Transmedia Storytelling

Industry Buzzword or New Narrative Experience?

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Is there such a thing as transmedia storytelling? In a sense I am playing the devil's advocate. The culture of the past twenty years has produced a vast number of "cult" narratives that have generated adaptations in many different media, inspired tens of thousands of texts of fan fiction, and were continually expanded through action figures, toys, T-shirts, mugs, and other gimmicks. Narrative systems such as George Lucas's *Star Wars*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*, or Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* keep sprouting up and suggest that transmedia storytelling is the most important narrative mode of our time. There are even manuals that tell us how to write for transmedia (see Bernardo 2011; Phillips 2012), though their advice does not instantly turn readers into masters of the art. The advocates of transmedia want us to believe that, thanks to the recent proliferation of new media, storytelling will never be the same. But while we cannot deny the existence of a cultural phenomenon known as

transmedia storytelling, we can ask whether it is a form of storytelling or primarily a marketing strategy, whether it is really new, what its various forms are, and what narratology can do about it beyond acknowledging its existence. As a criterion for deciding whether this cultural phenomenon deserves the labels *transmedia* and *storytelling*, I will use Henry Jenkins's well-known definition: "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" (2007: n. pag.).

What Transmedia Storytelling Is Not (Or Rather, Should Not Be)

If transmedia storytelling is going to be a truly new narrative experience, it will be useful to take a look at other, mostly older phenomena that bear a certain resemblance with it, but from which it should differ.

First, transmedia storytelling should not be conceived of as mere adaptation or illustration, two forms of transmedial activity that have been with us for centuries if not millennia, as one can see from the dissemination of Greek myth through various artistic media—sculpture, architecture, drama, epic—or, closer to us, the multiple modes of distribution of biblical stories in the Middle Ages. The multiple medial incarnations of biblical stories or of Greek myth are not the result of a deliberate decision by an authority to distribute narrative content across different media; rather, they are the result of a bottom-up, grassroots phenomenon that I call the "snowball effect." In the snowball effect, certain stories enjoy so much popularity, or become culturally so prominent, that they spontaneously generate a variety of either same-medium retellings or cross-media illustrations and adaptations. According to Jenkins's definition, by contrast, transmedia storytelling is a deliberate attempt to make media converge around a shared narrative content. Another difference between adaptation and transmedia storytelling, according to Jenkins, lies in the fact that adaptation tries (with greater or lesser success) to tell the same story in a different medium, while transmedia storytelling tells different stories about a given storyworld: "And for many of us, a simple adapta-

tion may be 'transmedia,' but it is not 'transmedia storytelling' because it is simply re-presenting an existing story rather than expanding and annotating the fictional world" (2009a: n. pag.).

Second, transmedia storytelling involves, but cannot be reduced to, what Richard Saint-Gelais (2011) has called transfictionality, namely, the migration of fictional entities across different texts. Transfictionality can be traced back to the rise of the Western novel, which means to the invention of print. One of its first known instances is the new adventures of *Don Quixote* published in 1614 by Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. Another early example is the multiple imitations that were inspired by *Robinson Crusoe*. Transfictionality can consist of three operations (see Ryan 2008, 2013): expansion (such as prequels and sequels), modification (such as changing the ending of a story and consequently the fate of characters), and the transposition of plot into a new setting, such as a Greek myth being transported into the modern world. Transmedia storytelling could be regarded as a form of transfictionality that operates across different media, but it is largely limited to expansion, because expansion is the only operation that preserves the integrity of the storyworld (see Thon 2015). Expansion places users in familiar territory, while modification and especially transposition force them to alter their existing representation of the story and of its world. The copyright holders of "cult" narratives are usually protective of their content and discourage such world-changing operations (see Harvey 2014).

Third, our concept of transmedia storytelling should not include the use of various media platforms to advertise a certain narrative product. When the Steven Spielberg movie *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) was advertised with an alternate-reality game called *The Beast*, this did not qualify as transmedia storytelling, because there was next to no narrative relation between *The Beast* and the movie. Similarly, when a company named Campfire advertised the TV serial *Game of Thrones* (2011–) through puzzles that were distributed over the Internet (see Klastrup and Tosca 2014), this was a way to generate hype, but it was not transmedia storytelling, because the puzzles did not contribute useful information to the storyworld of the TV serial.

