Transmedia Navigation — the ability to deal with the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities

In an era of convergence, consumers become hunters and gatherers pulling together information from multiple sources to form a new synthesis (H. Jenkins, 2006a). Storytellers exploit this potential for transmedia storytelling; advertisers talk about branding as depending on multiple touch points; networks seek to exploit their intellectual properties across many different channels. As they do so, we encounter the same information, the same stories, the same characters and worlds across multiple modes of representation. Transmedia stories at the most basic level are stories told across multiple media. At the present time, the most significant stories tend to flow across multiple media platforms.

We now live at a moment where every story, image, brand, relationship plays itself out across the maximum number of media platforms, shaped top down by decisions made in corporate boardrooms and bottom up by decisions made in teenager's bedrooms. The concentrated ownership of media conglomerates increases the desirability of properties that can exploit "synergies" between different parts of the medium system and "maximize touch-points" with different niches of consumers. The result has been the push towards franchise-building in general and transmedia entertainment in particular.

A transmedia story represents the integration of entertainment experiences across a range of different media platforms. A story like Heroes or Lost might spread from television into comics, the web, computer or alternate reality games, toys and other commodities, and so forth, picking up new consumers as it goes and allowing the most dedicated fans to drill deeper. The fans, in turn, may translate their interests in the franchise into concordances and wikipedia entries, fan fiction, vids, fan films, cosplay, game mods, and a range of other participatory practices that further extend the story world in new directions. Both the commercial and grassroots expansion of narrative universes contribute to a new mode of storytelling, one which is based on an encyclopedic expanse of information which gets put together differently by each individual consumer as well as processed collectively by social networks and online knowledge communities.

Let me start with the following definition of transmedia storytelling as an operating principle: "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." Some of what I will say here will complicate this conception of a "unified and coordinated entertainment experience," as we factor in the unauthorized, grassroots expansion of the text by fans or consider the ways that franchises might value diversity over coherence in their exploration of fictional worlds.
Transmedia Storytelling

I designed this handout on transmedia storytelling to distribute to my students. More recently, I passed it out at a teaching workshop at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. I thought it might be of value to more of you out there in the community. Much of it builds on the discussion of that concept in *Convergence Culture*, though I have updated it to reflect some more recent developments in that space.

For those who want to dig deeper still into this concept, check out the webcast version of the Transmedia Entertainment panel from the Futures of Entertainment Conference.

1. 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. So, for example, in *The Matrix* franchise, key bits of information are conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. There is no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the *Matrix* universe.

2. Transmedia storytelling reflects the economics of media consolidation or what industry observers call "synergy." Modern media companies are horizontally integrated - that is, they hold interests across a range of what were once distinct media industries. A media conglomerate has an incentive to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many different media platforms as possible. Consider, for example, the comic books published in advance of the release of such films as *Batman Begins* and *Superman Returns* by DC (owned by Warner Brothers, the studio that released these films). These comics provided back-story which enhanced the viewer's experience of the film even as they also help to publicize the forthcoming release (thus blurring the line between marketing and entertainment). The current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative, yet the most gifted transmedia artists also surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise.

3. Most often, transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories. This process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story.

4. Extensions may serve a variety of different functions. For example, the BBC used radio dramas to maintain audience interest in Doctor Who during almost a decade during which no new television episodes were produced. The extension may provide insight into the characters and their motivations (as in the case of websites surrounding *Dawson's Creek* and *Veronica Mars* which reproduced the imaginary correspondence or journals of
their feature characters), may flesh out aspects of the fictional world (as in the web version of the Daily Planet published each week by DC comics during the run of its 52 series to "report" on the events occurring across its superhero universe), or may bridge between events depicted in a series of sequels (as in the animated series - *The Clone Wars* - which was aired on the Cartoon Network to bridge over a lapse in time between *Star Wars* II and III). The extension may add a greater sense of realism to the fiction as a whole (as occurs when fake documents and time lines were produced for the website associated with *The Blair Witch Project* or in a different sense, the documentary films and cd-roms produced by James Cameron to provide historical context for *Titanic*).

