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The Entertainment Revolution: Does Transmedia Storytelling Really Enhance the Audience Experience?

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Abstract

This paper examines the theory of convergence culture in a technologically savvy culture where transmedia storytelling is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Using Jenkins theory of convergence culture as the future of media theory (2006) this paper will examine how transmedia storytelling has evolved from the mobile communication and internet voting uses in American Idol and Big Brother to the more advanced uses of ARGs (Alternative Reality Games) in Dollhouse and Harper's Island. The new example of a social show will be discussed in relation to the ARG associated with Harper's Island, Harper's Globe. This will lead to a practical proposed methodology that will prove the effectiveness of these forms of storytelling to traditional media.

Convergence is defined as being “the erasure of distinctions between media” (Baran and Davis, p. 22). Henry Jenkins’ discussion of the theory of media convergence as important to the future of the study of media focuses the scholarly world on the importance of understanding how media companies are using evolving technology to reach their consumers (2004). Jenkins further describes convergences in his 2008 book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*:

“By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.” (Jenkins, 2008, p.2)

Throughout his book he proposes that media companies need to think different about what consumption of media means and how to best provide services for his audience (2008). The three major trends towards convergence culture are stated as convergence, collective intelligence, and participation. These three aspects are very important in the idea of transmedia storytelling.

Jenkins also explains that “convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences” (2005, p.3). If it is accepted that convergence is the theory of the future, then the study of how media will converge and the effects that this will have on entertainment as a whole must be considered and studied. It can also be suggested that the way society uses media can be examined in comparison to the way people live life; they use what makes their life flow easier and makes it a more natural experience for them (Deuze, 2006).

With the understanding of convergence culture as the theory that media will evolve to the point where multiple mediums can be used to provide a consumer with numerous ways of

gathering communication, and the understanding that people will use whichever means are more available and comfortable to them, the trend towards transmedia storytelling is a natural societal succession. The use of transmedia storytelling to enhance the participation and enjoyment of the audience is relatively new to the area of mass communications; however it has proven to effectively engage various audiences when the correct use is applied.

Jenkins describes transmedia storytelling in ten points. The first point is the process of presenting important aspects of the story throughout multiple channels, with each channel having a unique contribution to the story. Secondly, transmedia storytelling involves synergy across multiple media platforms. Rather than focusing on specific characters and plot lines, the stories encompass entire fictional worlds. There is also the point that the various extensions of the storyline may serve different purposes than the main entertainment medium. Transmedia storytelling provides different points of entry that can be accessible by various audiences. Various segments may be enjoyed as part of the whole storyline, or on their own. The best use of transmedia storytelling comes when the same creator manages all the information presented or there is a strong effort of collaboration between the teams. Collaboration between the audiences is essential to understanding the entire story. Transmedia encourages the involvement of the story being told in the everyday lives of its audience. Due to gaps in the information, sometimes these stories can take on a mind of their own, even to the point of inviting user created content (Jenkins, 2007).

Maio Ji, a graduate student from USC, introduces the importance of the original show, or the mothership as it is called, to the success of transmedia storytelling. Without the fluid connection between the different forms of media an audience may not feel interested in learning more and examining the storyline closer (2009). This allows for the importance of the original

means of entertainment to be taken into account in the success of the various additional mediums used to enhance the storytelling experience.

Geoffrey Long explains the use of transmedia storytelling using his old *Masters of the Universe* figures as examples. Having different sets and tokens can open up various stories, just as having many different pieces of information allows different parts of the story to be understood in transmedia storytelling (2004). This relationship between forms of technologically enhanced media and toys leads to the wonder of what types of storytelling will evolve for the many and diverse new platforms that are emerging on a regular basis (Long, 2004).

Luke Freeman focuses on the idea of world building an important concept of transmedia storytelling (2008). Through the use of differing types of media the world of the main story can be elaborated on and explained in greater detail than originally presented. The narratives presented should fill in the gaps in the story or offer new information, rather than rehash information previously presented or introduces storylines that are never concluded in either of the mediums (Freeman, 2008).

Jenkins has determined that “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; its world might be explored through game play or experiences as an amusement park attraction” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 96). By this argument, any form of entertainment that involves a story which evolves over various forms of media is a form of transmedia storytelling. Such use of transmedia storytelling has changed drastically as various forms of technology have emerged.

Many scholars view transmedia storytelling as the future of effective storytelling. This is evident in Long’s 2007 article on Transmedia Storytelling.

By deliberately making each extension in canon, by creating and maintaining a consistent narrative world, by embedding hermeneutic codes to serve as potential migratory cues from one extension to another, and by stitching it all together using new commercial and artistic technology, there is plenty of reason for a would-be transmedia storyteller to be optimistic. The future of transmedia entertainment is both extremely complicated and incredibly rich – the creative and commercial opportunities are huge. In short, it's a great time to be a storyteller. (Long, 2007, p. 162)

The following are examples of how transmedia storytelling and convergence culture can be used to create interactive experiences for an audience and promote their product over various templates.

Both the Pop Idol and Big Brother franchises rely heavily on fan participation throughout the show to move the storyline along. Big Brother involves interaction on many levels, from texting a vote, calling a phone number, or voting online (Dwyer and Nightingale, 2006). This leads to a high level of interactivity and a fan audience dedicated to the outcome of the game (Dwyer and Nightingale, 2006). In comparison, Pop Idol and the US version, American Idol, distinguishing itself from other shows by promoting the audience interactivity (Franck and Nuesch, 2007). The outcome of these shows is determined by the audience since the performer with the largest fan base wins (Franck and Nuesch, 2007).

