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Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality

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Abstract This article investigates the relations between the narratological concept of transfictionality and the trendy phenomenon of transmedial storytelling. Made popular as a concept by Henry Jenkins (2006), transmedial storytelling is the creation of a storyworld through multiple documents belonging to various media. The three fundamental operations of transfictionality—expansion, modification, and transposition—are investigated in terms of their potential for transmedial storytelling. After an analysis of the variety of documents that make up the storyworld of *Alpha 0.7* (Südwestrundfunk 2010), a German transmedial story system that comprises a TV miniseries, radio plays, fictional web pages, and links to nonfictional texts created independently of the project, the article asks under which conditions an alternate reality game (ARG) could be added to the system without spoiling the experience of those people who limit their exploration of the storyworld to watching the TV show. In turn, the last section asks what kind of stories lend themselves to transmedial projects and why such projects are currently popular.

In this article I propose to investigate the relations between the narratological concept of transfictionality—defined by Richard Saint-Gelais (2005: 612) as a

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relation that obtains when "two (or more) texts . . . share elements such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds"—and a phenomenon that is currently taking popular culture by storm, variably known as convergent, transmedia, or transmedial storytelling (Dena 2009; Jenkins 2006; Mittell forthcoming; Ryan and Thon forthcoming; Scolari 2009; Wolf 2012). Henry Jenkins (2006: 2) views this phenomenon as "the flow of content through multiple media platforms." The dynamics inherent to the metaphor of flow suggests that content evolves as it passes from one medium to another, configured by these media's particular affordances. Yet Jenkins (ibid.: 95) also describes *transmedial storytelling*, as I will call it here, through a formula that suggests another visualization: "A narrative so large, it cannot be covered in a single medium." Here we may imagine various media eagerly reaching for a fixed, predefined content in order to grab a piece of it. One could argue that these two formulas are more catchphrases than definitions. (What is it, for instance, that makes a narrative "large"? Certainly not its length.) But memorable catchphrases are a powerful way to promote new ideas and start theoretical conversations.[1]

It is tempting to regard transmedial storytelling as something radically new and revolutionary if not as *the* narrative form of the future. But historians can put this claim in perspective by pointing out the dissemination of Greek myth through various artistic media—sculpture, architecture, drama, epic—or, closer to us, the multiple modes of distributing biblical stories in the Middle Ages. These stories were not only written in books, which most people could not read; they were also retold orally during sermons, enacted in passion plays, illustrated through paintings and stained-glass windows, and they even inspired the interactive phenomenon of the stations of the cross, where pilgrims relived the Passion of Christ by following a fixed itinerary dotted with little chapels. This kind of multimedia treatment is typically reserved for those narratives that are considered foundational for the identity of a group. In the age of globalization, the community-building function of narrative has been taken over by stories like *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977), *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson 2001–3), and *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999)—stories that transcend linguistic, national, and religious boundaries. But if the spreading of culture-defining stories across media is a time-honored phenomenon, it is

1. On his blog Confessions of an Aca-Fan, Jenkins later proposed a more thorough but narrower definition; as we will see shortly, it does not apply to what I call the "snowball effect": "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."

currently taking new forms, spurred by digital technology's ability to encode and efficiently transmit all semiotic types of information.

Transmedial storytelling comes in two major kinds, or rather in a variety of shades situated between two poles. The first pole is what could be called the "snowball" effect: a certain story enjoys so much popularity or becomes so prominent culturally that it spontaneously generates a variety of either same-medium or cross-media prequels, sequels, fan fiction, and adaptations. In this case, there is a central text that functions as a common field of reference to all the other texts. The Harry Potter series and *The Lord of the Rings* are good examples of the snowball effect: they started out in the medium of the novel, created by a single author, and they expanded to film and computer games by popular demand.[2]

The other pole is a much more recent phenomenon. It is represented by a system in which a certain story is conceived from the very beginning as a project that develops over many different media platforms. Storyworlds become commercial franchises, and the purpose of their developers is to get the public to consume as many different media as possible. Jenkins (2006: 93–130) illustrates this situation with the case of *The Matrix*: the Wachowskis deliberately planned a narrative empire that involved not only the films but also video games and comics. The *Matrix* films functioned for most people as the entry point into the system, and they could very well be consumed on their own, but they were full of esoteric clues that could only be deciphered by the players of the game. The players, conversely, depended on the film for knowledge of the backstory and of the characters. In this case, as Jenkins observes, the materials are so numerous and the story so rich that hardly anybody has a complete overview of the storyworld.[3]

Storyworlds

The notion of storyworld[4] is central to transmedial storytelling, since it is what holds together the various texts of the system. The ability to create a world, or more precisely, to inspire the mental representation of a world, is the primary

2. The Harry Potter and *Lord of the Rings* films are well known. Eight video game adaptations of the Harry Potter novels were released between 2001 and 2011 by EA Games. Wikipedia lists twenty-four games (single user or multiplayer) based on the *Lord of the Rings* series since 1982.

3. Christy Dena (2009: 99–104) has proposed a categorization of transmedial projects that comes close to the distinction proposed here between "snowball" projects and projects conceived from the very beginning as spreading across multiple media. She calls the two kinds of transmedial projects "intercompositional" (involving several separate processes of composition) and "intracompositional" (involving one process of composition), respectively.

4. See Herman 2009: 105–36 for an attempt to define this concept. It has been used for a long time by literary critics but rather informally.

condition for a text to be considered a narrative. This leads to the question: what is a world? Storyworld is a concept that makes a lot of intuitive sense, but it is very difficult to define in a theoretically rigorous way. *World* suggests a space, but *story* is a sequence of events that develops in time. If we conceive of storyworlds as mental representations built during the reading (viewing, playing, among others) of a narrative text, they are not static containers for the objects mentioned in a story but rather dynamic models of evolving situations. We could say that they are simulations of the development of the story. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) captured this inseparability of space and time in narrative through the concept of chronotope.

I define *storyworlds* through a static component[5] that precedes the story and a dynamic component that captures the unfolding of the events. Some components are optional; for instance, the minimalist narrative proposed by E. M. Forster (1990, 87) as an example of plot,[6] "The king died, and then the queen died of grief," is limited to features 1, 4, 6, and 7 below. (Alternatively, we could say that the Forster example fails to conjure a world to the imagination; this is why it is not a tellable story.)

