

Introduction to Expanding Universes

Exploring Games and Transmedial Ways of World-building

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Transmedia is a wide concept, as by definition, it is a network of various media forms. It includes also games, both digital and more traditional forms of games. Even though transmedia productions often are built around a certain television series, as Elizabeth Evans and M. J. Clarke have argued (Evans 2011; Clarke 2012), in some cases a digital game has been the core production as well. Some early examples include the *Gadget: Invention, Travel, & Adventure* (1993) a game expanded by a picture book and a novel *The Third Force: A novel of Gadget* (1996) authored by well-recognized science fiction author Marc Laidlaw, and the *Myst* (1993) game series, accompanied by a series of novels which were not adaptations of the game, but provided novel story content for the game world. *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) and *Mass Effect* (2007) game series have also spawned rich transmedia universes. For some reason, however, games have not been looked at in detail in their role as a part of a transmedia whole. Games are somewhat specific as a media form, in their product-audience relation, and in the way how they incorporate playfulness into that relation. In many cases, games are just one, and often minor, part of a wide transmedia franchise, but even in such cases the playfulness involved in transmedia user practices makes games well worth closer scrutiny.

In the introduction to *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon propose to pivot the reflection on transmedial narrative strategies around the post-

classical narrative concept of storyworld. Storyworlds here are defined as representations that transcend both media boundaries and the ‘native’ territory of language in narrative fiction – which allows for abandoning what Linda Hutcheon associated with the ‘realist imperialism’ of classical narrative studies, that is their dependence on exclusive real-world reference as well as Barthesian ‘having-been-there of things’ principle for constructing narrative meaning (Hutcheon 1987, 4; Barthes 1977, 44). Media-conscious narratology allows, therefore, for studying not only medium-specific aspects of narrative that consequently form various disciplines in the humanities (such as film, literature, music, or game studies), but also those medium-free, like fictional characters, locations, or even whole worlds. This is why using these tools helps tackling such underdeveloped research subjects as, for instance, cross-overs that, when analyzed only as intertextual links between two or more texts of culture, quintessentially lose what makes them unique that is both the transgression from one fictional world to another and the reoccurrence of a given character or location disregarding the specifics of any medium involved in the process.

The intersection of transmedial and narrative studies occurred on even a wider scale in Jan-Noël Thon’s recent monograph *Transmedial Narratology in Contemporary Media Culture* wherein he leaned toward studying ‘transmedial strategies of narrative representation’ rather than media-specific renditions of transmedial stories which neglect the fact that narrativity itself is a transmedial phenomenon (Thon 2016: xvi-xviii). Thon’s contribution is unique both for his multimedia literacy (the book analyses literature, movie, video game, or comic book examples on equal terms) and elaboration on transmedial storyworlds as part of even larger transmedial universes that encompass not only consistent and natural elements of narrative – seen by Colin B. Harvey as hallmarks of transmediality in general (Harvey 2014: 279) – but also those inconsistent and unnatural. Consequently, it is possible to treat Albus Dumbledore’s double portrayal by Richard Harris and Michael Gambon in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* movie adaptations as expanding on the single character despite conspicuous differences in its characterization, costume, or even appearance. This is even more visible in incongruent and largely undocumented products of so-called “fan labour”, with a particular emphasis on fan fiction in literature or modding scene in gaming. Countless mods for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) unquestionably expand the gameworld and probe its narrative boundaries by introducing cheerfully postmodern and playful mash-ups

and mock-ups (like those replacing textures of fearsome dragons with models of Thomas the Tank or introducing to the stark winter world of *Skyrim* colorful unicorns from *My Little Pony*). Similarly, numerous short stories or encyclopaedic entries that compose *Star Wars Expanded Universe*, now known as Disney-curated *legendarium*, enhance the experience of convergent storytelling by building up a xenoencyclopaedia (Saint-Gelais 1999: 140) – a fictional field of reference that needs to be acknowledged in order to better immerse the addressee in the inhabitable space of transmedial storyworld.

