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What Is Transmedia, Anyway?

Before we can talk about how to make great transmedia projects, we have to clarify what we mean when we say “transmedia storytelling” (at least for the purposes of this book). This is shockingly difficult to do. For all of the excitement surrounding the word and its crackling aura of innovation, it’s flat-out impossible to nail down a single definition that everyone can happily agree on.

There’s a divide between what some wags call West Coast versus East Coast transmedia. West Coast-style transmedia, more commonly called Hollywood or franchise transmedia, consists of multiple big pieces of media: feature films, video games, that kind of thing. It’s grounded in big-business commercial storytelling. The stories in these projects are interwoven, but lightly; each piece can be consumed on its own, and you’ll still come away with the idea that you were given a complete story.



A great example of this would be *Star Wars*, where multiple films, books, TV series, and so on combine to tell the long-ago history of a galaxy far, far away. Both new franchises, like *Avatar*, and reboots of old ones, like *Tron* and *Transformers*, are increasingly embracing this approach.

On the other end of the spectrum, East Coast transmedia tends to be more interactive, and much more web-centric. It overlaps heavily with the traditions of independent film, theater, and interactive art. These projects make heavy use of social media, and are often run once over a set period of time rather than persisting forever. The plot is so tightly woven between media that you might not fully understand what's going on if you don't actively seek out multiple pieces of the story.

For our example here, consider Lance Weiler's indie film experience *Pandemic*, which incorporated a live scavenger hunt, a short film, comics, Twitter feeds, and more, all unfolding at the Sundance Film Festival over a few action-packed days.

If the term *transmedia* means anything at all, how can *Star Wars* and *Pandemic* both be transmedia at the same time?

A LITTLE BACKSTORY

To answer that, let's back up and review the history: The term *transmedia* was originally coined by cultural theorist and University of Southern California professor Dr. Marsha Kinder. She first used it in 1991 as “transmedia intertextuality,” describing works where characters appeared across multiple media, like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (what we would generally call an entertainment franchise these days).

Dr. Henry Jenkins, a media theorist who was then at MIT but is now at USC, has brought transmedia to popular attention in recent years, most notably through his book *Convergence Culture*. He reframed Kinder's term to describe heavily integrated narratives like *The Matrix*. In that narrative, the different media components—films, video games, a graphic novel—are so intertwined that a character can walk offstage in the game and appear in the film in his very next breath.

This is the definition Jenkins has posted on his blog, “Confessions of an Aca-Fan”:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get *dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels* 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. [Emphasis his, not mine.]

Thus, we have three criteria for transmedia storytelling: multiple media, a single unified story or experience, and avoidance of redundancy between media. Sounds like *Star Wars* to me. Sounds like *Pandemic*, too. But if transmedia storytelling is the process that results in both of these kinds of structures, what exactly are you doing in that process?

FRAGMENTATION

Telling a story transmedia-style involves one of two processes, actually. Either you take a single story and you splinter it across multiple media, or you start with one story and you keep adding pieces on to it *ad infinitum*. Both of these processes will result in projects that can be described with phrases like “greater than the sum of its parts” and “a single cohesive story.”

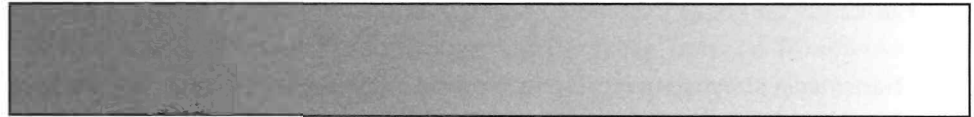
There is a point of similarity in both techniques, though; a meaningful underlying commonality. The end result of both processes is fragmentation—the story has been broken into pieces. It’s just a matter of scale. *Star Wars* uses a story that’s been broken into really big fragments (a whole film, a book), and *Pandemic* uses much smaller ones (a single bottle of water, a series of tweets). And then there are a number of hybrid projects that mix big and little pieces together, like *Cathy’s Book*, which used a single-medium narrative piece (a book), but combined it with fragments of evidence and online components to tell a deeper story.



The transmedia fragmentation spectrum

Big Pieces

Tiny Pieces



Star Wars

Cathy's Book

Pandemic

No matter how big the pieces are, though, you interact with them using the same basic behavior. Compare this with different kinds of jigsaw puzzles. There are five-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzles out there, and if you pick up only one piece, you can't guess whether the whole thing will be a mountaintop or a potted plant. There are also simpler puzzles where each piece looks like an entire horse or cow or sheep, but as with more complex puzzles, you still have to finish the puzzle to see the whole farm.

Of course, the more pieces you break a story into, the more likely it is that you're going to be entering a highly distributed structure and embedding pieces of story into the real world. You're more likely to be using interactive elements and real-time platforms. This is what makes for sexy, award-winning marketing campaigns and deep, immersive experiences.