Static component:

1. An inventory of existents comprising (a) the kinds of species, objects, and social institutions that populate the storyworld and (b) the cast of individual characters who act as protagonists
2. A folklore relating to the existents (backstories, legends, rumors)
3. A space with certain topographic features
4. A set of natural laws
5. A set of social rules and values

Dynamic component:

6. Physical events that bring changes to the existents
7. Mental events that give significance to the physical events (i.e., the motivations of the agents and the emotional reactions of both agents and patients), affect the relations between characters, and occasionally alter the social order

5. Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca (2013) propose an interesting taxonomy of what they call the "core features" of transmedial worlds, features that correspond to my static component: they divide them into mythos, topos, and ethos (these labels should be self-explanatory). My category 2 (folklore and backstory) is clearly part of mythos, 3 (space with geographic features) part of topos, and 5 (social rules and values) part of ethos. Categories 1 (inventory) and 4 (physical laws) could also fit into topos if it encompasses all the physical features and laws of the world. It should be noted that Klastrup and Tosca's taxonomy omits events and consequently describes only what I call the static component of storyworlds.

6. In order to avoid unnecessary narratological jargon, I use *plot* in the informal sense of "sequence of events told by the narrative," that is, as a synonym of *story* or *fabula*. It is in this sense that we speak of "great plots," "plot summary," or "plot holes."

Storyworlds can bear three relations to texts.

A one-text/one-world relation. Here the text projects a determinate storyworld, and it is the only mode of access to this world. Since different users will hardly ever construct the same mental model of a text, it could be argued that the one-to-one relation cannot occur literally. But if we adhere to such a stringent condition of sameness, we will miss the distinction between this category and the next one. I will assume that if the vast majority of users construct roughly the same sequence of events, the same causal relations, and the same motivations for the characters' actions—in other words, if they attend to what Remigius Bunia (2010: 713) calls the "immediate meaning" of the text—they will have constructed the same storyworld.

A one-text/many-worlds relation. This relation is found when the text is so indeterminate that it can be related to many different stories. Some paintings, for instance, urge the spectator to imagine stories that explain the scenes they are presenting, but because paintings have no temporal extension, they cannot represent a fixed set of events, and they will inspire highly variable narrative interpretations. Another example of the one-to-many relation is the case of digital texts, such as hypertexts or video games, where the user's choices determine one of many possible sequences of events.

A one-world/many-texts relation. This relation is typical of the oral tradition. It is represented by multiple performances of the same story or joke or by bards telling and retelling stories about the same heroes. We also find it in the cases of summaries of the same text or of adaptations of classical texts for young audiences.

The phenomenon of transmedial storytelling is generally presented by its theorists as an example of the third relation: one world, many texts. Jenkins (2006: 116) does not use the term *world*, but he describes the common ground of a transmedial franchise as "compelling environments that cannot be explored in a single work or medium." But is it really the "same" world (*dieselbe Welt*) that the various incarnations of *The Matrix*, or *Star Wars*, or *The Lord of the Rings* present? Or is it a similar world (*eine gleiche Welt*)? I will try to answer this question later, but as a preliminary step, we must first examine the narratological concept of transfictionality.

Transfictionality

As we have already seen, the term *transfictionality* (Ryan 2008; Saint-Gelais 2005) refers to the migration of fictional entities across different texts, but

these texts may belong to the same medium, usually written narrative fiction. Transmedial storytelling can be regarded as a special case of transfictionality—a transfictionality that operates across many different media.

According to the literary theorist Lubomír Doležel (1998: 206–7), a fictional world can be linked to another world by three kinds of relations: expansion, modification, and transposition.[7]

Expansion extends the scope of the original storyworld by adding more existents to it, by turning secondary characters into the heroes of the story they experience, by having characters visit new regions of the storyworld, and by prolonging the time covered by the original story though prequels and sequels. Doležel illustrates this relation of expansion through a discussion of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). This novel follows the life of a minor character from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), the first wife of Mr. Rochester, who appears in the original text as a madwoman locked in the attic. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she acquires what she is denied in *Jane Eyre*, namely, the opportunity to narrate her life from her own perspective.

Modification "constructs essentially different versions of the protoworld, redesigning its structure and reinventing its story" (Doležel 1998: 207). According to Doležel, this relation obtains between Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986). In *Foe*, Robinson does not engage in any of the heroic civilizing feats described in the original novel, nor does he keep a journal: his story is the work of a ghostwriter. Most literary examples of modification follow a counterfactual sequence of events by giving a different destiny to the characters, one that in effect answers the question What if?[8]

Transposition "preserves the design and the main story of the protoworld but locates it in a different temporal or spatial setting" (Doležel 1998: 206). Doležel's example is *The New Sufferings of Young W.* by Ulrich Plenzdorf (1973), a novel that transplants the plot of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) into the German Democratic Republic of the 1960s.[9]

To the three relations described by Doležel I would like to add *quotation*. Examples of quotation would be a character in one of the *Lord of the Rings* movies using a light saber borrowed from *Star Wars* or an amateur video on

7. Actually, Doležel refers to modification as displacement. I prefer modification, because displacement suggests the phenomena covered by transposition.

8. I borrow this question from Jason Mittell (forthcoming), who distinguishes "what is" (expansions) and "what if" (modifications) versions of storyworlds.

9. *The New Sufferings of Young W.* actually involves modification as well as transposition: the hero does not commit suicide, as does Goethe's Werther, but dies in an accident. Transposition without modification is very rare; it is illustrated by the case of staging a Greek tragedy in modern dress.

YouTube featuring a character wearing a Darth Vader mask in an action set in an American suburb that has nothing to do with the plot of *Star Wars*.[10] In this case, the imported element is not integrated into the storyworld, and the effect is one of dissonance and incongruity. This effect plays an important role in the aesthetics of Dada and surrealism.

Same World versus Many Worlds in Transmedial Story Systems

The relation of expansion is much more world preserving than modification and transposition, because it does not require changing any of the facts asserted in the original story. This difference makes it tempting to conclude that expansions refer to the same world as does the original, while modification and transposition refer to related but different worlds. But there is a problem with this view. Imagine that an author writes a novel, then another author writes a sequel or prequel to it: can the two texts be said to refer to the same world?