As the examples above show, there is a playful element in much of transmedia engagement. According to Mittell (2015, 314 – 315) there is “What If?” type of transmedia storytelling that allows incompatible elements alongside the canonical, and “What Is” transmedia which main concern is to fill in the gaps in the core text. What If? type of transmedia storytelling, especially gives room for playful exploration of alternative modifications of the canonical world. In this way, transmediality presents itself as a field for new narratives to emerge, and one phenomenon where that is very explicit, is the so-called Let’s Play videos. There is a wide variety of Let’s Play video genres, but all of them record a player playing certain game, showing simultaneously the on-screen action and the commenting player. (Kerttula 2016) As many popular games are part of a bigger transmedia franchise, the Let’s Play videos often base their narrative not only on the game played, but also on the other related productions, demonstrating transmedial user practices in a highly explicit way. Even though much of the Let’s Play videos are focusing on the play performance, there are many Let’s Players turning the commentary itself to a performance, creating new, often humorous, narratives to widen the transmedia storyworld, and who, by doing this, have become popular culture celebrities themselves.

A majority of the articles published in this volume were originally presented as conference papers at the “Expanding Universes. Exploring Transmedial & Transfictional Ways of World-building” (23-25 Sept 2016) International Conference, organized by independent academic foundation, Facta Ficta Research Centre, in Kraków, Poland. Set as a starting point for a long-running interdisciplinary project on transmediality, transfictionality, and world-building in contemporary media culture, the conference was meant to broaden the notion of transmediality beyond somewhat limited mono-media studies and show the massive potential of world-building as a leading cultural phenomenon nowadays. Marie-Laure Ryan’s keynote lec-

ture *On the Worldness of Narrative Representation* (recorded and available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7muPBXTaIrY>) well mirrored the conference scope, showing how contemporary world-building practices may be tracked back to the very roots of narrative and possible worlds theory alike. Ryan drew attention particularly to the concept of *worldness* – famously introduced by Lisbeth Klastrup and later on developed in her further research conducted with Susana Tosca – claiming that “when a text creates a world, we imagine that there is more to this world than the text represents” (Ryan 2016). Furthermore, Ryan’s lecture framed transmedial narrative practices into a new, world-centered paradigm that – contrary to the text-centered one, characteristic for broadly understood modernism and its representational idiosyncrasies – rendered the concept of narrative beyond medium-specific appropriation in favour of a more inclusive, all-media approach. Thanks to that particular contribution, conference attendees proceeded in their talks further into studying the narrative complexity of fictional worlds triggered by their multimedia diegetic instantiations rather than the meaning of a given cultural text which does not necessarily coincides with what lies beyond it – “a wonderful world to inhabit” (Toft-Nielsen 2013).

Table 1. A comparison of classical text-centered and post-classical world-centered approach to narrative. Source: Marie-Laure Ryan, On the Worldness of Narrative Representation. Available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/factaficta/marielaure-ryan-on-the-worldness-of-narrative-representation>

	Textualism	World approach
Medium concerned	Literature	All media
Cultural domain	High culture	All levels of culture
Prototypical genre	Poetry	Narrative
Concept of meaning	Infinite, endless deferral	Blueprint for imagining a world
What the text is about	Itself, language	Characters, events, human problems, etc.
“Textual world”	Sum of meaning unique to text	Imagined as existing independently of text
Ideal user experience	Appreciating play of language	Immersion

Several presentations at that conference were dealing with games, and we are happy to be able to bring some of the highlights to a wider audience here. Three of papers look at transmedia universes centered around certain digital game, *World of Warcraft* (2004) and *Metal Gear Solid*, and three of them expand the transmedia perspective each in their own way. One article deals with larp, live-action role playing games, a somewhat odd form of gaming, familiar mainly to initiated ones, where one has to start with the question if larp can be considered as a media, in the first place, before proceeding to its transmedia aspects. *Dear Esther* (2012), one of the best known games in the genre of Walking Simulators, games with very little, if at all, game action, focus being on investigating the game world and piecing together story fragments found scattered around it. Finally, transmediality also manifests itself in how we are accustomed to the ways of different media to the extent, that we may expect that the logic specific to a certain media should be available in other media forms as well. When digital games have taught us to get used to the endlessly repeating loop of tries, failures and new attempts, 'Game Over – Start Again', it is not surprising, that there is an increasing number of films, tv series and novels, in which the story repeats itself in similar narrative loops. In the transmedia landscape, the habits of one media easily circulate and multiply among other media too, creating the wider transmedia strategies of Thon.