Fourth, transmedia storytelling should not be confused with multi-

modal narration, that is, the use of various types of signs to tell a story, such as language and linearly organized images in comics, language, sound, and moving pictures in film, or music, gestures, stage design, and language in opera (see Kress 2010; Page 2010). While in multimodal narration the different semiotic channels are organically connected, so that the story would make no sense, or at least lose a great deal of its appeal, if one type of signs was disabled, in transmedia storytelling the different semiotic or media objects are autonomous entities that can be consumed separately from each other, and there is no need to consume them all: the user can explore the database more or less thoroughly.

Storytelling versus World-Building

The term "transmedia storytelling" suggests that narrative content forms a unified story, which means a self-contained type of meaning that follows a temporal arc leading from an initial state to a complication and resolution. This arc is what Aristotle had in mind when he described stories as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. But story arcs do not lend themselves easily to fragmentation and dispersion into multiple documents. Imagine how annoying it would be to read the beginning of a story in a novel, then to have to buy a comic book, and finally to get the next episode, then to have to go to a movie theater to have to play a computer game in order to find out how it ends. This is not how transmedia storytelling works. Transmedia storytelling is not a serial: it does not tell a single story, but a variety of autonomous stories, or episodes, contained in various documents. What holds these stories together is that they take place in the same storyworld. People are willing to look for information in many documents and across multiple platforms because they are so in love with the storyworld that they cannot get enough information about it. In its "classical" form (i.e., the one represented by commercial franchises), transmedia storytelling is not a game of putting a story together like a jigsaw puzzle, but rather a return trip to a favorite world. It satisfies the encyclopedist's passion for acquiring more and more knowledge about a world, or the collector's passion for acquiring more and more souvenirs, but not the detective's passion for reconstructing a story out of disseminated facts. The term "transme-

dia storytelling" is therefore a misnomer: the phenomenon should rather be called transmedia *world-building* (see Weiler 2009; Wolf 2012).

The key to successful transmedia storytelling (as I will continue to call it, since it is the accepted term) is the selection of the right type of material to start with. Transmedia storytelling is supposed to be a top-down operation that coordinates various media for a global experience, but in practice it usually starts bottom-up, by exploiting the commercial success of a narrative originally conceived as autonomous, often a novel. This is how the transmedia empires of *The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter*, or *A Song of Ice and Fire* started. The common denominator of all these narratives is that the storyworld attracts a lot of attention because of its exotic character, often to the detriment of the plot. We can rank narrative genres according to the relative prominence of world and plot; for instance, tragedy and jokes are plot-dominant, while fantasy and science-fiction are world-dominant. In a plot-dominated genre, the storyworld is mainly a container for the characters and their actions, and the plot could easily be moved to another type of world, through the operation that I have called "transposition" (see Ryan 2008, 2013). In a world-dominated genre, by contrast, the plot acts as a path through the storyworld that reveals the diversity of its landscapes, the variety of its biological species, and the particularities of its social system. The more richly imagined a storyworld is from the beginning, the more stories can be told about it, and the more discoveries it offers to the user. This is why world-dominated narratives present much better material for transmedia storytelling than plot-dominated ones. As a filmmaker told Henry Jenkins, "when I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn't really have 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" (Jenkins 2006: 116).

But how do you pitch a world? What makes a world distinctive? Doesn't a fictional world's identity rely in a large part on the characters who populate it? We would not recognize a novel or comic book as being about the same world as the *Star Wars* movies if we did not find Darth Vader, Yoda, or Luke Skywalker in it. It is the presence of Sherlock

Holmes that distinguishes his world from the world of other narratives that take place in Victorian London. Yet a work can "pitch a character" without pitching a world: for instance, the TV drama *Elementary* (2012–) places Sherlock Holmes in contemporary New York City, and Dr. Watson is a woman. I would call this an example of transposition, and I would not regard the world of *Elementary* as the same as the world of the Conan Doyle stories. While it is necessary to import characters in order to pitch a world, it is not enough to import a single character. One must import an entire cast, together with its social, technological, and natural environment. By importing a whole cast, it becomes possible to expand the world by telling the story of minor characters. And since the lives of these characters become entangled with the lives of other people, the population of the storyworld can keep growing with every new document.