The situation here is certainly different from the case of an author who writes a sequel or prequel to his or her own text or uses the device of the return of characters. I have no trouble calling the world of the various *Star Wars* films the same world—they were all conceived by a team headed by George Lucas. But now consider the example of the new adventures of Don Quixote published in 1614 by Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda: does it take place in the same world as the *Don Quixote* of Cervantes? When Cervantes found out about Avellaneda's text, he decided to write his own sequel, and that is the second part of *Don Quixote*. If all three texts are regarded as referring to the same world, this world will contain logical contradictions, since Don Quixote both performs certain actions—those reported by Avellaneda—and does not perform them, since they are not narrated by Cervantes. We can account for the difference between Cervantes's and Avellaneda's sequels by viewing the former as expanding the same world and the latter as creating another world that contains the world of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (or at least that of part 1).

As for the worlds of modifications and transpositions, the relation they bear to the original world is one of overlap. The worlds of transfictional texts can thus relate to the original world in three different ways: overlap, inclusion, and same world, just growing bigger (see fig. 1).

10. Both examples were suggested to me during oral presentations of this article, but I cannot vouch for their authenticity, especially not for the *Star Wars/Lord of the Rings* example. Still, the mere fact that they could occur makes quotation theoretically viable as a type of transfictional relation. One may wonder why the effect must be dissonant and incongruous; if it were not, the imported element would fit seamlessly into the storyworld, and the implicit quotation marks would vanish.

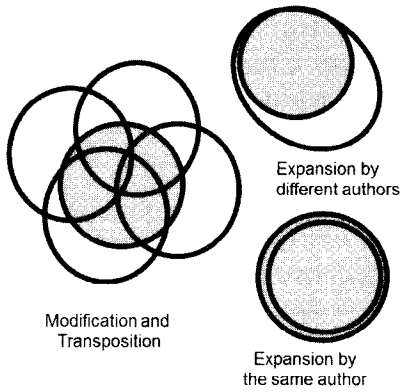

Figure 1 Relations between storyworlds in transfictional and transmedial systems. (Shaded area is the storyworld of the original text.)

Another operation that creates a relation between storyworlds, but without fusing them into one, is transmedial adaptation. Since different media have different affordances, giving them different expressive power, it is virtually impossible for two different media to project the same world. Take, for instance, the difference between novel and film. In a novel, the thoughts of characters can be represented very explicitly and in great detail; in a film, the corresponding resources are much more limited, and the mental states of characters must usually be inferred by the spectator on the basis of visual signs. Another important difference between these media has to do with the characters' appearances. In film, as Seymour Chatman (1978) has argued, we know instantly and fully what characters look like, and this allows us to make inferences about their other features. In a novel, by contrast, appearance can be left unspecified, and when a character is first introduced, we may know nothing more about him or her than a name or a referring expression. When characters are described, moreover, the description comes piece by piece, and it leaves many gaps to be filled in.

In addition to the differences that come from the medium itself, adaptations can differ from the original through each of the three major transfictional operations defined above (see also Ryan 2008: 399). A common operation is to expand the original world by adding new characters: for instance, the 1981 film version of John Fowles's 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, directed by Karel Reisz, adds a modern film crew to the nineteenth-century characters borrowed from the novel, and it presents the story of these characters as the script of the film whose production is

being represented. An adaptation can also modify the original plot by giving it a different ending, as does the Walt Disney Pictures animated film version of *The Little Mermaid*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker (1989), which ends with the mermaid getting the prince rather than dissolving into foam. Or it can transpose a plot to a different world, as does the film *Bride and Prejudice*, directed by Gurinder Chadha (2004), which relocates the plot of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in an Indian setting in order to parody Bollywood films. But there are also adaptations that seek to minimize the differences: for instance, the film *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993) compared with the novel by Michael Crichton (1990), who also wrote the script of the film.

In a transmedial story system, the most common relation between the various documents is expansion: for instance, if there is a video game based on a film, the game may invent a new character for the player to control, or it may focus on an aspect of the storyworld that remains undeveloped in earlier versions. Carlos Alberto Scolari (2009) mentions three kinds of expansions. *Interstitial stories* take place between the installments of a series (one can also place prequels and sequels in this category, since they expand the time period covered by the original document). *Parallel stories* take place at the same time as the original story by, for instance, following the destiny of a secondary character, and *peripheral stories* are "more or less distant satellites of the macrostory" (ibid.: 598). I would regard as peripheral stories the folklore and legends that relate to the objects of the storyworld.[11]

The relation of modification is much less common than expansion in transmedial projects, because it threatens the integrity of the original storyworld. But such modification is not unheard of: for instance, the game Star Wars: The Force Unleashed transports the player into a counterfactual world where the dark side of Darth Vader and of the Emperor prevails over the Force, while in the films it is the other way around. In this case, the relationship between the world of the films and the world of the game is partly a matter of plot—in both versions there is a war going on between the Force and the Dark Side—but mostly this relationship is a matter of names, of objects, of laws of nature, and above all of visual appearance. It is because a certain character is called Darth Vader, because he looks like the hero of the films, and because the main weapon used by characters is a light saber that the world of the game The Force Unleashed is perceived as a version of the

11. Scolari mentions a fourth category: user-generated content like blogs, wikis, and fan fiction. But such "content" does not belong to the same level of analysis as his other categories, since it can belong to any of them. Moreover, blogs and wikis are not necessarily part of the story system; they may consist of user comments, which evaluate the storyworld from an external perspective but do not contribute to its creation.

Star Wars universe. Modification is also very prominent in the apocryphal texts created by the fans; for instance, there is a whole genre, called slash fiction (Gwenllian-Jones 2005), that changes the sexual preferences of famous film or TV characters.

I believe, however, that the third relation, transposition, is not compatible with the spirit of today's transmedial franchises. If the plot of *Star Wars* were transported into a different environment—for example, into a world of medieval fantasy—nobody would recognize it as a version of *Star Wars*, because its plot is one of countless stories that tell about a struggle between good and evil.[12] What makes the *Star Wars* storyworld distinctive is not the plot but the setting, and if the setting is changed, the whole storyworld loses its identity.

As for the relation of quotation, it can be found in parodies, but it presents an even greater challenge to the spirit of transmedial storytelling than does transposition, because such quoting calls into question the unity and autonomy of the storyworld and so creates an ironic distance from this world that prevents immersion.

The relations between the elements of a transmedial project can be described not only in terms of semantic relations—as expansion, modification, and transposition may be called—but also in terms of legal status. A typical snowball project, such as the *Star Wars* franchise, consists of three types of elements (fig. 2):

(1) A core of canonical documents—here the six Lucas films—which variously expand the same world.