I'll admit my biases up front: This kind of highly fragmented narrative is where I get my thrills. This is where you find writing-as-performance-art. It's where you find audience-as-agent. This is the thing that gets me excited about the power of transmedia.

And—to get back to the business of creation—it's also a more educational subject to study, if you're at all interested in transmedia storytelling, because the tricks and tools of single-medium storytelling won't serve you very well. Big-business transmedia narratives using tentpole feature films, AAA video games, and books from the Big Six publishing firms can be integrated into unified story universes without shifting into a completely transmedia mindset. But if you learn how to create a highly fragmented narrative, that knowledge will serve you no matter where on the spectrum you land.

QUESTIONS ALL THE WAY DOWN

Transmedia as it's commonly known today is storytelling on the cusp of new possibilities. We'll probably see skirmishes over what transmedia means and whether any given project is transmedia at all for years to come, as those possibilities grow and change.

But that doesn't really matter much. The important thing isn't that we all settle on a definition that will endure through the ages. There is nothing wrong with the debate continuing, as long as we creators in the trenches keep trying a lot of different structures, tools, and innovations.

Jenkins himself worries that we have "too much focus on the definitional and not on the analytic." We're focusing on whether something is or isn't technically transmedia, when we might be much better off examining the field of prior art to see where and how various pieces work. "A lot of hybrid things are emerging that are difficult to classify," he said.

That's exactly the way it should be. Don't worry about whether or not your project is technically going to be transmedia. Worry about making it something people will care about.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

There may continue to be some scuffling about definitions for some time to come, because a lot of money and credibility could ride on the outcome. The history of the transmedia producer credit is a case in point.

When the Producers Guild of America first announced that it was creating a transmedia producer credit, this immediately caused quite a bit of controversy. That's because the PGA's definition is "three stories told via three distinct media." The PGA has a list of what qualifies as a distinct medium, too, including television broadcasts and feature films.



WORDS WE CAN'T USE

There are a number of words we can't use in place of *transmedia*, because they already mean something very specific, or else they exclude one of the kinds of projects that you would call transmedia.

Multimedia

On the surface, *multimedia* sounds like it describes exactly what transmedia is meant to be: multiple media. Unfortunately, in the 1990s, the term took on a very specific connotation: text, video, audio, and images delivered together through computer. Multimedia CD-ROMs of atlases and encyclopedias were common and profitable for a few years. They vanished when the new king of the multimedia experience arose: the World Wide Web.

Interactive Fiction

You might think a story that you can interact with is interactive fiction. But this phrase has been taken for decades to mean a very specific kind of computer game: the text adventure, as in games like *Zork* or *Moonmist*. These were the particular specialty of a Massachusetts company named Infocom, which was taken over by Activision in 1986.

But there's another reason why transmedia storytelling can't be called interactive fiction, and that's the growing interest in transmedia documentaries and serious games. The same tools you can use for telling a story that isn't true can just as easily be used to call attention to real-world information.

Cross-Media

Until very recently, *cross-media* was the top contender to mean the same thing as transmedia. Now, a consensus is growing that cross-media refers to releasing the same content (like, say, a TV show) over multiple platforms. So cross-media is what lets you see the same episode of *Yo Gabba Gabba* on TV, on your phone, and on a DVD.

Alternate Reality Game (ARG)

An alternate reality game is a social media narrative that plays out in real time, using real communications media to make it seem as though the story were really happening. Sounds a lot like transmedia, right? And in fact the ARG is a subset of transmedia—*Perplex City* was an ARG. But the accepted formula for an ARG requires elements that a transmedia project doesn't always have, such as direct communication with characters or puzzles for the players to solve.

Indie creators like Dr. Christy Dena and Brooke Thompson expressed concern that this would freeze out some kinds of projects that feel like transmedia, but don't meet the three-media rule, or those where multiple media are telling a single plot line, not three distinct stories.

At the same time, groups like the PGA have no choice but to create a clear and objective definition for what transmedia means in order to decide who can qualify for their credit. The PGA isn't the only example, either. Funding bodies like the Tribeca Film Festival must offer definitions to spell out who can qualify for grant money—and who can't.



That means that any definition for *transmedia* is genuinely high-stakes. It's not just an intellectual fencing match; whether or not you can put "PGA transmedia producer" on your résumé could be a career changer. But once you've drawn a line, inevitably a deserving project or creator will be on the wrong side of it.

The definition has proven to be a moving target so far, making everything just a little more complicated. It's already difficult to keep track of the novel ways in which creators are telling immersive stories today. It's dead impossible to foresee the innovations in storytelling that new technology and new visionaries will give us in 5, 10, or 15 years.

So it might take decades for the dust to settle. But there's no sense in waiting for consensus on a complete definition before you start making something amazing yourself. There's a lot of territory to explore, and it's going to be just as much fun no matter what words we use to label our work.