5. Transmedia storytelling practices may expand the potential market for a property by creating different points of entry for different audience segments. So, for example, Marvel produces comic books which tell the Spider-man story in ways that they think will be particularly attractive to female (a romance comic, *Mary Jane Loves Spiderman*) or younger readers (coloring book or picture book versions of the classic comicbook stories ). Similarly, the strategy may work to draw viewers who are comfortable in a particular medium to experiment with alternative media platforms (as in the development of a *Desperate Housewives* game designed to attract older female consumers into gaming).

6. Ideally, each individual episode must be accessible on its own terms even as it makes a unique contribution to the narrative system as a whole. Game designer Neil Young coined the term, "additive comprehension," to refer to the ways that each new texts adds a new piece of information which forces us to revise our understanding of the fiction as a whole. His example was the addition of an image of an origami unicorn to the director's cut edition of *Bladerunner*, an element which raised questions about whether the protagonist might be a replicant. Transmedia producers have found it difficult to achieve the delicate balance between creating stories which make sense to first time viewers and building in elements which enhance the experience of people reading across multiple media.

7. Because transmedia storytelling requires a high degree of coordination across the different media sectors, it has so far worked best either in independent projects where the same artist shapes the story across all of the media involved or in projects where strong collaboration (or co-creation) is encouraged across the different divisions of the same company. Most media franchises, however, are governed not by co-creation (which involves conceiving the property in transmedia terms from the outset) but rather licensing (where the story originates in one media and subsequent media remain subordinate to the original master text.)

8. Transmedia storytelling is the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence. Pierre Levy coined the term, collective intelligence, to refer to new social structures that enable the production and circulation of knowledge within a networked society. Participants pool information and tap each others expertise as they work together to solve problems. Levy argues that art in an age of collective intelligence functions as a cultural attractor, drawing together like-minded individuals to form new knowledge communities. Transmedia narratives also function as textual activators - setting into motion the
production, assessment, and archiving information. The ABC television drama, *Lost*, for example, flashed a dense map in the midst of one second season episode: fans digitized a freeze-frame of the image and put it on the web where together they extrapolated about what it might reveal regarding the Hanso Corporation and its activities on the island. Transmedia storytelling expands what can be known about a particular fictional world while dispersing that information, insuring that no one consumer knows everything and insure that they must talk about the series with others (see, for example, the hundreds of different species featured in *Pokemon* or *Yu-Gi-O*). Consumers become hunters and gatherers moving back across the various narratives trying to stitch together a coherent picture from the dispersed information.

9. A transmedia text does not simply disperse information: it provides a set of roles and goals which readers can assume as they enact aspects of the story through their everyday life. We might see this performative dimension at play with the release of action figures which encourage children to construct their own stories about the fictional characters or costumes and role playing games which invite us to immerse ourselves in the world of the fiction. In the case of *Star Wars*, the Boba Fett action figure generated consumer interest in a character who had otherwise played a small role in the series, creating pressure for giving that character a larger plot function in future stories.

10. The encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts often results in what might be seen as gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story: that is, they introduce potential plots which can not be fully told or extra details which hint at more than can be revealed. Readers, thus, have a strong incentive to continue to elaborate on these story elements, working them over through their speculations, until they take on a life of their own. Fan fiction can be seen as an unauthorized expansion of these media franchises into new directions which reflect the reader's desire to "fill in the gaps" they have discovered in the commercially produced material.

**What Might Be Done**

Students learn about multimodality and transmedia navigation when they take time to focus on how stories change as they move across different contexts of production and reception, as they give consideration to the affordances and conventions of different media, and as they learn to create using a range of different media tools.

• An exercise developed by MIT’s New Media Literacies (Jenkins, 2006b) asks students to tell the same story across a range of different media. For example, they script dialogue using instant messenger; they storyboard using Powerpoint and images appropriated from the Internet; they might later reenact their story and record it using a camera or video camera; they might illustrate it by drawing pictures. As they do so, they are encouraged to think about what each new tool contributes to their overall experience of the story as well as what needs to remain the same for viewers to recognize the same characters and situations across these various media.