(2) Transmedial adaptations, such as single-user games and multiplayer online worlds (massively multiplayer online role-playing games [MMORPGs]), which are produced by different companies operating under license. The worlds of these texts tend to be expansions, because they must be approved by the original creators: for instance, the Lucas company would probably refuse to approve a *Star Wars* adaptation that did not offer good clean family fun. I represent these expansions as intersecting circles rather than as larger worlds containing the original, because they are also cross-medial adaptations.

12. The most distinctive feature of the *Star Wars* plot is the motif of father/son rivalry, one that climaxes in a confrontation leading to the death of one of them. This motif occurs in many narratives around the world, but it is not nearly as common as the struggle between good and evil. I doubt that a father-and-son rivalry would be in itself sufficient for an audience to recognize a story set in a medieval setting as being a transposition of the *Star Wars* plot. The connection could only be made if the similarity on the level of plot were reinforced by, for example, visual clues or related names.

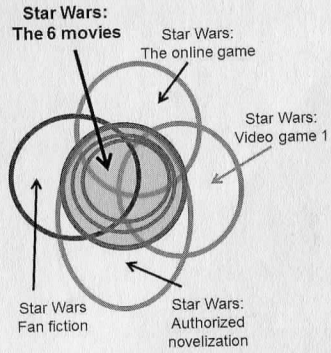

Figure 2 Relations between storyworlds in the *Star Wars* system

(3) Apocryphal documents produced by the fans. Here the operation of modification will be much more prevalent than with licensed products, because it allows the fans to take a satirical attitude toward the original world.

Alpha 0.7: A Single-World Transmedial Story System

While a snowball project consists of mostly overlapping worlds, a project conceived from the very beginning as transmedial and convergent can be described as the expansion of the same world through multiple documents. As an example of such a project, I will discuss the case of *Alpha 0.7: Der Feind in dir* (*Alpha 0.7: The Enemy Within*), a multimedial storytelling project created by the German TV chain Südwestrundfunk. *Alpha 0.7* ran in November and December 2010 and was advertised under the slogan "Keine Serie. Ein Universum" ("Not a series. A universe").

The core of this universe is a TV miniseries which ran for twenty-five minutes in six installments. It tells a story situated in Germany in the year 2017. In this world, a company called Protecta plans to introduce security systems that take the form of brain-scanning technology. When an individual develops the kind of thoughts that might lead to violent crime, his thinking will be changed by a chip implanted in his brain, and he will become harmless. The planned system will ensure near-total security for German citizens, but it will violate the individual's right to privacy. An underground movement called Apollo fights to maintain freedom of thought.

Figure 3 *Alpha 0.7*: Protecta Society website. A press release (*right column*) announces that Protecta's CEO Uwe Gonzoldt has been awarded an honorary degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. www.protecta-society.de

Alpha 0.7 uses television to tell the story, but it also uses websites and radio plays to provide supplementary documents about the storyworld.[13] For instance, there is a fictional blog maintained by Apollo that discusses the loss of personal freedom that is taking place in this world and the ethical dilemma of imposing security on the population at the cost of privacy. There is also the website of Protecta (see fig. 3), the company that manufactures the brain-scanning and brain-controlling technology. Through this website, which passes for that of a real company,[14] Protecta presents itself to the public as a benefactor of humankind. The positive image of Protecta is reinforced by a TV spot in which a convicted rapist praises the brain-controlling system of Protecta for turning him into a law-abiding citizen and saving him from a life in jail. Then there is the blog of the main character, a young woman named Johanna, who is hired by Protecta as a test subject: the company implants a chip in Johanna's brain, unbeknownst to her, in order to control her behavior. There is also a fictional TV show that reports the disappearance of a character named Stefan Hartmann (see fig. 4) and a web page that

13. The description I provide of the documents that create the transmedial world of *Alpha 0.7* is based on the configuration and content of the website in 2011. It has since evolved, and more information—mostly paratextual—has been added to it.

14. The illusion of reality is reinforced by a button that says Contact Us, but if you click and send Protecta an e-mail, you will get a response that acknowledges the fictional status of the company.

Figure 4 Fictional TV spot on the disappearance of Stefan Hartmann (Alpha 0.1, the first victim of Protecta). www.alpha07.de/de/tutorial

contains the links on Hartmann's computer. These links invite the user to investigate the websites that Hartmann visited in the hope of solving the mystery of the disappearance.

The ontological status of these multimedial documents is quite different from the status of the intersecting worlds in snowball systems. There the same characters and roughly the same events appear in different media: now in a novel, now in a game, now in a film. But the novel does not exist in the world of the game, the game does not exist in the world of the film, and the film does not exist in the world of the novel, because these various media represent *action* rather than media objects: they do not say "I am a film, I am a novel, I am a game" but rather "this and that happened." In the case of *Alpha 0.7*, by contrast, the task of representing action directly is fulfilled by the TV show, but the live action film is supplemented by media objects that exist within a common storyworld. In one of the TV episodes, for example, Johanna's blog appears on the screen as part of the plot, and it is read by her husband, who is trying to locate her after she has disappeared. Just as we viewers pretend that the images on the TV screen *are* the events of the storyworld, so we pretend that the blog on the real Internet *is* a blog that exists within the storyworld.

The function of the web documents is to provide background information which cannot really be presented in the medium of film because of its focus on action and dialogue. The written documents allow a much more complete description of ideas, of emotions, and of the scientific background of the series than does the TV series, because the readers can parse the information at

their own pace.[15] For instance, Johanna's blog explains her decision to take a job in Protecta, her initial impression of the company, and her relation to her husband and daughter much better than the film can. Here the system plays with the complementarity of the semiotic nature of two media, but the medium of written language is clearly subordinated to the medium of film. The system is designed for two kinds of spectators: those who watch the TV series exclusively (this will be the majority) and those who consult the other documents. But it is highly unlikely that there will be people who limit their visit to the websites and ignore the TV show: this would be like reading the descriptions in a novel and skipping the action parts.

The presentation of the universe of *Alpha 0.7* does not stop with fictional documents made up for the show. If we look at the links on the computer of Stefan Hartmann, we find a number of real-world documents: for instance, a Wikipedia entry about brain stimulation, another about paranoid schizophrenia, and an article from the famous German magazine *Der Spiegel* about human monsters and what to do with them.[16] These documents exist independently of the show, and they describe the real world, but by connecting them to the disappearance of Stefan Hartmann, the *Alpha 0.7* system integrates them into the fictional storyworld and redirects their reference toward this world. We see, for instance, the Wikipedia article on paranoid schizophrenia appear on Johanna's computer screen during the TV show.