Jonathan Barbara has conducted an empirical research among people who have watched the *Warcraft* movie (2016). With a questionnaire, Barbara has sought answers to questions dealing with experience of narrative coherence in the movie. The issue of coherence is challenging in transmedia productions in general. Whereas transmedia theories expect coherence from the whole, building it as part of the very definitions of transmedia storytelling, in practical productions maintaining coherence requires considerable effort, and is usually achieved only approximately in the canon of the specific transmedia universe. The Transmedia Production Bible often serves to keep the core elements of the production coherent. In Barbara's approach, however, the perspective is on the user's experience, not so much in the production part. As reception and fandom studies have shown, media users are quite flexible, and also creative, when it comes to apparent contradictions or narrative gaps – even though fans, especially, may be very strict on certain aspects of fictional worlds.

Barbara takes it as his starting point to look at the transmedial consumption of the *Warcraft* movie, in the context of 22 years of *WoW* games,

novels and comics. Both such audience which was not familiar with the rest of the franchise, and the fans who knew the franchise well, felt engaged with the film, so there was a clear stand-alone value for the film. The fans, however, found consistency problems in the film narrative, in regards to the franchise canon. In his statistical analysis, Barbara comes to the conclusion that film action, and its continuity with the game action, is the most important element in creating the sense of cohesion within the audience. The visuals, for example, are not as crucial, and the film makers may exert more freedom on this freedom. Barbara's study paves way for further research to gain more detailed and nuanced understanding of the audience experience of transmedia productions.

Metal Gear Solid franchise by Konami, with Hideo Kojima as the lead designer, is one of the most important game driven transmedia franchises. Sven Dwulecki develops a novel game analysis approach, game dynamic narrative analysis or GDNA model, and applies it to the *Metal Gear Solid* universe. The GDNA model combines the narrative and procedural aspects of meaning production in games, and promises to deliver more adequate understanding of video game rhetoric. This is quite fundamental also in improving transmedia literacy. Dwulecki focuses in his article on one specific trait of *Metal Gear Solid* games, what he calls *immersion fractures*. In immersion fractures, immersion in the game world is broken through directly addressing the player in the real world, rather than her avatar in the game world. The player, for example, has to change her game controller from one port in the game console to another, in order to proceed in the game. Dwulecki analyses both how immersion fractures function in the games, but also how they are reproduced in other parts of the transmedia universe, in the novels, comics and digital comics. The analysis demonstrates how it is possible, to some extent, create effects of video games design in other media forms as well, but simultaneously emphasizes the expressive power of video games. Referring to Jenkins' notion of each medium in transmedia production "doing what it does best", Dwulecki's study helps us to see in more analytical terms what it is that video games are especially suited for.

In his article "Language Danger: *Metal Gear Solid V* and the Weaponization of English", Christopher Hall provides another perspective to the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise. He is concentrating on the fifth game in the series (*MGS V: The Phantom Pain*, 2015), and the way how spoken language is turned into a weapon of mass destruction in it. The villain of the

game, Skull Face, employs parasites which destroy the vocal chords of the hosts speaking English language. Being a strongly narrative game, language plays important role in the construction of the game world. At the same time, the fictional parasite is threatening to destroy language. Hall applies Ian Bogost's rhetorical approach to videogame analysis and investigates the interpretive potential of spoken English as a *lingua franca*, made possible by *MGS V*'s "procedural representation" of language. Extending the claims presented in the game, about English as a destructive power into real-world situations of language-based oppression, Hall shows how *MGS V* enables interrogating the role of the English language in constructing real-life colonial worlds. Hall combines English as Lingua Franca scholarship with the anti-colonialist work of Paulo Freire and Edward Said, in exploring language as a tool for both totalitarianism and revolution, and concludes by gesturing toward means of ideological and linguistic decolonization. Through this approach to *MGS V*, Hall theorizes how we might move from media theory to real-world action, a concern which should be at heart of all serious approaches to transmedia literacy.

Live Action Role Play, larp, is a form of play which is often neglected in transmedia scholarship. This is a serious flaw, considering that there are larp developed as part of many important transmedia franchise, most notably the *School of Wizardry* set in the world of Harry Potter. Michał Mochocki, in his article, frames larp as a multimodal medium which is based on live-action role-playing, but which is also open for inclusions of other media and technologies. He approaches larp as a narrative medium, used for performative and participatory co-creation of dynamic storyworlds. The emergent story is experienced by the full sensorium of the players' bodies and simultaneously uses the bodies as a medium of representation. Players combine the roles of authors, actors, characters, and audience. Mochocki refers to Jan-Noel Thon's (2014; 2016) typology of representation of character's subjective perception in film, graphic novels, and video games, and applies it to live-action role-playing, locating as unique characteristic the 'first-person audience' (Sandberg 2004; Stenros & Montola 2010) mode of participation in larp. Unlike the audiovisual media discussed by Thon, in which it is intersubjective perception that comes unmarked, larp by default is experienced from a subjective spatial point of view. Mochocki adds one category to Thon's framework: symbolic markers, which are used to regulate the active agency or perception of the audience. In the discussion part he compares medium-specific affordances of live-action role-playing, which

are fairly limited in representing subjectivity, to the affordances of larp as a multimodal genre, able to include many other forms of live, recorded and digitally mediated, and recorded representation.