Top-Down Design

As I have already observed, Jenkins's definition presupposes a top-down planning that distributes narrative information into multiple documents, so that users will have to consume many of these documents for a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Yet in practice, most franchises grow bottom-up, through a process of aggregation that adds ever new documents to the representation of a storyworld that has already achieved popularity, independently of any transmedia build-up. The original master text creates a world *ex nihilo* by telling a story about it, and the satellites adopt this world and add to it, by filling it with new stories.

Transmedia projects that are conceived top-down from the very beginning are the exception rather than the rule. To illustrate the process of top-down creation I will discuss two transmedia systems in some detail. My first example, *The Matrix*, is borrowed from Henry Jenkins's discussion of this case in *Convergence Culture* (2006). *The Matrix* is the epitome of a top-down approach to transmedia storytelling. The three films, released in 1999 and 2003, were accompanied by short anime films, comics, and computer games that had been specially commissioned by the authors of the films, Andy and Larry (now Lana) Wachowski. The most notable feature of the *Matrix* franchise is that its

individual elements depend on each other for a better understanding of the whole. In transmedia storytelling the various media stand in a relation of competition as much as they stand in a relation of cooperation, since when a bit of story is given to a medium it must be taken away from another medium to avoid redundancy. If too much is taken away—in other words if there is no redundancy—the elements of the system will be incomplete and the user will be frustrated, but if nothing is taken away from the individual parts—if they all tell a full story—the user will have no incentive to explore other documents.

The Wachowskis' design philosophy is clearly aimed at cultivating the desire to look beyond the films, especially when it comes to the relation between the films and the computer games. For instance, in the film *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), the good guys succeed in their final mission because a character named Niobe and her team manage to cut down the electrical power that feeds the machines. This event, which is necessary to the logic of the plot, is not shown in the film, but it is one of the tasks that the player must complete in the game. Or to take another example, there is an episode in *The Matrix Reloaded* where the main character, Neo, encounters a new character named the Kid who wants to join in Neo's fight against the machines. From their dialogue one can conclude that they already know each other. The story of their first meeting is not shown in the film, but it is the subject matter of one of the anime shorts titled *The Kid's Story*. In both of these examples, the film shows an event that can only be fully explained through a backstory, even though this backstory is told in another document.

The overall structure of the *Matrix* franchise can be compared to pieces of Swiss cheese. The films present an image of the storyworld that is full of plot holes. The function of the other documents is to fill these holes so that the user can form a more complete, more coherent mental representation of the storyworld. Conversely, the film provides information that completes the stories told by the other documents. Therefore, each element of the system depends on other documents for the plugging of its holes.

This does not mean that the system can be entered through any of its elements. Take the story of the Kid. In the short film that is part of *The Animatrix* (2003), Neo contacts the Kid on his cell phone, the Kid

commits himself to Neo's cause, he is pursued by the Agents, he throws himself from a roof, and, rather than dying, he lands in another world, which happens to be the real world, where he meets Neo and Trinity.[1]

To the spectator unfamiliar with *The Matrix* and *The Matrix Reloaded*, this would make no sense, since this spectator would not know who Neo or the Agents are, nor that what passes as the real world is in fact a virtual reality projected by the machines. The plot holes in *The Kid's Story* would be far too big to provide an autonomous experience, while the plot holes in *The Matrix Reloaded* are relatively minor. Moreover, most spectators will be so distracted from the logic of the story by the special effects that they will not notice the inconsequencies. The feature films provide a much more efficient entry point—what is called a "mothership" in the TV industry (see Jenkins 2006; Mittell 2014)—than the other documents. Since the films received the most publicity, I very much doubt that a significant number of users approached the system through the short films, the comics, or the games.

My second type of top-down design is represented by a German TV project titled *Alpha 0.7: Der Feind in Dir* (The enemy within), which was produced in 2010 by the German TV channel Südwest Rundfunk (see Ryan 2013). *Alpha 0.7* consists of three elements: a main document (a TV mini-serial that ran in six weekly installments of thirty minutes), a series of satellite documents available on the Internet, and a series of radio shows that presented a sequel to the mini-serial.