This use of nonfictional documents as building blocks of the storyworld may seem at first sight to violate the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, but it can be regarded as a variation on the practice of referring to real-world individuals and events in historical novels: fictional worlds always overlap to some degree with the real world, otherwise they would be so unfamiliar that we would be unable to process them. If this kind of overlap appears stranger than a novel's reference to Napoléon, it is because the novel creates an imaginary counterpart of the real-life Napoléon, and this counterpart exists only in the storyworld specific to this particular novel. On the other hand, in the case of *Alpha 0.7* an object that can be reached outside the *Alpha 0.7* system—for instance, through a Google search regarding paranoid schizophrenia—is literally imported into the storyworld. Media objects, such as websites, can easily be decontextualized and transported across fictional borders.

15. Spectators can also control the time of projection when film appears on video, but so far they can only stop the video and restart it from another point, at the pace inherent to the recording. They cannot play it in slow or fast motion—at least not with the equipment commonly available.

16. This article was the cover story of *Der Spiegel* (May 5, 2008) about the case of Josef Fritzl.

So far we have seen documents creating the storyworld from two different ontological perspectives. The TV film creates it from an external (extradiegetic) perspective, since the film does not exist as an object within this world, while the fictional websites and the internalized real-world websites create it from an internal (intradiegetic) perspective, as texts that do exist within the storyworld.

In contrast to the films and websites that actively create the storyworld, however, some of the documents made accessible in the *Alpha 0.7* website describe it as a preexisting object, and they acknowledge its fictionality rather than making it pass in make-believe for the real world, as does genuine fictional discourse (Ryan 1991; Walton 1990). These documents are what Gérard Genette (1997 [1987]) would call paratexts. Gathered under the tab Story (in English on the website), they treat such categories as The World in 2017, The People, The Institutions, and The Narrative. These documents have two functions: (1) they give the user an idea of what the TV show and its satellite documents are about, just as the trailer of a film or the advertising copy on the back of a book would do, and (2) they explicitly suggest connections between the world of the TV series and the actual world.

These connections are reinforced by a last category of texts, accessible from the tab Research. It concerns real-world documents which are presented as evidence that today's world already contains the seeds of the dystopic situation depicted in the TV series. In contrast to the documents mentioned earlier, these real-world texts are not available to the characters, and they are consequently not integrated into the storyworld. Several of them are radio shows of Südwestrundfunk that describe the current state of neuroscience. They suggest that MRI techniques are getting closer and closer to being able to read thoughts, so that the brain-scanning technology of Protecta could very well become reality by 2017. Another real-world document linked to *Alpha 0.7* is a website that describes a research project of Homeland Security titled Hostile Intent Detection. This link insinuates that Homeland Security is pursuing the kind of projects that could lead to the situation depicted in the show: a society where the behavior of people is controlled by the state. The fictional world of 2017 may be a creation of the imagination, but it also belongs to the horizon of possible developments of the world of 2010. Through these documents, *Alpha 0.7* sends a message typical of dystopic science fiction, one that says: "This is a fictional world, but if you don't do anything, it will become your world."

Another type of nonfictional element on the *Alpha 0.7* website is the spectator comments gathered under the Forum tab. (For an overview of the various documents connected to *Alpha 0.7*, see fig. 5.) Here is an example of a comment that captures perfectly, in my view, the essence of such a project:

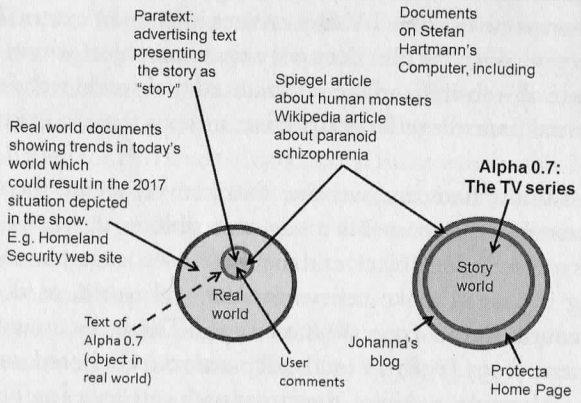

Figure 5 Relations between the documents of the transmedial universe of *Alpha 0.7*

Wenn ich das Konzept richtig verstanden habe, geht es eben nicht nur um die 25 Minuten, in denen die Sendung im Fernsehen ausgestrahlt wird. Es gibt diese Internetseite hier mit vielen Hintergrundinformationen, ein Forum zur Diskussion, diverse andere fingierte Webseiten zu dem Thema, Blogs und Videochannels bei YouTube. Ich weiß nicht, wie konsequent die Menschen im Hintergrund dieses Projektes den Informationsfluss am Laufen halten. Aber wenn in der Woche zwischen den Sendungen immer wieder neue Hinweise, Berichte und Videos auftauchen, können es schnell ein paar Stunden werden, in denen man sich pro Woche mit *Alpha 0.7* befasst. Und genau diese Idee fasziniert mich. (Südwestrundfunk 2010)

If I understand the concept correctly, there is more to *Alpha 0.7* than the 25 min in which the TV show is broadcast. There are also those Internet pages with lots of background information, a forum of discussion, various other made-up web pages on the general theme, blogs and videos on YouTube. I don't know how deliberately the people in the background of this project keep the flow of information going. But when new hints, reports and videos keep appearing in the week between the shows, it's easy to spend a couple of hours every week with *Alpha 0.7*. And it is precisely this idea that I find fascinating.

Central to these comments, at least in the early weeks of the show, was an attempt by the users to solve mysteries, such as why the show is called *Alpha 0.7* or the disappearance of Stefan Hartmann. These attempts to solve mysteries mean that *Alpha 0.7* was treated as an alternate reality game or ARG. The users were unclear as to whether there is an ARG or not, as this comment suggests:

Was ARG angeht, bin ich mir auch immernoch nicht sicher, ob es eins ist—denn meine Mails an Missing Link wurden noch nicht beantwortet, und unsere Teilnahme an sich ist mir auch noch nicht ganz klar. Vielleicht ist es ein Alternate Reality Experience. . . . Aber es kann sich jederzeit ändern. (Südwestrundfunk 2010)

As far as an ARG is concerned, I am still not sure if there is one, for my mails to Missing Link have not yet been answered, and it is not clear to me what role we are supposed to play in it. Maybe it is an alternate reality experience . . . but it can change at any time.