Heidi Colthup analyzes *Dear Esther* and walking simulators in general as a genre between video games and interactive fiction, seeing them as “literary auteur games” (Ensslin 2014). As *Dear Esther* is considered the seminal walking simulator (among others such as *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* (2015), *Gone Home* (2013) and *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (2014)) Colthup’s article is an important contribution to the body of game studies. She focuses on placing *Dear Esther*, and the whole of the Walking Simulator genre, within a tradition of “second-person narration”. They use video game engines and artistic styles, but as a form they are more narratives than play or exploration. In Aarseth’s ludo-narrative continuum they clearly belong closer to the narrative than ludological end (Aarseth 2012).

Transmediality appears in *Dear Esther* in a simulated way. The game itself is not part of a larger transmedia production, but the way how the story is dispersed to various locations and different media inside the game world is highly transmedial. It is quite hard to find real life examples of transmedia storytelling in the Henry Jenkinsian sense, as a story told through a set of media, where each of the media use what it does best, and contributes its own part to whole, in a limited and well-defined game world this kind transmedia storytelling is easier to accomplish. The activity of the player who wanders around the fictional world, looking for story fragments, and piecing them together, is a presentation of the transmedia user engaged in a comparable story construction and expansion task. The case of Walking Simulator makes it explicit how the piecing together a transmedial whole is a playful act, pleasurable in itself. Looking more deeply into the analysis by Colthup, the ambiguity considering the role of the player, at times addressed as one of the characters in the game-story, at times as player making meaningful selections, can be also applied to transmedia users more in general.

Linda Lahdenperä’s approach differs from the rest of the articles in this issue, in that she investigates a narrative phenomenon of time-loop narratives, instead of focusing on one specific work. Characters in time loop narratives, like players of video games, repeat specific sequence of events with varying outcomes to reach a goal. Lahdenperä’s study has three aims: to use the time loop as an example on how films remediate video games, to conceptualize the time loop by applying the possible worlds model, and to

analyze the experience of parallel, mutually exclusive events. As a result, she describes how time loop films resemble video games in their level-like and goal-oriented structure, as well as in their portrayal of death as a mere nuisance instead of the final end. There is an important lesson in article, when it shows how replaying a game can weaken the narrative experience of it. This seems to be a design challenge for narrative games, and some players simply choose not to replay a certain game. Some game designers, however, encourage replaying and experimenting with alternative story-lines. With all the inherent heterogeneity of transmedia universes, comprising of highly different elements such as films, novels, games, toys etc., there seems to be a unifying tendency in user behavior: when users are familiar enough with certain convention, such as the replay-looping in digital games, they are ready to accept it, and maybe even expect it, in other media as well making it into a new transmedia strategy.

The selection of articles in this issue of *IJTL* provide multifaceted and complimentary approaches to the topic of games and transmedia. They discuss both the ways how games in themselves may be transmedial, but also how games may be incorporated as elements in larger transmedia universes. Furthermore, the articles also present ways how playful engagement with media is, or could be, part of transmedia user experience. We believe that there is much to gain for transmedia scholarship in the field of game studies, and vice versa.

Currently, augmented reality and virtual reality games and other applications are opening new avenues for media design. The first smash hit in AR gaming, *Pokemon GO* (2016), happens to be a prime example of transmedia production, or *media mix*, as it is called in Japanese context. As different media are coming together in transmedia, also our physical world is increasingly being incorporated in these ‘vast narratives’ (Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin 2009). It is the nature of games as part of transmedia universe, that they do not only tell stories about the world, but “let the user of the world become and act as a character in the world” (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 5) – and, specifically in open world games, “imaginatively (emotionally, viscerally) inhabit” (Herman 2008, 570) a virtual space. The emphasis is on the user engagement with the fictional world and its characters. In *Pokemon GO* type AR game, the physical world and transmedial game world are coming together, which does not only mean that aspects of our everyday life become part of the game world, but also, and possibly even more importantly, our lives become, to an extent, made into play or *ludified*.

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