Alpha 0.7 tells a story situated in Germany in the year 2017. In this world, a company named Protecta plans to introduce security systems that take the form of brain-scanning technology. When individuals develop the kind of thoughts that could lead to violent crime, their thinking will be changed by implanting a chip in their brain, and they will be turned into harmless persons. The planned system will ensure near-total security for German citizens, but it will violate the individual's right to privacy.

The plot of the TV mini-serial unfolds around a young woman named Johanna who is hired by Protecta as a test subject—the seventh such subject, as the title *Alpha 0.7* suggests; all the others have mysteriously disappeared or committed suicide. The company implants a chip in Johanna's brain, unbeknownst to her, in order to control her be-

havior. Meanwhile, an underground movement called Apollo fights to maintain freedom of thought. In the course of the plot, Johanna escapes from Protecta, makes contact with Apollo, and has the chip removed—only to be captured again, have the chip put back in, and so on, in a series of reversals typical of the genre thriller. In the final episode she is freed from Protecta, but she is wanted by the police for a murder she attempted when she was under Protecta's control. Her adventures as a fugitive are the subject matter of the radio show.

Alpha 0.7 uses television and radio to tell the story, but it also uses a website to provide supplementary documents about the storyworld. For instance, Apollo maintains a fictional blog that discusses the ethical dilemma of imposing security on the population at the cost of privacy. There is a website on which Protecta presents itself to the public as a benefactor of mankind. This positive image 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 Johanna, who describes, on a day-to-day basis, the changes that are taking place in her mind and her fear that she is suffering from a mental disease. There is also a fictional TV news spot that reports the disappearance of a character named Stefan Hartmann, who was Alpha 0.1, and a web page that contains the links on Hartmann's computer. The user is invited to visit these links in order to solve the mystery of Hartmann's disappearance. And finally there are links to a number of real-world documents, such as the website of Homeland Security, describing a project about "hostile intent detection," or websites that describe recent achievements in brain science, which is getting ever closer to reading minds. The nonfictional documents exist independently of the story, but their reference is redirected from the real world to the storyworld. Their function is to suggest that the fictional world of *Alpha 0.7* is not as different from the real world as one may think (especially after recent revelations about the spying activities on ordinary citizens by the National Security Agency). Through these documents, *Alpha 0.7* sends a message typical of dystopic science fiction: "This is a fictional world, but if you don't do anything, it will become your world."

As I hope to have suggested through this summary, the interest of

Alpha 0.7 lies much more in the storyworld than in the plot. The vast majority of spectators will probably limit their exploration of the storyworld to the TV serial, and they will only get to know those features that can be seen from the trail of the plot, but the users who consult the satellite documents will gain a broader view of the storyworld and of its relations to the actual world. The satellite documents play the same role as descriptions in a novel: the plot is realized in the TV and radio show, but the world is fleshed out in the satellites. All in all, the multiple documents that make up the *Alpha 0.7* system fulfill a core condition of successful transmedial storytelling that was formulated by Jason Mittell: they must reward those who consume them without punishing those who do not (see Mittell 2014: 272).

Transmedia Storytelling, Participatory Culture, and Interactivity

Transmedia storytelling has flourished in a cultural climate that Jenkins calls "participatory." There is no doubt that popular storyworlds—"cult" narratives—create user communities, and that communities are held together by the active participation of their members, yet I would like to argue that there is no necessary relation between active user participation and transmediality. Thanks to digital technology, we now have a new medium—or should it be called a meta-medium?—that is not only capable of encoding and transmitting every other medium but also provides tools that allow people to engage creatively with storyworlds. The purest manifestation of participatory culture is the phenomenon of fan fiction, which existed before the digital revolution but has exploded since the Internet made it possible for fans to share their creations with countless other fans (see Lindgren Leavenworth 2015; Thomas 2011). But fan fiction and other forms of spontaneous, bottom-up fan contributions are only a small part of transmedia franchises, and one that is not licensed by the owners of the intellectual properties. Take a look at the *Star Wars* franchise. What makes it transmedia is not the fact that it inspired a lot of fan fiction (which tends to use mainly text, with occasional videos or art), but the fact that the films were complemented by novels, comics, and computer games, all licensed by LucasArts, and