It had been in the plans of Südwestrundfunk[17] to include an ARG in the universe of *Alpha 0.7*, but nothing has come out of this idea. This failed plan provides an opportunity to address the question of how ARGs can be integrated into transmedial storytelling.

Alternate Reality Games as Part of Transmedial Story Systems

When ARGs are used as part of a transmedial project, they function as one of the many platforms through which the storyworld is realized. But ARGs are also inherently transmedial narratives, because they tell stories, and they do so by using a wide range of existing delivery systems: websites, e-mails, short message service (SMS) messages, GPS, phone calls, posters, stickers, and even live actors planted in real space. ARGs, however, are not simply forms of storytelling; they are primarily games, which means that they are played for the sake of problem solving much more than for the intrinsic interest of their narrative content. They give the user a much more active role than do the snowball projects and inherently transmedial storyworlds that I have discussed so far.

In ARGs, clues to a fictional story are dispersed throughout the real world and the Internet. Usually a website serves as an entrance point into the storyworld, known as a "rabbit hole"[18] in the jargon. Through a convention known as "this is not a game" (TINAG), the websites that provide clues look as if they were designed for other purposes—in other words, they hide the fact that they are fictional documents created specifically for the game. The TINAG convention is widely regarded as specific to ARGs, as compared with other types of games (e.g., sports games or board games), but it is a manifestation of a basic convention that underlies all fictional communi-

17. As told to the author by members of the production team during a public presentation of the project at Südwestrundfunk in Mainz in October 2010.
18. By reference to the rabbit hole that takes Alice into the dream world of Wonderland in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).

cation. This convention manifests itself most openly in those eighteenth-century novels (such as *Robinson Crusoe*) that present themselves as true letters or authentic memoirs. It is by denying its own fictionality, by trying to pass as true, that fiction invites readers to participate in its game of make-believe and to immerse themselves in the storyworld. Just as a novel tells its story as fact, an ARG tells it through websites that look as if they contain real-world information.

ARGs are played by following a trail of information that comes through a variety of delivery systems. For instance, a website may contain a phone number to call; the person who answers the call may indicate a real-world location to visit where a message will be transmitted; in addition, players may receive e-mails or SMS messages on their cell phones and may obtain clues from live actors positioned in certain locations. By solving riddles and communicating with other people, the players are directed toward ever-new sources of information that allow them to get more and more of the story. The riddles are usually so difficult that people cannot solve them on their own; in order to make progress in the game, it is necessary to communicate with other players—in other words, to form communities. At the end of the trail, the players have solved a mystery, much in the way a detective pieces together the story of a case. This story is not really told in any of the fragments—it develops mostly in the minds of the players. Jane McGonigal (2011: 287), a leading designer of ARGs, calls this mode of presentation "chaotic storytelling."

This chaotic mode makes it very difficult for scholars to research the plot of ARGs: at the end of the game—which runs in a limited time span—all that remains of the physical inscription of the story are isolated websites or wikis created by the players on which they exchange information about the game. Quite often these websites and wikis are no longer accessible after the termination of the game, and the only traces of the plot are the plot summaries provided in paratextual documents, such as Wikipedia articles or the private design documents of the developers. ARG stories are truly ephemeral phenomena; when the game is over, the public recording of the story vanishes.

ARGs have frequently been used to promote products of other media, especially TV and film. For instance, the first ARG, called The Beast by its players,[19] was conceived to advertise Steven Spielberg's (2001) film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. There were also a couple of ARGs connected to the popular TV show *Lost* (2004–10). When ARGs are used in a transmedial system, the problem is to coordinate their plot with the story told in the other documents.

19. See the Wikipedia (2013) article on The Beast.

This coordination involves not only the content but also the time frame, since both the ARG and the work being promoted by it develop over a certain period. When an ARG is linked to a film or TV show, there are three ways they can be connected in time.

The ARG precedes the release of the other work, so as to advertise it. Example: The Beast vis-à-vis Spielberg's film *A.I.* In this case, the plot of the ARG must constitute an optional prelude to the film or TV show. If it were necessary to play the ARG in order to understand the other work, this would exclude a large number of spectators. (Regarding The Beast, the two stories were largely independent of each other, but The ARG story could be very loosely connected to the action of the film by being regarded as the prehistory of the robots featured in the film. The ARG fulfilled its promotional role, because some of the clues were located on the posters that advertised the film.)

The ARG and the other work run concurrently. Example: the TV show *Lost* and the ARGs of the same name, which ran between the seasons of the show. Here again the problem is to keep the plots related but independent of each other. The ARG could, for instance, tell the story of a character who does not appear in the TV show but is somehow affected by the same events. This was possible with *Lost*, which is a massively parallel narrative with a lot of characters; the ARG could easily add yet another character without damaging the integrity of the show.

The ARG follows the other work. In this case, the ARG must pick up a thread in the plot of the film or TV show that has been left untied: for instance, a problem that has not been solved. The danger here is that the companion work will not reach proper closure, and its ending will leave many spectators frustrated.

In all three cases, the ARG must fulfill a condition formulated by Jason Mittell (forthcoming): "Transmedia extensions from a serial franchise must reward those who partake in them, but cannot punish those who do not." We can only speculate as to how an ARG could have been linked to *Alpha 0.7*. Would it have played concurrently with the series, or would it have followed the last episode? If the ARG had followed the series, it could not of course have attracted new spectators to *Alpha 0.7*. But it could still have fulfilled an advertising function by generating talk about *Alpha 0.7* in the social media, thereby attracting attention to the three divisions of Südwestrundfunk: television, radio, and Internet.

One way an ARG could have followed the TV series would have been to take over the plot of the radio shows, which were conceived by the developers

as a "second season"[20] and were aired after the final TV episode. The radio shows are a classical sequel: they chronicle the adventures of Johanna, who is freed from Protecta in the last TV episode but is wanted by the police, because when Protecta had control over her mind, they made her try to murder the minister-president of Baden-Württemberg, who opposed the brain scans. The ARG players could have received the task of locating Johanna, but this script would have come at the expense of the radio shows.

