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Mariana Ciania holds a Ph.D in Industrial Design and carries out her research activity in the Design Department at the Polytechnic University of Milan. Her research explores subjects related to new means of studying the way in which the paradigms of multichannel communication (crossmedia and transmedia) alter the media's production, distribution and consumption processes.

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multichannel

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storytelling

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storytelling worlds

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transmedia design

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# From transmedia practice to transmedia design

## The role of design in the development of transmedia projects

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Far from using the term transmedia as a simple adjective to characterise certain nouns, nowadays, transmediality can be considered a real way to execute projects tackling the complexity of the contemporary media scene. The aim of this work is to define the Transmedia Design discipline, by describing the project and research activities carried out at Polytechnic University of Milan, placing special emphasis on the Plug Social TV project. Plug Social TV is a project that was started up in 2013 in two neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Milan, involving the participation of students from Communication Design, and directed by the research team from ImagisLab. The main aim of the project is to test drive the communication processes and instruments which, through building storytelling worlds and their strategic and multichannel distribution (analogue and digital), can support the creation of a dialogue between interested parties present in the territory.

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### Introduction

*Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Hunger Games*, *Game of Thrones* are just some of the storytelling worlds which have been strategically distributed through multiple analogue and digital channels, and thereby experienced by people across the globe. However, these are not the only examples of projects associated with the term «transmediality». A term which, since 2010, is a trending word that adds to the widespread conceptual confusion present in many terms linked to the media world. The meeting of storytelling forms with new technologies, and new ways of distribution and consumption, have led us to overcome the concept of multimediality, and to a kind of supremacy of the multichannel paradigm, to which the phenomenon of crossmedia and transmedia on which this work is based belong.

This article is based on the assumption that it is possible to consider transmediality as a true design practice, to be used to tackle the complexity of the contemporary scene. Therefore, our aim is to define the transmedia design discipline [1] through the *Plug Social TV* project, started up in 2013, in the neighbourhood hosting the headquarters of the School of Design of the Polytechnic University of Milan.

The first part of the text, carries out an analysis of existing literature highlighting the terminological confusion, and describes the definition adopted for «transmedia». The second part of the article describes the *Plug Social TV* project, started up in two neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Milan city (Bovisa and Dergano), involving the participation of students from the Communication Design course of the School of Design at the

Polytechnic University of Milan. After describing the work process, the working framework used to develop transmedia projects is described, paying special attention to the results of the final year. Lastly, in the analysis, we reflect on the role of design in the development of transmedia projects, to finish outlining the framework for the Transmedia Design discipline.

## Analysis of existing literature

What does the term «transmedia» really mean? Many definitions have been given to this term, which have contributed to widespread semantic confusion. Not because they are incorrect, but because each one emphasises one specific aspect of transmediality, highlighting the perspective used by the researcher or professional when describing the phenomenon. For this reason, before discussing the definition adopted by the investigation, we explore the descriptions developed by leading players in the debate.

The term «transmedia» was coined in 1991 by Marsha Kinder, who describes it as «in the case of the super-entertainment system, transmedia intertextuality works to position consumers as powerful players while disavowing commercial manipulation» [2]. Marsha Kinder, in her description, emphasises economical aspects and commercialisation. Providing some reflections on the existing relationship between the multichannel distribution of media scripts and the implication, in terms of the economic success of the system itself, which was later revisited by other scholars in the 90s [3]. It was Henry Jenkins who subsequently developed this argument, and in 2003 coined the expression «transmedia storytelling», to later revisit and develop it in 2006 [4], to describe the ability of stories which, unfolding through multiple channels, clearly contribute to the creation and understanding of the developed storytelling world. These definitions of the term «transmedia» are followed by many more, which have contributed to overlapping concepts and a multitude of terms referring to the very same practices. In general, when analysing these descriptions in depth, what emerges is the use of three elements that come together as the basic characteristics of any transmedia project: the presence of a storytelling world with stories that may or may not be told [5], the multichannel distribution of the elements making up this secondary world [6], and the participation of audiences who decide to experience the imaginary worlds and stories told [7].

