

Current State of Cross Media Storytelling: Preliminary observations for future design

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Abstract

This paper analyses the current state of design and usage of cross media storytelling. In line with the session 'matrix', works will be assessed according to patterns of low, moderate and high acceptance and diffusion. Preliminary observations are offered to assist in the formation of characteristics of, and design guidelines for, cross media works.

1 Classifying cross media storytelling

As recognised by Hannele et al. cross media has multiple meanings: the term can refer to '[c]reate once, publish anywhere', 'ability to leverage content over a variety of media' and 'creation and implementation of single graphics for a variety of media' (Hannele et al., 2004, 19). Unlike these usages this paper addresses the phenomenon of cross media storytelling, which Monique de Haas defines as 'communication where the storyline will direct the receiver from one medium to the next' (Hannele et al., 2004, 19). De Haas' definition rightly places the activity of the user of a cross media work and the role of the storyline in directing this activity as primary elements.

1.1 User activity

Espen Aarseth differentiated between the interpretative and constructive aspects of reading and physical activity by outlining a category of literature that requires the later: 'ergodic literature' (Aarseth, 1997). For Aarseth, the activity (such as following a hyperlink, turning a knob, moving a joystick) is needed to access a work and for meaning-formation (ibid., 1). The user of a cross media work, an ergodist perhaps, does indeed need activity to access the work. Cross media games that require the player to search for the content as explained by the designers of the 'immersive game' *The Beast* (Microsoft and Dreamworks, 2001):

'We [4orty 2wo Entertainment] tell our stories in the form of "search operas" -- narratives that spill off the page, the screen, the web, the phone--and into peoples' lives. We don't send an advertising message into the maelstrom of other competing messages: we reverse-engineer the process, so that the consumer comes looking for our campaign and our

client's product. We create communities passionately committed to spending not just their money but their imaginations in the worlds we represent.'

(Anonymous, 2004b)

Access in a cross media work is ongoing, for without navigation between channels the work is not cross media. While is helpful in identifying works that require 'nontrivial effort' there are more specific aspects to the user of a cross media work that are not addressed in Aarseth's terminology.

PhD researcher Tom Apperley sees franchises as encouraging 'the audience to experience a sense that each product is a part of a wider mediated universe that is largely constructed in the minds of the audience through the process of assemblage of the disparate media.' (Apperley, 2004, 3). Cross media works therefore, according to Apperley, are constructed by the audience or user. Indeed, they are assemblers of pieces or products scattered across media and it is their task to bridge the gaps and to create a work. This implies some passivity on behalf of the design of a product (though a jigsaw is best delivered fragmented and not solved) and it places responsibility for meaning construction on behalf of the assembler and not the storyteller, but it does elevate the ergodic and interpretive activity as a primary force in the nature of cross media storytelling.

Henry Jenkins has observed how a user of the cross media work of Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix* (1999-2004) franchise of films, comics, game and so on is 'always going to feel inadequate before *The Matrix* because it expects more than any individual spectator can provide' (Jenkins, 2003b). Jenkins quoted game designer Neil Young in describing how the cross media user accrues information: "additive comprehension" (ibid.). My experience is that perhaps *addictive comprehension* is more apt. Jane McGonigal, in her research into the immersive "game" of Microsoft and DreamWorks' *The Beast*, related how those participating in "the game", *The Cloudmakers*, saw themselves as a "collective detective" (McGonigal, 2003, 110). Unlike the type of games McGonigal describes — alternately labeled "alternate reality games", "immersive games", "unfiction" and "collective detecting" (ibid.) — a cross media work can be experienced in a singular or collective fashion.

Are cross media users gamers? Multiple types of players, and so their motivation for playing, have been and are being developed in Ludology. Some examples are Richard Bartle's 'achievers', 'explorers', 'socialisers' and 'killers' (Bartle, 1996), Ron Edwards's 'Gamist', 'Narrativist' and 'Simulationist' (Edwards, 2001) and Nick Yee's five motivations: 'relationship', 'immersion', 'grief', 'achievement', and 'leadership' (Yee, 2004). A typology of a cross media user is an area that would benefit from this research, but it would need to address how the user, the material *and* narrative aspects of the work interact.

