Bertetti) character. The different theories on characters migrating from one media to another referred to in this paper reflect the current theoretical discussion regarding the dual fictionality/ referentiality, said theories concurring on the importance of establishing the identity of characters that present said behaviour. This article also reflects on the *world*, another key element for the identification of characters, given that a character needs a world in which to be and to act, although, in the long run, the world of a transmedial *character* is subordinated to the latter.

This point is highlighted in order to refute the idea that it is possible, even in transmedial narratives that appear around a character's central figure, to apply to its design or analysis the whole set of transmedia storytelling tools centred on world-building. Hence, this article proposes, in proximity with Bertetti's approach and Jenkins' latest proposal on transmedial logic (2016), the concept of transmedial character that goes beyond the idea of character belonging to a transmedial narrative. The transmedial character is the core of a type of transmedial narrative which goes back to the origins of modern cultural industry, just as transmedial worlds are the core of a specific type of transmedial narrative whose origins also date back to the same period of time. The two types of narratives have to analysed and considered in a different manner.

Sherlock now seems to form part of Holmes. The 2014 exhibit "Sherlock Holmes - The Man Who Never Lived and Will Never Die" at the Museum of London featured objects related to the Holmesian canon and to the tradition of detectives initiated by Edgar Allan Poe, objects of the period in which the stories and novels that comprise said canon were written and which help a 21st century audience to immerse itself in and understand said texts. These objects included old maps of London and its Underground, typewriters, forensic instruments, costumes, photographs and even audio-visual material of an interview of Conan Doyle himself. In addition, of the personal 19th and 20th century objects that could have belonged to the detective, two mannequins facing each other illustrated, on the one hand, the iconic image of Doyle's detective's attire, the cape and deer hunting hat with which Sidney Paget drew him; and on the other, the long tweed coat and blue wool scarf typical of the character played by Benedict Cumberbatch. We can, thus, consider that the 21st century Sherlock has been added, in some way, to Sherlock Holmes the character.

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