The first basic element of any transmedia project is the storytelling world which, according to Jenkins,

operates as a real textual activator for fans and the interest created around a cultural phenomenon:

Often, transmedia stories are not based on individual characters or specific arguments, but on quite complex fictional worlds that serve as a basis for many inter-related characters and their stories. This world creation process instigates an encyclopaedic impulse both in readers and writers alike. It turns us into real knowledge experts on a world that continues to expand way beyond our reach [8].

In fact, what transmedia projects have in common, is the constant reference to a later world, which we can catch a glimpse of beyond the story being told, and that leads audiences to surpass the boundaries of every story [9]. Some reflections shared with Jeff Gomez [10], chief executive officer (CEO) of Starlight Runner Entertainment, who underlines the importance of building an imaginary world to activate an empathetic relationship with audiences, leading them to «tear away the veil» that separates the primary world from the secondary [11].

A storytelling symphony, that needs strategic coordination for the distribution of stories through various channels, so that «each one of these compositions are self-sufficient, but also have a continuous narrative running through them» [12]. This is precisely where transmedia projects differ from crossmedia: although both refer to a multichannel distribution processes, when referring to crossmediality, we refer to the adaptation affecting a media script when it travels from one channel to another; transmediality, however, foresees the distribution of complex storytelling worlds that flow through different media (digital or otherwise), and in some cases, creates true cosmogonies (e.g. Star Wars, The Matrix, Harry Potter). In 2007, Geoffrey Long already showed the difference between «adaptation» and «transmediality», and stated that «retelling a story in a different media type is adaptation, while using multimedia types to craft a single story is transmediation» [13]. However, thanks to the work of Christy Dena [14], a theoretical reference model is obtained, which identifies the different transmedia strategies: transmedia intracompositional phenomenon and transmedia intercompositional phenomenon. The first are projects defined in Portmanteau Transmedia [15], where the contents on each media are self-sufficient, but become essential and fundamental fragments of the storytelling. In the case of Alternate Reality Games (ARG), these are immersive recreational activities based on storytelling, often used to promote participation in a determined media script. In fact, don't you think it's coincidental how many ARGs have been developed as launch campaigns for films or television series? Why So Serious is just one example (42 Entertainment, 2007-2008), developed for the distribution

of the film *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), but also the transmedia campaign of *The Maester's Path* to launch the first season of *Game of Thrones* (Campfire, 2011). The second transmedia strategy identified by Christy Dena is that of transmedia intercompositional phenomena, defined in the work of Franchise Transmedia [16]: systems made up of independent platforms (book, film, game, etc.) and each one, covering a different range of drama, but all leading towards a single storytelling world. In this case, we are talking about large transmedia franchises, where there is a relationship between monomedia compositions like in *The Matrix* or *Collider* (beActive, 2013), but also between monomedia and transmedia compositions. In the case of defined complex storytelling like the Portmanteau Franchise (combined franchise) [17], the best example has to be *Lost*: a system consisting of a television series that lasted six seasons (J.J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, Damon Lindelof, 2004-2010), three ARG, a mobisode, a podcast, a promotional novel and a magazine and games (consoles, mobiles and board games).

The third common characteristic of transmedia projects, regardless of their structure, is the participation of the audience, interacting with the storytelling world created and distributed through multiple channels. Robert Pratter, CEO of Transmedia Storyteller, in his description of the transmedia phenomenon emphasises the commitment to the audience.

Transmedia storytelling tells the story through multiple media, and preferably, although not always, with a certain degree of audience participation, interaction or collaboration. In transmedia storytelling, the commitment to subsequent media increases the understanding and enjoyment of the audience and their penchant for the story [18].