Alternatively, the ARG could have taken place during the six weeks of the TV series, developing a parallel plotline, one presumably centered on a secondary character. One way for an ARG running simultaneously with a TV series to fulfill an advertising function is to hide clues in the background of the screen picture; this forces the players to scrutinize the films. Since the episodes of *Alpha 0.7* are available on the Internet after they are broadcast for the first time, it is possible for the spectators to stop the video at certain moments to look for secret codes in the background. This is what the fan quoted earlier presumably did: he found an e-mail address by the name of "Missing Link"[21] and sent it a message, but he received no response, for there was no ARG. The words *Missing Link* could very well have been planted by the producers as the "rabbit hole" meant to function as a portal into the world-within-a-world of an ARG. When the project of an ARG collapsed, so did the rabbit hole.

When the idea of an ARG was dropped, the developers tried to generate fan activity by creating a fictional TV newscast on the disappearance of Stefan Hartmann.[22] By announcing "Stefan Hartmann's link list found," (*Alpha 0.7* "Die Suche nach Stefan Hartmann") the newscast invited the viewer to try to solve the mystery by exploring the websites that Stefan Hartmann had visited before his disappearance. One fan identified the names of the seven individuals who were used to test the brain chips of Protecta by exploiting the possibility of stopping the video of the TV films. In one episode, we see Uwe Gonzoldt, the CEO of Protecta, leaf through a pile of files; the pages move too fast for the TV spectator to capture any information, but if the video is stopped, the names on each file become easy to read. These names correspond to the various Alphas: Stefan Hartmann is Alpha 0.1, Johanna Berger Alpha 0.7. Once the names were identified, however, there was nothing more for the fans to do but watch Stefan Hartmann's occasional appearances in the TV series. (We see him contacting

20. Sebastian Hünerfeld and Bettina Flächer, coproducers of *Alpha 0.7*, personal communication with the author (spring 2011).
21. In the storyworld of *Alpha 0.7*, Missing Link is the name of an organization that looks for people who have mysteriously disappeared, a common occurrence in this world.
22. Sebastian Hünerfeld, personal communication with the author (spring 2011).

Apollo, the resistance group, and then committing suicide as he is being pursued by hit men from Protecta.)

The linkage of the TV series to an ARG points to a major problem in designing transmedial story systems: the individual documents must reach reasonable closure to satisfy the user who sticks to their medium, and yet they must be sufficiently open to generate additional content. The various media stand to each other in a relation of competition no less than of cooperation: when a bit of story is given to a medium, it must be taken away from another medium in order to avoid redundancy.[23] A certain amount of redundancy is admittedly good, since it makes the story accessible to people who engage with different documents, but it must be kept within certain limits; here resides the art of transmedial storytelling. The standard way of managing a compromise between closure and openness is to present each of the various components as a battle won in an ongoing war. In *Alpha 0.7*, the battle won at the end of the TV series is that Johanna has the chip removed from her brain and is consequently freed from the control of Protecta; but in the last scene, the leaders of Protecta reaffirm their intent to impose their system on society, thereby continuing the war. For a transmedial system to remain productive, the dark forces can never be defeated for good. According to Christian theology, the elimination of all evil will be the end of the world—which means the end of storyworlds.

The Design of Transmedial Story Systems

The last question I would like to address is what kind of stories, or plots, lend themselves to transmedial projects. As a point of departure, I will use the following observation made to Jenkins (2006: 116) by an anonymous filmmaker: "When I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn't really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media."

Yet a storyworld cannot acquire a distinctive identity without characters who inhabit it, and characters cannot acquire an identity without some kind

23. A good example of a transmedial project that sacrifices the integrity of its individual components by giving what belongs to one medium to another medium is mentioned by Klastrup and Tosca (2013: 112): "In the film *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), . . . the story of how Niobe's team manages to cut the electrical power down so that the heroes can succeed in their final mission is never shown, because it is part of the video game (*Enter the Matrix*, 2003) that the player must complete herself." The plot hole in the film is, however, not too damaging, because the spectator is distracted from the logic of the story by the special effects.

of personal history that follows them around. What, then, does it mean to "pitch a world" as opposed to "pitching a story" or "pitching a character"?

I regard "pitching a story" as creating a narrative whose main point of interest lies in the plot and which minimizes the representation of "how it feels"[24] to experience certain events. This focus on plot is clearly the case with fairy tales: Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, or the hero of Valdimir Propp's folktales do not have a personality that transcends the events in which they participate. When the hero gets the princess at the end of a tale, they live happily ever after, and there is no need for a sequel, because neither the hero nor his bride have the individuality that can support a new story. Another type of story-centered narrative is tragedy: as Aristotle (1996: 4.3, 11–12) observed, tragedy is dominated by the dramatic action. The plots of fairy tales and tragedies involve so much closure that there is no room for expansion. I am not saying that plot-centered stories cannot inspire transfictional operations;[25] but when they do so, the operation is predominantly transposition and occasionally modification. For instance, as Heta Pyrhonen (2010) has shown, there are countless versions of the fairy tale about Bluebeard that place the basic structure of the plot in different settings, but it would be a challenge to get the reader interested in a young Bluebeard who has not yet killed any wife or in the second marriage of the wife who survives him.

"Pitching a character" means creating a fictional individual who seems to possess a life of its own and who tempts the user to imagine how this individual would have behaved under different circumstances. But when the original narrative covers a long time span and the character undergoes psychological evolution during this time, it is very difficult to place new episodes along this narrative arc, because in these new episodes the character would have to be locked in an intermediate state. A story about Emma Bovary after her marriage but before her love affairs would miss her development and would therefore not be very interesting. For this reason, the memorable characters who inspire one story after another tend to be superhero types who do not evolve from one episode to the next: types such as Odysseus, Sherlock Holmes, Indiana Jones or James Bond. In this case, the storyworld develops through an accumulation of episodes that follow a standard and infinitely repeatable narrative pattern, the pattern of the individual problems solved by the hero. The storyworld gets bigger and bigger, but it does not really change in meaningful ways.

24. An aspect of narrative that Monika Fludernik (1996) regards as constitutive of story. I believe, on the contrary, that it can be more and less fully developed and cannot replace plot as a necessary condition of narrativity.