1.2 Activity that is narrative-driven:

De Haas says the storyline or the narrator (de Haas, 2002) as the director of activity in a cross media work. This is important element for it:

- discriminates between the use of multiple media around a work and the experience of following a work through media;
- discriminates between adaptations in multiple media and the peculiar mode of storytelling using multiple media;
- discriminates between ‘transmedia intertextual commodities’, that is: the remediation of content across platforms (Apperley, 2004), and storytelling;
- has the potential to distinguish between commercial exploitation and entertainment, even pedagogical tools (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004).

To what degree, however, is the user directed by a storyline? Most cross media works, like *The Matrix* franchise have channels that are self-sufficient to a large degree (the film, comics, game), but also reference each other and indeed are needed to understand the work (Jenkins, 2003a). Henry Jenkins defines works such as *The Matrix* as ‘transmedia’:

‘In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa.’

Alternately, there can be a work that requires two mediums in order to experience the *one story*, or game in this case of the video board game. Examples are the *Nightmare I - IV* video board games (A Couple A' Cowboys 1991-1995), now the *Atmosfear* DVD board game (Pressman Toy Corp., 2004), the *Star Trek Next Generation: A Klingon Challenge* (Decipher Inc., 1995) and *Star Wars* interactive video board game (Parker Brothers, 1996). The games require the use of a board and a video, or DVD, at a single-point-in-time. The board game cannot be played without the video/DVD and vice versa. It is a multi channel, single-story work.

To differentiate between the transmedia and transfiction I’ll introduce the term ‘transfiction’. Transfiction is a single-story told over multiple channels. It can be single-point-in-time (ie: simultaneous media usage) as with the video board game, or alternating between channels.

1.3 Navigation between media:

The requirement for movement between channels or media is a vital characteristic of cross media; however, to be inclusive of all the aspects of a cross media work, activity within a channel needs to be recognised. A cross media work involves different channels such as a film, print, mobile phone and a website. A computer is a confluent media though that offers text, video, audio, networking, 2D, 3D and virtual environments. There may be within a given cross media work many websites, and of these websites many modes (image, text, audio). In order to capture the usage of these sites and modes, and to appropriately design for these they need to be recognised in the bounds of cross media. Let us explore then, the different types of media navigation that can occur.

- Cross channel: between channels;

- Inter-channel: within a channel (single-channel), between modes (multi-modal);
- Intra-channel: single-channel, mono-modal;

1.3.1 Cross channel

By ‘channel’ I refer not only to the medium but to all the environmental conditions surrounding it: a film can be experienced in a movie theatre, on DVD or video at home, on DVD or from a movie file on a computer. These would be considered specificities of a channel. An example is to separate *The Matrix* films from *The Matrix* IMAX release.

If a channel has more than one medium in it, for example a sculpture with television sets embedded or a stage show with projections, then it would be considered a single channel, a hybrid art, and not two channels. Hybrid Art facilitates a convergence of interaction systems that coalesce into one — a unique singular mode of interaction. Cross channel navigation occurs when the user has to navigate, to move physically and conceptually to another system of interaction. An ‘assembly’ has to take place therefore (in line with Apperley’s ‘assembler’) on behalf of the user, not the object. Kress and Van Leeuwen define ‘assembly’ from a semiotic perspective as being the case when: ‘there is no longer a single, integrated original. Instead, a range of fragments is assembled into a whole’ (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001, 102). Hybrid Art has already been assembled, whereas cross media requires effort to bring all the components into a whole. The user may be sitting in the exactly the same spot, reading a book at their desk and then using the Internet, but they have to change their interaction (from turning pages to taping a keyboard) and the associated cognitive processes to ‘build’ the work.

1.3.2 Inter-channel

This navigation occurs within the same channel, for example on a networked computer. An example is a website that has a hyperlink (guided navigation) to another. Another, unguided but nevertheless explicit is a television advertisement that refers a viewer to a sitcom to answer a question in a competition. The difference, however, between inter- and intra-channel navigation is the modal repertoire. Kress and Van Leeuwen distinguish between ‘multimodality’ and ‘multimediality’ as follows:

‘Radio [...] is multimodal in its affordances, because it involves speech, music and other sounds; but it is monomedial, since it can only be heard, and not seen, smelled, touched or tasted. [...] It therefore also follows that, just as a given mode (e.g. language) may be realised in different media (e.g. speech and handwriting), so several modes (e.g. language, pictures) may be realised in the same medium (e.g. painting, or moulded plastic).’

(Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001, 67 my ellipses)

Modes, for Kress and Van Leeuwen, can be combined to ‘reinforce each other, [...] fulfil complementary roles, or be hierarchically ordered’ (ibid., 20, my ellipses). Inter-channel navigation involves the movement within a channel and between modes. For example, moving from a text-based webpage to a video sequence.

1.3.3 Intra-channel

Intra-channel navigation therefore, is within the same channel and within the same mode. An example would be fast-forwarding through an audio recording at the request of the narrator.

Although these modal distinctions may seem petty for the sake of identifying a cross media work, they are nevertheless helpful in establishing the wide expanse of a cross media work and in recognising the complexity in choosing channel and modal elements for design.

To summarise, a cross media work needs to have the following characteristics:

- 1) User activity to assemble the 'work';
- 2) Activity is narrative-driven;
- 3) Activity is between channels, and can be within a channel, and between modes;

2 Cross Media Design and Usage

Cross media storytelling is not new -- it's antecedents of theatre and hybrid arts have existed since the segregation of art practices -- however the vast palette of media now available for producing cross-media storytelling, networked capabilities, remediation and mass markets set the stage for a process of storytelling we seem ready to produce and experience but not quite ready to orchestrate with flair. Why? The following section offers observations on high, moderate and low acceptance and diffusion of cross media works in entertainment. When assessing works according to their acceptance and diffusion levels I encountered the problem of who to attribute a primary opinion. Many works, for instance, are accepted and diffused among certain age-groups and rejected by others. Both instances have implications for future use and design. Additionally, many of the obstacles to acceptance and diffusion are common to all the works. Therefore, I discuss the obstacles and successes, and suggest recommendations for future design, albeit briefly.

2.1 Factors influencing Moderate to High Acceptance and Diffusion

The Beast (Microsoft and Dreamworks, 2001) was played by over three million people (evenly male and female) all over the world, with 'well over 300 million impressions through coverage in mainstream media such [as] Time Magazine, CNN, and USA Today, as well as from niche outlets such as Slashdot, Wired, and Ain't it Cool News' (Anonymous, 2004a). Industry honored the achievement also with numerous awards 'including Best Idea (New York Times Magazine), Best Website (Entertainment Weekly), and Best Advertising Campaign (Time Magazine)' (ibid.).

The game involved following and deciphering clues on websites, phone calls, emails, faxes, television, film, newspapers, people and locations. The following factors influencing acceptance and diffusion of *The Beast* are extrapolated from Jane McGonigal's paper (McGonigal, 2003). The first are the design techniques that McGonigal believes lead to the success of the game. McGonigal claims 'immersive aesthetics', the "interfaceless interface" (Bolter and Grusin, 1999 cited in McGonigal),

was a primary force in uptake and continued play. She describes the elements of ‘immersive aesthetics’ as:

a) ‘Alternate reality’

‘[T]he Beast’s producers co-opted real environments to enable a virtual engagement with reality [...] The Beast recognized no game boundaries; the players were *always* playing...’ (112, original emphasis, my ellipses) This was so successful the players thought they could “solve” 9/11 (ibid.).

b) Pervasive fiction

‘The vast majority of game content was distributed via the Internet, on the Web sites [...] Aesthetically, technologically and phenomenologically speaking, there was no difference at all between the look, function or accessibility of the in-game sites and non-game sites.’ (112, my ellipses)

c) Nothing was simulated

‘[E]very aspect of the player’s experience was, phenomenologically speaking, real.’ (112) For example, webpage hacks were enacted identically to how they would be in real life and game plot developments corresponded with the player’s real life time.

d) “TING”/‘sub-dermal’ method

‘To “TING” a game now means to explicitly deny and purposefully obscure its nature as a game...’ (113). Also described as ‘sub-dermal: there was no overt acknowledgement that it was part of a marketing campaign for the film’ by the designers (Anonymous, 2004a).

There are also the benefits to the players, which impacts on their continued playing and uptake of future works. The following are, once again, extrapolated from McGonigal:

- **Collaborative power:** ‘The Cloudmakers [...] proudly identified themselves [...] as “a collective intelligence unparalleled in entertainment history”...’ (110). ‘The Shove members’ [...] refused to defer to the producers, the players felt authorized and entitled to step in when they believed that higher authorities had failed them’ (114);
- **Application of specialist skills:** ‘Players were also charged with cracking complicated and time-consuming puzzles that variously required programming, translating and hacking skills, obscure knowledge of literature, history and the arts, and brute computing force.’ (111).
- **Development of specialist skills:** ‘Although many Cloudmakers were incredibly tech-savvy before beginning the game [...] the Beast changed their subjective experience of that technology.’ (116)
- **Transformed patterns for real-world action:** ‘The translation of game-inspired confidence and game-learned practices constitutes the main link, I believe, between immersive aesthetics and real-world action.’ (114) Applied to 9/11, 2002 Washington D.C. sniper problem, Think Tank on corruption and waste in U.S. federal government spending.