However, the project on modes of interaction with the audience covers the latest technological advances, much more so than in the participatory project. This means developing storytelling worlds that can be distributed through channels and apparatus that best suit the demands of those wishing to enjoy them. That is, projecting the participatory experience with the user at its centre, like during the design.

In this sense, transmediality is understood as a phenomenon where a storytelling world, distributed through multiple channels, leads the audience to spontaneously enter the created secondary world, interacting with it on various levels and in many ways.

Naturally, we are not just talking about a communication model developed following digitalisation. In fact, many researchers underline that transmediality is well rooted in the olden days. For example, Bordwell [9], identifies the *Bible* as the first multichannel tale, while

Jenkins and Wolf [20] show how the world of Oz created by L. Frank Baum (the first book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is from 1900) can be considered one of the first examples of the transmedia storytelling world. Today, there is renewed strength in the dissemination of multichannel systems. In fact, we are facing a context in which transmediality becomes, for all purposes, a practical project capable of responding to modifications in the contemporary media scene. A practical project which, as such, proposes the typical *learning by doing* of design, while resuscitating the artistic and artisan workshop model of renaissance times. Therefore, we must not only carry out an in-depth analysis of the conceptual apparatus, which is the basis for the practice, but also ways of doing things, if we want to apply the possibilities of this Transmedia Design discipline, to areas derived from entertainment classics (in which, until now have been well tried and tested).

Although at the start of the investigation, the first aim was to try to unravel the knot that defined the term transmedia, the need arose to understand how economical and aesthetic issues related within the imaginary world projects, and the aim of this work has been to propose a conceptual and operational instrument that could be used by designers, to develop storytelling systems that would involve local people, with the limits of a daily-life scenario, and outside the market managed by big editors.

## Materials and methodology

These reflections are based on the doctorate research carried out in the Design Department at the Polytechnic University of Milan from 2011 to 2015, and in the teaching-based experiment carried out on an instrument supporting the transmedia system project, in the School of Design at the same centre. Although at the start of the investigation, the first aim was to try to unravel the knot that defined the term *transmedia*, the need arose to understand how economical and aesthetic issues related within the imaginary world projects, and the aim of this work has been to propose a conceptual and operational instrument that could be used by designers, to develop storytelling systems that would involve local people, with the limits of a daily-life scenario, and outside the market managed by big editors.

Given the need for a form of literacy in the creation of complex storytelling projects, that foresee the complementarity and coordination of diverse professionals and skills, the result obtained with this work, is

the proposal of a model based on the practical project, defined under a working framework: a conceptual and operational instrument for transmedia system projects.

## Plug Social TV practical scenario

The development and approval of the instrument that has been perfected under the name of Transmedia Design Framework (TDF), has been carried out in parallel with the local-level experimentation of the *Plug Social TV* practical transmedia project.

*Plug Social TV* is a project that was started up in 2013, in two neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Milan, involving the participation of students from Communication Design, and directed by the research team from Imagis-Lab. The main aim of the project is to develop and test drive the communication processes and instruments which, through building storytelling worlds and their strategic and multichannel distribution (analogue and digital), can support the creation of a dialogue between interested parties present in the territory. The basic idea behind this project, is to use transmediality to support local communities to develop interaction both online and offline: develop storytelling systems capable of generating large audience participation and consequently, having a specific repercussion on local communities.

The development and management of the *Plug Social TV* project, has been characterised each year by a different process which has led to specific results, and enabled some of the predicted hypothesis to be verified. The process of the first year of experimentation (from October 2013 to January 2014) [21] involved three phases. The first was *listening* to the terrain, and the participation of citizens in gathering stories and audiovisual material. The main result was the launch of the *Plug Social TV* (<https://it-it.facebook.com/plugsocialtv/>) line, designed as an adder for stories developed in the second and third phases.

During the second experimentation year (from October 2014 to January 2015), the main objective was the project for new transmedia content for *Plug Social TV*, related to four subject frameworks (food, work, culture and green). The project process was divided into two phases: audiences on the terrain and storytelling projects to be distributed according to a multichannel strategy. In the case of the latter, the TDF developed the transmedia content, after modifying some of the procedures of the first version after the first experimentation year.