25. The content of Greek tragedy was of course subject to a heavy transfictional/transmedial activity that also included the visual arts, lyric poetry, and epics; but this activity is typical of oral societies, and Greek culture was then just emerging from the oral stage. Yet while the individual characters easily traveled across genres and media, the plots did not do so: as Aristotle (1996: 8.7, 30) observed, certain plots are suited for epic poetry, others for drama.

What does it take for a narrative to pitch a whole world rather than a character? This world must possess invariant features in order to be recognized as the common frame of reference of diverse documents. Even when the story is not character centered, the identity of its world depends on the recurrence of certain characters identified by names that function as rigid designators.[26] For example, a character referred to as "Darth Vader" in a novel or video game must be taken as a counterpart of the Darth Vader of the movies, and the referring term is not simply a homonym. A large network of characters connected by family relations or brought together by the circumstances of their fictional lives is a particularly favorable condition for a world-centered narrative system. As the worlds of Honoré de Balzac or William Faulkner have shown, the characters who play a central role in some of the stories of the system can appear as minor characters in other stories.

But in order to support a large story system, a fictional world must also present diversity. This does not necessarily mean that it must cover a large territory; it rather means that the world must be thought out by its creators in great detail, so that its various aspects can be described in different documents. If *The Lord of the Rings* has been so successful in spilling across multiple media, it is in part because it was much more fully imagined by its author than other fantastic worlds, such as the worlds of individual fairy tales. As Jenkins (2006: 116) observes (relying on the new media theorist Janet Murray [2007]), a transmedial storyworld must have an encyclopedic capacity. It should inspire the same passion that leads some people to spend hours researching family history, military history, and the lives of their favorite celebrities; to create online maps and encyclopedias of the worlds of popular novels;[27] or to build their own imaginary worlds on the Internet.[28] This passion can be an ethnographic curiosity about the institutions, ethnic groups, history, geogra-

26. The "rigid designator" theory of names, developed by Saul Kripke (1972), claims that names do not stand for certain clusters of properties but are attached to certain individuals, and to all the counterparts of these individuals in different possible worlds, through an original act of baptism. According to this theory, the properties of Darth Vader can change substantially from world to world and from text to text without severing the connection to the original Darth Vader. Yet one must ask if there are essential properties that cannot be changed: I doubt that a fictional white dog named Darth Vader would be recognized as being a counterpart of the villain of *Star Wars*.

27. One example is George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, which has not only generated a transmedial empire (novels, the HBO television show *Game of Thrones*, games) but has also inspired websites that aspire to gather all that can be known about the storyworld. See towerofthehand.com.

28. Here I am thinking of people who build imaginary micronations by posting their descrip-

phy, and cultural traditions of the storyworld, or it can be motivated by the desire to solve a mystery. The theme of conspiracy particularly encourages detective activity, because it suggests that, under the overabundance of information that the storyworld throws at users in seemingly random fashion, there is a meaningful trail of signs that leads to a rational understanding of reality. This idea that everything will make sense once they correctly decipher the signs is the motivation that sends the players of ARGs on a time-consuming hunt for hidden clues.

In the case of *Alpha 0.7*, the main motivation for exploring the various documents is the belief that the fictional world represents the future of the real world. The appeal of *Alpha 0.7* does not reside in the narrative action—the show is a rather conventional thriller that resorts to many cheap plot tricks, such as poorly motivated sudden turns[29]—but mainly lies in the dramatization of ethical issues that concern everybody: the dilemma between security and personal freedom and the ever-increasing ability of brain science to understand and control the mind. The designers of *Alpha 0.7* were much more successful in creating a world than in creating a story; but the TV series is good enough to provide a thread that guides users through the storyworld and motivates them to learn more about it.

Conclusion

Why are transmedial projects currently so popular? I can think of six answers.

A marketing trick. Transmedial story systems are imposed on us by the developers. Their purpose is not artistic but economic: transmedial storytelling is for them just a way to get us to consume as many products as possible. This is certainly the case with *Alpha 0.7*: Südwestrundfunk sells TV, radio, and Internet services, the three media through which the story is distributed. (In fact, some of the radio shows that are linked to the website are so remotely connected to the story that the purpose of the link is obviously promotional.)

The pleasure of experimentation. Whenever new media are developed, people have a strong urge to use them for artistic and entertainment purposes that go beyond the function for which they were originally devised. Transmedial storytelling is a response to the proliferation of media and delivery systems that the digital revolution of the past fifty years has brought upon us. It offers the audience an opportunity to use the latest electronic gadgets, such as

tions on the Internet. Examples of micronations are Aristasia, the Feminine Empire; Bergonia; Freedonia; Lizbekistan; Reuniao; Talossa; and Uteged (see Ryan 2007).

29. For instance, Johanna is captured by Protecta and then miraculously frees herself; then she walks too easily into a trap set up by Protecta and is recaptured.

smart phones, tablets, and GPS. This motivation is particularly strong in the case of ARGs.

The need for community-building stories. When a narrative corpus acquires an identity-defining status for a group, it tends to spill over multiple media, as the treatment of biblical stories has demonstrated. Through a feedback loop effect, the ability of these stories to create worldwide communities has inspired transmedial franchises, which have strengthened the power of the stories to create communities.

Customizable time frame. Convergent projects like *Alpha 0.7* enable users to research the storyworld on the web and therefore to spend as much time in it as they want rather than having the duration of their immersion imposed on them by the medium. (Compare the remarks of the fan quoted above.) The individual documents of transmedial narrative require specific time frames—time of reading, time of watching—but users are free to decide how many documents they want to consult and consequently how far they want to explore the storyworld.

Downloadable media. The possibility of downloading videos or radio plays means two things for transmedial storytelling: (1) Users are no longer tied to rigid time schedules in order to access the documents that represent the storyworld; for instance, with *Alpha 0.7*, if you miss the showing of an episode on TV, you can catch it online the next day. (2) These documents can be stopped and replayed, so that they can be studied like a literary text or a still picture. For instance, this resource would help the spectators who thought that *Alpha 0.7* was connected to an ARG and tried to find hidden phone numbers or website addresses in the background.

Return of cognitive investment. Finally, there is a reason for popularity that operates not only in the case of transmedial storytelling but also in regard to serials and monomedial transfictionality: once we have invested sufficient mental energy to construct a storyworld, we want to collect the dividends of our efforts by being able to return to this world as often as we want. Immersion takes some time to develop, but with transmedial storytelling, serials, and transfictionality, we are already immersed when new events are told, because our imaginations have built themselves a long-lasting home in the storyworld.

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