In summary, factors affecting moderate to high acceptance and diffusion:

- Immersive Aesthetics: real-world devices, pervasive fiction, no simulations, TING/sub-dermal.
- Collaborative power;
- Application of specialist skills;
- Development of specialist skills;
- High-impact interactivity;
- Transformed patterns;

2.2 Factors influencing Low to Moderate Acceptance and Diffusion

Without the ‘immersive aesthetics’ of “TING” and pervasive fiction McGonigal claims that a player is not able to immerse themselves in the game, which then reduces their desire to continue with the game. Pervasive games like the *Nokia Game* (It’s Alive, 2002), McGonigal continues, offered mini games with only ‘symbolic diegetic meaning’, leaving the players ‘interacting with a signifier’ (113, original emphasis). This factor is, I believe, a primary influence and will be addressed in the recommendations section of this paper. For now, let us consider some other factors.

Another pivotal cross media work, *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999-2004), was embraced initially and then audiences splintered into fans and critics. Jenkins cites three reasons for apparent misgivings of the project:

- **It was assessed from a ‘mono-media’ perspective:** Film critics are ‘stuck within a mono-media rather than a trans-media paradigm’;
- **The effort required to access the work and in meaning-formation:** ‘You are always going to feel inadequate before *The Matrix* because it expects more than any individual spectator can provide’;
- **Inchoate poetics:** The ‘aesthetics of transmedia storytelling are still relatively undefined’.

(Extrapolated from Jenkins, 2003b)

Obviously ‘mono-media’ approaches to criticism will persist in some sectors but recognition and understanding of transmedia will emerge in the larger community. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol 1* and *2* are examples of another film-maker pushing the *rules* of film -- where the story is told over two films rather than each being self-sufficient -- and of cult audiences being perhaps better prepared for the stylistic dalliances or narrative development than critics¹. For the sake of diffusion there are on the one hand audiences ready or eager to embrace the alternate approach to narrative delivery and on the other the necessity to design a cross media work to accommodate emerging cross media narrative literacy. The poetics of cross media will therefore continue to transform along with the audiences and technologies.

The greater effort required of the audience is cited by Jenkins as being an ‘inadequacy’ but also a strength. A cross media work, therefore, will not be for everyone. Jenkins also

¹ Although not ‘cross media’ the inter-media narrative design and navigation should be considered.

excuses criticism of the third film -- ‘it is trying to do too much, close off too many openings, and has this feel of ticking off plot elements’ -- as being due to inchoate poetics. Ultimately though Jenkins is excited by the rise of ‘transmedia storytelling’ and praises the artistic intentions of those involved:

‘Transmedia storytelling is trying to take an economic imperative (the need to build up franchises in an era of media conglomeration) and trying to turn it into a creative opportunity. There remains an uneasiness about what is ruling this process—art or commerce.’

(Jenkins, 2003b)

The *Pokémon* phenomenon -- the parental, media and sociological uproar around it -- is the poster-boy of the art or commerce debate. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green, in their chapter on the need for a pedagogical interpretation of Pokémon, outline the furore:

...Pokémon appears to be distinctly “calculated,” both in terms of its relation to Nintendo's broader commercial strategy and in terms of its inclusive appeal to the child market. On this account, the corporation is seen to engage in a deliberate--even cynical--form of manipulation. The assumption here is that success is almost guaranteed, and that the children who are the consumers are easy targets for commercial exploitation. Advocates of this view might well go further, arguing that a phenomenon such as Pokémon creates “false needs,” which it then promises to satisfy through consumption; and that, in the process, it prevents other forms of children's culture, forms that might be more “dangerous” or “oppositional,” from every existing (see Kline 1993). From this perspective, the success of Pokémon could be interpreted as evidence of the overpowering control of global, corporate capital, or, in more theoretical terms, of the victory of structure over agency.

(Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004, 17)

Buckingham and Sefton-Green discuss the ‘good and bad’ arguments around media effects. Two negative arguments they consider are:

- **The economic exploitation of children:** ‘commercial dimension of Pokémon, and in particular the trading of cards’ (ibid., 26)
- **Low aesthetic value:** ‘...the Pokémon movie and the TV cartoon...were frequently described as trashy and worthless, particularly on the grounds of their lack of visual sophistication.’ (ibid., 30)

Other examples of the objection against what seems to be economic exploitation is the reaction to the *Neopets* website, which has been described as having the ‘potential to be the next Pokemon’ (Anonymous, 2004c). When television show *Today Tonight* and newspaper the *Herald Sun* announced that children who buy particular McHappy Meals were going online and playing ‘gambling’ games at the *Neopets* website, parents and the

media reacted quickly. Initially reluctant McDonalds 'bowed to public pressure and shut down gambling on a children's website' (Ha?, 2004). The concern was not just the over the overt 'gambling' games of blackjack and pokies, but also the amount of advertising targeted directly to the children.

Adults have also objected. In 2002 writer Tony Walsh led an online protest against McDonald's kiosks in *Sims Online* (Electronic Arts, 2003) led by Tony Walsh (Walsh, 2002). Also, a fan of the Fight Club film and book made his feelings about the Fight Club Game clear on the Vivendi Universal Games Forum:

XII - 10:33pm Jul 8, 2004 PST

I jokingly ran a search for fight club 2 hoping I would find nothing but to my surprise it was not a sequel I found, but a game..... this is terrible..... this stands against everything that fight club stands for..... its not about marketing and merchandise and advertising..... its about the message.... this is the worst game I have ever heard of.... even the actual fight club in fight club was not about making your opponent bleed or about slamming them into the ground and breaking their spine as this game suggests.... it was about feeling... about the sensation of life...'

(XII, 2004)

In summary, factors that influence low to moderate acceptance and diffusion of cross media works:

- (Experienced) + assessed from a 'mono-media' perspective;
- Intimidating + exhausting activity required;
- Parental wariness of negative media effects: economic manipulation + low-aesthetic judgements;
- Low employment of 'immersive aesthetics';
- Inchoate poetics;
- Anti-commercialisation

3 Provisional Recommendations for future design:

Many of the impedances to acceptance and diffusion and criticisms of cross media works can be reduced, I believe, with the development of the narrative elements. The design of content on channels and modes that are diegetic will assist in immersion the persistence of it; provide motivation for cross-, inter- and intra- media activity; has the potential to reduce negative media effects criticisms such as 'economic manipulation' and 'low aesthetics'; assist in the development of transfiction and 'interactive storytelling' narrative design. To be diegetic the content and the interface in the channel and modes needs to have a story or storyworld role.

To play a **story role** the channel or mode must be:

- Designed as primary source of information about characters, setting and plot;

- Designed and experienced as an entry-point to the whole multi-channel work;
- The experience of it has a strong impact in story comprehension;
- If collaborative, user participation can impact story creation;
- Consistent information about characters, setting plot;
- Being a product that cannot be separated from a particular fiction;
- Can be self-contained (if transmedia) or one of the primary texts (if transfiction);
- Are familiar and preferred channels.

To play a **storyworld role** the channel or mode:

- Has lesser impact on story comprehension;
- Not primary source of information about characters, setting and plot;
- Provides further information about characters, setting and plot that are primary or secondary in the story channel or mode;
- Does not play a direct role in the unfolding plot;
- Augments story comprehension;
- Medium-level influence on comprehension of story;
- Consistent with characters, setting and plot in story channel or mode;
- Allows the fictional world to be accessed in the real world through character identification and scene extension;
- Must perpetuate story channel and not break fictional setting.

It is interesting that the majority of the ‘best sellers’² of Harry Potter merchandise are consistently what I categorise as ‘story world’ objects. Items like the *Harry Potter* scarf, student hat, Quidditch costume, Dementor costume, Gryffindor tie, Hermione Granger costume, Harry Potter costume, Professor McGonigal's hat, Wizard chess set and Zonko's Joke Wand all facilitate role-playing and are objects found within the story. The future design of cross media works need to, I believe, transform much of the narrative and navigation techniques currently used in media. The exciting part is that we are all part of the emergence of this storytelling system glimpsed but never see before in the long history of entertainment.

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² As claimed on the *Harry Potter* online shop. Available at: http://harrypotter.wbshop.com/catalog/category.xml?category_id=3981;pcid1=2677

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