The definitive version of the TDF was adopted in the last experimentation year (from October 2015 to January 2016). In this third and final year, the challenge proposed to the young people of the Communication Design course was, to project transmedia contents

based on some of the storytelling worlds developed in the previous years. This enabled us, on one hand, to test out the instrument itself (TDF) and on the other, to check the validity of the storytelling worlds created in the previous years regarding invention, completeness and coherence [22].

## Results

The critical analysis of the existing literature shows, as seen in the presence of multiple definitions, that the subject of transmediality was been broached from diverse perspectives. From a methodological perspective, the approach aimed at designing Transmedia Practice [23], has led to focusing the investigation on the development of a useful tool for transmedia system projects. In fact, from a design perspective many projects have been analysed, successfully or otherwise, ending in a proposal for modelling the development process and basic guides to transmedia system projects [24]. This has led to the definition of the Transmedia Design Framework (TDF) which has been tried and tested on the terrain, thanks to the teaching experience carried out by the School of Design at the Polytechnic University of Milan, based on a trial and error approach. In this manner, it was possible to apply successive modifications to the working framework, while testing its limits and possibilities.

The TDF is a working framework on two levels (analytical and project based), proposed as a useful instrument for multi-disciplinary teams faced with the challenge of developing multichannel storytelling systems. While the Conceptual Framework, an analytical instrument, is aimed at guiding the understanding of a complex system like that of transmedia, the second level, the Transmedia Building Model is operationally based.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, students of the Communication Design course, used the definitive version of TDF during the last experimentation year of the *Plug Social TV* project. The challenge proposed to the young people was, to develop transmedia projects from four previously provided storytelling worlds. The main result was the Project Reference Document, and an audiovisual promotional video explaining the projected system in thirty seconds. The strategic document, drafted according to the basic guides proposed by the working framework, was aimed at describing the project as a whole and organised into the four sections making up the transmedia building model.

- Storytelling world, or the description of the imaginary world created through the seven identifying dimensions proposed by Davide Pinardi and Pietro De Angelis [24]: *topos*, *epos*, *ethos*, *logos*, *genos*, *telos* and *chronos*.
- Storytelling context, related to the definition of elements making up the diverse story lines, from the dramatic twist to the definition of the characters.
- Functional specifications, which define the multichannel distribution strategy, the general system structure (channels involved) and the modes of interacting with the audience.
- Productive specifications, or specifications that enable the project to be operative and doable.

There were four resulting projects. *Oltreilcondominio*<sup>1</sup> tells the tale of a conflict between two different families living in the same block of the main town square, which becomes a metaphor of the neighbourhood itself (Bovisa). The system consists of a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/condominio09/>) that distributes the series *Condominio 09* (13 videos 30 seconds long) and an offline event, *I dolci di Ettore*, for citizen participation. The final objective is the creation of a platform, designed to share the knowledge of inhabitants of the neighbourhoods involved.

*Il Viaggio di Ivan*<sup>2</sup> uses storytelling to involve citizens in the preservation of green areas in the neighbourhood. In this case, the project consists of an offline event (the workshop *Bovisa 2116 - cartoline dal futuro* which took place on the 30 January 2016) to launch the Facebook page *Il Viaggio di Ivan* (<https://www.facebook.com/Ilviaggio-di-Ivan-1749654475262869/>) in which the story of Iván is told in the form of a digital short story.

In *Hands Bovisa*<sup>3</sup> the objective is to value the artisan presence in the neighbourhood and aimed at new generations. A project dedicated to the young people who were involved in the *ArtiGianni* workshop, which was held on the 23 January 2016 partly in *Fucina di Efesto* - [www.lafucinadiefesto.com](http://www.lafucinadiefesto.com) - and partly in *Fab Lab* - [www.fablabmilano.it](http://www.fablabmilano.it) - through the strategic use of an adventure game on WhatsApp.