consequently produced top-down. "Fan participation" and "transmedia storytelling" tend to be regarded as aspects of the same phenomenon, because the narratives that generate transmedia projects also tend to inspire a lot of fan fiction. But there are transmedia projects that do not generate fan fiction (*Alpha 0.7* is an example), and conversely, there could be single-medium narratives such as films or novels that do generate fan fiction activity.[2] If we adhere strictly to Jenkins's top-down definition, fan fiction does not represent a systematic dispersion of content, and it does not create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Texts of fan fiction often contradict each other, and when there are ten thousand such texts available on the Internet, no one will be familiar with more than an small fraction of the corpus. This is not to deny the narratological value of studying the mechanisms through which fans expand, modify, and transpose the worlds of transmedia franchises; what I want to say is that fan fiction is a by-product rather than a core constituent of transmedia storytelling.

Although transmedia projects are not inherently participatory, one of Jenkins's seven principles of transmedia storytelling (no. 7: performance) stresses the importance of giving the user something to do (see Jenkins 2009b).[3] But what kind of tasks and what forms of interactivity can transmedia storytelling support? Interactivity is a broad category that needs to be subdivided if it is going to provide a useful analytical tool for transmedia systems. I propose to distinguish three types. The first is *external interactivity*, which consists of the freedom of making choices among documents presented by a system to the user. It is an inherent property of databases, and it is not a particularly interesting phenomenon. The second is *internal interactivity*, which is inherent to some of the documents of a transmedia system. In internal interactivity, the user's mode of participation is narrowly scripted by the system. For instance, in most video games, users are told to play the role of certain characters and to pursue certain goals. But the user's actions do not leave permanent traces on the system; once you have finished playing a video game, the game world will revert to its initial state for the next player and the game can be replayed under the same conditions. The third type is truly *productive interactivity*, which leaves durable traces on the system, so that the user's contributions can be seen by other users.

Productive interactivity can be either bottom-up, as in the case of fan fiction, or controlled top-down by the system. An example of system-controlled interactivity would be a transmedia project that allows users to post publicly visible comments or to contribute their own materials about a certain topic. In these cases top-down meets bottom-up, since the producers of the system openly invite users to create content. An idealized view of transmedia storytelling presents it as the possibility to co-create or change a story, but collective creation is only feasible when the system consists of a collection of individual stories, rather than of a global story line. It is always possible to add your own story to a narrative database that collects individual testimonies in various media, but it would be disastrous for narrative coherence to allow the fans to access and modify the documents that constitute the mothership. Despite all the hype about participatory culture, transmedia storytelling is not particularly hospitable to collective creation.

The two examples of top-down transmedia storytelling that I have discussed present very modest degrees of interactivity. Both, of course, offer the exploratory interactivity of the first type. In *The Matrix*, the video game represents interactivity of the second type, while in *Alpha 0.7*, there is a forum where users can post comments. Since these comments can be read by other users, they represents an interactivity of the third type. But there is only a handful of them, because *Alpha 0.7* was not a popular success, and they did not affect the plot of the TV show, because the show was already entirely produced before the first episode was shown, in contrast with those serials that span several seasons.

Choice of World

Most transmedia franchises concern storyworlds that are both fictional and fantastic or futuristic. Is this relation necessary, or is it coincidental? I think it is neither: there are good reasons for the predilection of transmedia developers for fantastic worlds, but these reasons are not compelling. Transmedia could very well develop around works with a realistic setting. The preference of transmedia for ontologically remote worlds can be explained in several ways.

First, it takes a lot of cognitive effort to imagine a world very dif-

ferent from ours, because we cannot use our experience of the real world. When a text mentions a horse we can imagine it on the basis of our knowledge of real horses, but when a text mentions a ghorf we have only the information provided by the text to visualize this kind of creature, unless there are illustrations (see Ryan 1991 on minimal departure). Since they are harder to imagine than realistic worlds, fantastic worlds have much more to gain from a transmedial and multimodal representation that depicts them through many different kinds of signs that address different senses.

Second, once fans have expended the effort to imagine a strange and remote world, they want a return on their cognitive investment. This return consists of many more texts that provide quick and easy access to a world with which they are already familiar, and in which they can be instantly immersed, without having to go through a painful period of initiation.