The last project, *7minuti - Scrivi il tuo presente*<sup>4</sup>, is aimed at valuing the historical memory of the neigh-

1. Project developed by Elisa di Nota, Giuseppe Esposito, Pieralberto Faggian and Luca Raschi.

2. Project developed by Gabriele Clemente, Rossella De Vico, Elisa Pintonello and Lorenzo Rizzoni.

3. Project developed by Umberto Dolcini, Simone Pietro Romei, Riccardo Schito and Zhang Ge.

4. Project developed by Elena Corbari Verzeletti, Francesca Di Vito, Huiling Li, Mario Martinasco and Giulia Valentini.

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bourhood. In this case, the system consists of a Facebook page -*Il prodigioso anno del Jiao Gu Lan* ([www.facebook.com/ilprodigiosoanno](http://www.facebook.com/ilprodigiosoanno))- with the function of distributing a meta-tale, to entertain the audience and involve them in offline activities. *7minuti, il prodigioso evento*, an event that was held on the 30 January 2016 and highlights the storytelling world in the terrain, and *La dispensa della memoria*, a real pantry placed alongside the neighbourhood library, so that citizens can share their recipes spontaneously (which becomes a metaphor for memories).

## Analysis: from transmedia practice to transmedia design

Far from using the term transmedia as a simple adjective to characterise certain nouns, transmediality can currently be considered as a real way of executing projects tackling the complexity of the contemporary media scene. A statement which appears to clearly contrast with the statement of Henry Jenkins [25], and the proliferation of projects in which the term *transmedia* is used as an adjective: an example of this are cases referred to as transmedia presentations, transmedia activism [26] or transmedia journalism [27].

As Jenkins states, «Transmedia, used alone, means “in diverse media”» [28]. In fact, the term transmedia [1], is an adjective that describes the type of specific relationship existing between different media platforms, through which content is distributed, which as highlighted before is associated with diverse areas. However, what happens when we talk about it in practice? What we can guess from the work carried out over these years, is the existing need to have the ability to also consider

the term *transmedia* as a noun, regarding putting it into practice, with its specific identity, and characterised by its defining elements that distinguish it from other practices. In fact, in this sense, although we continue to recognise its role as an adjective, we propose that the terms be used with the following meanings: Transmedia as a proper noun (and hence with capital letters), or as a specific note to identify and distinguish this precise multichannel phenomenon; transmediality as a common noun referring to the practice that foresees the multichannel distribution of storytelling worlds; transmedia (*transmedial* or *transmedia*) as an adjective that specifies its accompanying noun, as indicated by Henry Jenkins:

«Returning to the idea that transmedia is an adjective, this turns storytelling into one of the nouns that can be changed. What we see now is transmedia news, transmedia documents, transmedia presentation, transmedia activism and mobilisation, transmedia actions and transmedia learning. Hence, transmedia models, or those expanding beyond any form of media production and which influence many other areas of contemporary culture.» [29].

In conclusion, the problem with the definition has led me over the years, to ask myself if with so many definitions, maybe we are not talking about the same phenomenon, and that maybe the process was not the same in all fields of application. Questions and reflections which have led me to propose this use of the term (Transmedia, transmediality and transmedia), and identify the Transmedia Design discipline, for which I have proposed an instrument aimed at guiding the multichannel storytelling system projects and analysis. If, as we already stated, the contemporary scene is characterised by changes in the media customs of audiences and constant technological development, its main consequence, is the change in the relationship between producers and the public. It is clear that the need arises for a form of literacy that considers the changes arising inside the communication paradigm. Regarding this point, Jenkins underlines that: «The greatest challenge faced by current and future storytellers, is being able to involve different audiences in a perfectly told story through all of these different platforms» [30].