Third, transmedia franchises tend to develop around blockbuster films, which are themselves often adaptations of best-selling novels. In this age of cultural and economic globalization, Hollywood favors the kind of stories that will captivate audiences all over the world, especially in China. Fantastic worlds, being disconnected from particular geographic, historical, and social circumstances, have a much better chance of fulfilling this requirement than realistic ones.

And finally, the predominance of fantastic worlds in transmedia franchises can be explained by the fact that these franchises primarily target adolescents and young adults. In our early childhood we are almost exclusively exposed to stories that take place in fantastic worlds, such as fairy tales, myths, and stories about talking animals or animated objects. It is only later in our mental development that we are given realistic stories to read. The literature for young adults is often a mixture of everyday setting and fantastic events, for instance, high school students, with whom the reader can identify, meeting vampires and zombies who threaten their familiar world. Since children and young adults are big consumers of toys, action figures, comics, videos, and computer games, it is no surprise that the entertainment industry would target the kinds of worlds that stir their imagination.

Transmedia Nonfiction

There is, however, no reason why transmedia storytelling could not take as its subject matter realistic storyworlds, or even the real world (see Moloney 2014). News stories naturally come to us through multiple media: newspapers articles, TV spots, audio, books, and movies. Imagine that you are fascinated by some real-world event, such as a particularly sensational crime that takes place, preferably in high society. You will read or watch every news item that relates to the case, and the story of the crime will be brought to you piecemeal by texts of different media. Because the story unfolds in time, the authors of these documents do not have a complete view of the plot. It is only when the case has been closed that books or documentary films presenting the whole story from a retrospective point of view can be produced. The various media objects can be gathered into an archive, allowing the user to experience the story in its temporal unfolding as well as in its various semiotic ramifications. My example of a crime is a discrete story, with a clear beginning and ending—provided it is ever solved—but the transmedia treatment can also be given to broader topics that combine multiple individual stories with nonnarrative information: topics such as climate change, the Holocaust, or undocumented immigration. The journalistic concept of story, which designates a topic, an area of investigation, is much more amenable to transmedia treatment than its more linear narratological counterpart (as defined, e.g., in Ryan 2007), because it can contain many different testimonies and documents, each of which can be presented in the medium that best fits the nature of its information.

As an example of a nonfictional transmedia narrative, consider Rob Hornstra and Arnold van Bruggen's *The Sochi Project* (2007–14), a project in "slow journalism" dedicated to the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics.[4] Comparing Sochi to a "Potemkin village" (i.e., a seemingly prosperous village filled with happily waving peasants hastily built by the lover of Catherine the Great along the road taken by the empress during a visit to the countryside), the project explores what lies behind the fancy facades of the newly constructed Olympic complex (by far the most expensive in Olympic history). While the facade shows President Vladimir Putin's triumphal announcement (in English and French) of

the awarding of the games to Russia, the hidden side documents the contrast between the poverty of the region and the glamour of the new buildings, the separatist movements of the North Caucasus (Chechnya and North Ossetia), the frozen conflict of neighboring Abkhazia (a region that broke away from Georgia but remains unrecognized as a country by most of the world), the enormous sums spent to guarantee security during the games, the displacement of residents to build the Olympic facilities, and so on. This material is presented through text, still pictures, maps, music, and videos, all accessible from the project's website. A series of books was also published, one of which is entirely accessible from the website (*Empty Land, Promised Land*, about Abkhazia). It could be argued that *The Sochi Project* is not "really" transmedia, since all the documents are available on the same platform (the same holds true of *Alpha 0.7*). In a prototypical transmedia franchise like *Star Wars* or *The Matrix*, by contrast, the documents are located in different places, and the user not only has to run from the movie theater to the bookstore to the toy store to the site of the cosplay event, but she also has to buy most items separately. The question here is whether transmedia storytelling is a marketing ploy or a way to achieve a more complete sensory and mental representation of storyworlds (a term that I do not restrict to fiction). The question is also what is to be considered a medium: if media are platforms for the transmission of information, then *The Sochi Project* is monomedial, since all the documents are available on the website, but if media are artistic/semiotic means of expression, then the texts, images, and movies of *The Sochi Project* do indeed make it transmedia.

Augmented Books as a Form of Transmedia Storytelling

If top-down transmedia storytelling can work with nonfictional content, why couldn't it also work with fictional stories? (Remember that most examples of fictional transmedia are commercial franchises built bottom-up around an established storyworld.) One could, for instance, create a multimedia archive of an imaginary crime, or an encyclopedia concerning a fantastic world—what media people call a bible. A recent tendency in narrative consists of embedding a variety of simulated doc-

uments within the text. In Alison Bechdel's autobiographic (and therefore only semi-fictional) graphic novels *Fun Home* (2006) and *Are You My Mother?* (2012), for instance, we get facsimiles of maps, photos, and pages from Virginia Woolf's novels or Freud's writings, all reproduced by the pen of the author. This is multimodality rather than transmediality, since the documents cannot be taken out of the book. But if one makes media objects available on the Internet, and if one gives access to them by scanning special symbols on the page with a smartphone or tablet, as does Marisha Pessl in her augmented book *Night Film* (2013), one will achieve transmediality in both the technological and the semiotic sense of medium, since the peripherals are situated in the clouds rather than in the book, and since they provide sensory dimensions not possible in book form. The question, however, is whether the augmentations are really worth the effort needed to access them, whether they truly enrich the storyworld. For digitally augmented books to become more than an isolated curiosity, more than a technological gimmick, novelists will have to think of plots that truly benefit from the additional layer of information without sacrificing the basic layer. We have the technology; now it is up to the novelists to create the stories.

Conclusion

It may be true that, when people love a story and its world, they will want more and more documents that add substance to the storyworld and more and more objects that demonstrate their loyalty to the brand (see Scolari 2009). This principle is what inspires bottom-up transmedia projects. But it is counterbalanced by another tendency, a preference to stick with the native medium of a storyworld. Fans of a TV serial want additional installments much more than they want a novelization, and fans of a comic book series want another comic book much more than they want a computer game or a webisode. The only two media between which people will easily switch are novels and movies.[5] If transmedia development is to extend further, it must be dictated by some narrative necessity, rather than being treated as inherently desirable. The difficulty of justifying the distribution of narrative information over many de-

livery systems could explain why, as media developer Brian Clark (2012) has argued, there are no great transmedia hits. There are certainly many hits that *became* transmedia—what I call the snowball effect—but Clark is saying that there are no projects conceived as transmedia from the very beginning, no *native* transmedia projects that became great successes.[6] This failure to produce a great hit can be interpreted in two ways. According to one explanation, transmedia storytelling is not an autonomous mode of storytelling but rather a marketing strategy that force-feeds storyworlds to the public through as many media platforms as available, in order to reach the widest possible audience (a strategy disturbingly reminiscent of how Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, took control of the press, radio, film, and the nascent TV to disseminate the narrative of Aryan superiority). According to the other explanation, the failure to produce a mega-hit just means that transmedia storytelling (or world-building, if you prefer) is an experimental project that still needs to find its true calling. In this case, the criterion for success is not to produce a mega-hit but, more modestly, to create a work that justifies its transmedia buildup.

Notes

1. This episode actually suffers from the same incompleteness of backstory as the encounter between the Kid and Neo in *The Matrix Reloaded*: how does Neo know the phone number of the Kid if they have never met?

2. Of course, if that happens the copyright owners will quickly expand the storyworld to other media.

3. Jenkins's (2009b) seven "principles of transmedia" are (1) spreadability versus drillability, (2) continuity versus multiplicity, (3) immersion versus extractibility, (4), world-building, (5) seriality, (6) subjectivity, and (7) performance. Note that some are formulated as oppositions, which makes one wonder which term counts as principle (if both do, wouldn't that mean that transmedia storytelling is indifferent with respect to these notions?), while others are singular.

4. Slow journalism is a movement that advocates the in-depth exploration of an issue, as opposed to the traditional focus of journalism on breaking news and sensational revelations (see Le Masurier 2014).

5. I base this claim on the fact that when a novel is adapted to the screen, the novel often jumps to the top of best-seller lists. Conversely, if I can judge by my own experience, when a favorite novel is turned into a film, many readers will be eager to see the film. Of all the entertainment media, film has the greatest

potential to attract fans of other media, because it is cheap, easily accessible, time-limited, and highly immersive.

6. What about *The Matrix*, you ask? *The Matrix* became a hit because of the movies, not because of their transmedia peripherals.

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