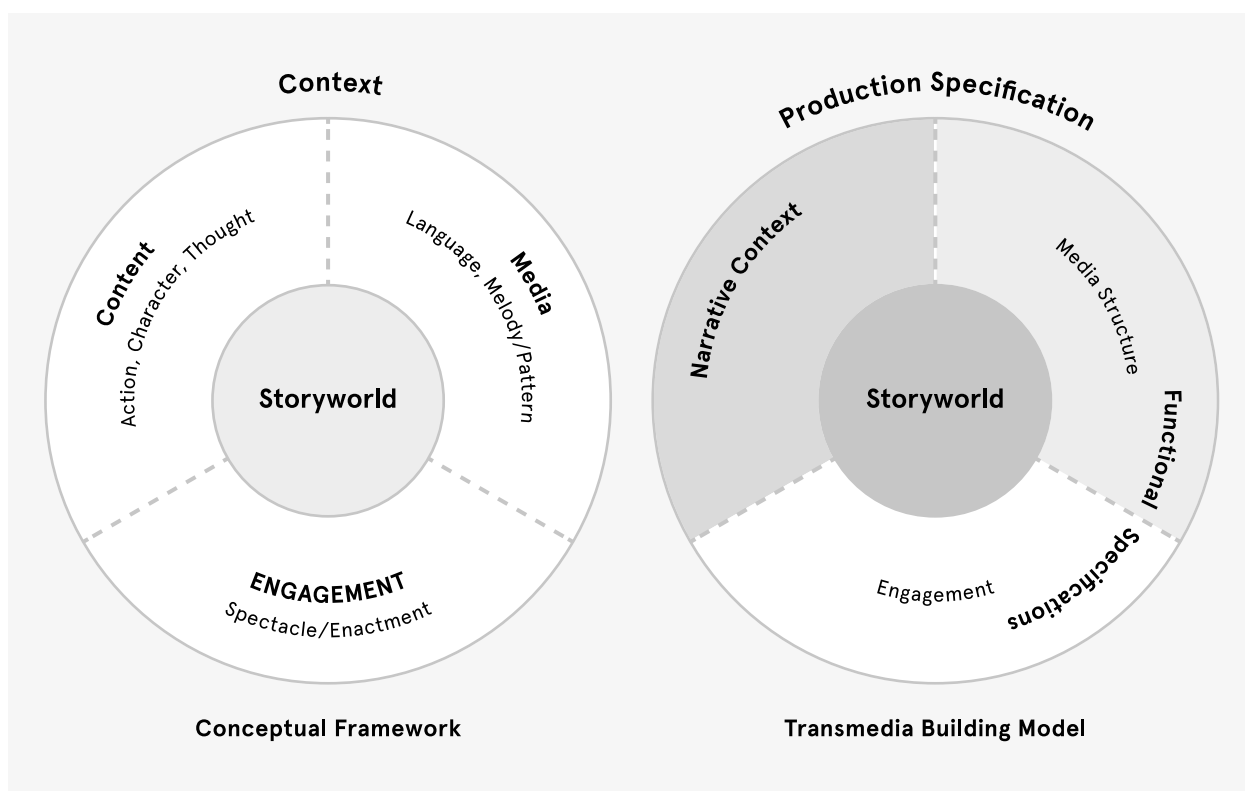


Figure 1 Transmedia design framework.

In my view, this is the reason why, what appears on the horizon is a discipline between audiovisual studies and design culture -Transmedia Design-, which enables researchers and professionals to analyse, develop and manage multichannel communication systems based on storytelling worlds. Undoubtedly, viewing transmediality from a design perspective, it can be described as a practice that operates resolving issues and giving meaning, reflecting the role of design as indicated by Ezio Manzini [31]. A discipline which, when it resolves issues, has an impact on the aspects of production, and the development processes of multichannel projects. However, regarding the sense of a *maker*, this is above all related to processes for the creation of meaning, and the development of storytelling environments capable of freeing the potential of the audiences by whom they are enjoyed.



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