Lisebet van Zoonen conducted a study in 2004 regarding the popularity of interactive television. Her focus is on the popularity of the fan culture and how that may be used to promote political advocacy and awareness (2004). It is concluded that how politics are represented on television can be seen as destructive but ultimately can provoke the collective intelligence concept in the theory of convergence culture (Zoonen, 2004). This idea of the discussion and

contemplation on various political avenues is essential to keeping the field of politics alive and active (Zoonen, 2004).

Another large player in fan participation is the creation of user generated content to move the story forward, whether considered part of the storyline by the official company or not. Jenkins wrote about how the Star Wars franchise is an excellent example of the creation of the fan fiction medium (2006). In the case of Star Wars the creators seemed unsure on how to manage this new text, which took place over both old and new media (Jenkins, 2006). They fight to maintain control over the storylines and products by also seeking to encourage specific types of fan storytelling and participation through various specific areas [i.e. creation of movies with specific criteria and multiplayer games that allow the audience more control of the environment] (Jenkins, 2006).

In his study on user generated content Jensen also discusses how the relationship between the user and media institution is changing. Due to the ready availability of technology and the changing environment of the internet the media environment has changed from one solely of mass produced content to various forms of user generated content, both spurred by a given fan base and original (Jensen). With the creation of personal blogs and YouTube user generated content it is easier to produce and share for a larger audience, and is easier to find for those interested. It can be assessed that in order for an entertainment company to be successful in the changing media environment, they must understand how to control and encourage user generated content, while maintaining ownership of their property over multiple forms of media.

The use of transmedia storytelling has also been important to children's publishing. More frequently publishers are not only investing money in book publication but the creation of an entire franchise around a storyline. One example is the book series *The 39 Clues*, which has the

elements of a treasure hunt included in the story (Deahl, 2009). In addition to various print publications, there is also a card game being printed and a website dedicated to the series (Deahl, 2009). As more media companies are facing the trend towards interactivity, children's publishing is embracing the desire of the younger generation to not only find the story in the book, but outside the book as well (Deahl, 2009).

It is not only book publishers that are using the drive for interactivity to push their stories beyond the traditional means of storytelling; television and movie studios are doing this as well. Dawson discusses how the convergence of technology allows people to view television not only on the traditional screens, but on their mobile devices as well (2007). However, this leads to the question of aesthetics and how well the traditional media converts to the new media form without specific modifications (Dawson, 2007). Traditional means of entertainment must evolve to effectively converge with the new forms of media that are technologically different.

All these examples of convergence in the media world and storytelling involving various forms of media lead to the current trend toward what Ruston refers to as an interactive narrative (2008). Ruston's study revolves around how mobile narratives can be woven into audiences' daily lives with the advent of the mobile technology (2008). By involving both the physical world and the imaginative world of the narrative mobile media, storytelling can be an effective form of the interactive narrative, requiring the necessary involvement from the fan based community to move the story towards its conclusion.

It can be argued that alternative reality games (ARGs) may be the most advanced form of transmedia storytelling currently available. Örnebring describes an ARG in the following way:

An ARG begins when players find or are directed to an entry point into the mystery (commonly a webpage) and the first set of clues (this entry point is known as a rabbit

hole or trail head). Players then alert other players through email or web forum messages and play commences. Play is collective and when someone finds the solution to a puzzle or the meaning of a clue this is generally posted online for all participants to see, so that everyone can progress through the narrative. (Örnebring, 2007)

Through this description it can be discussed that this form of innovative storytelling is the trend of the future because it involves all aspects of convergence culture and transmedia storytelling, as discussed earlier.

Various forms of traditional media are beginning to use ARGs as an alternate means of investing an audience in their storylines. Örnebring continues to discuss the three ARGs created to extend the existing narrative of ABCs show *Alias*, two of which were considered official and one created by the fans themselves. Through the success of these forms of storytelling it is argued that “it seems likely that the popular culture industry will continue to be successful in its symbiosis with fan culture, and the shared framework of appropriate modes of fan consumption and engagement with texts will mitigate against too creative treatments of existing fictional universes ” (Örnebring, 2007). Because this mode of storytelling welcomes fan participation and encourages the use of collective intelligence it is trending towards the theory of convergence culture. As the audience desires more interactivity in their media, the media companies, if they desire to be successful, must adjust to give them what they want.

The progression of this type of transmedia storytelling leads to what creators Miles Beckett and Greg Goodfried of the media company EQAL refer to as a social show (Kless, 2008). They refer to this concept as a website used to tell story through videos, blogs, ARG elements, and a social networking aspect usually found within websites like MySpace and Facebook (Kless, 2008). While this concept was first used for the web show *Lonelygirl15* the

same concepts are being used in the transmedia storytelling of Harper's Globe, the web storytelling linked to the CBS show Harper's Island.

Due to the nature of the social show and the reality that it is an extremely new concept that many people may not yet understand, a Frequently Asked Questions describing the nature of a social show is included on the main Harper's Globe website. The process of watching the show, interacting with the characters, and using the website are explained while showing that the show can be enjoyed no matter which level audience participation is chosen (Harper's Globe, 2009). Depending on the audience's desire for participation one can just watch the television series, just watch the web series, participate in puzzles, and interact with the characters on the web series, or, if they desire the complete experience do all four. Chuck Tryon discusses the possibility of the success of these types of social networking entertainment in relationship to Harper's Globe and Harper's Island (2009). Due to the innovativeness of the concept it is unknown if this form of storytelling will succeed or not.

Neil Perryman wrote a paper in 2008 about the BBC show Doctor Who and its use of the convergence of media. In the United Kingdom the BBC uses mobile technology, pod casts, games, vlogs, fictional websites and targeted spin-offs to promote their Doctor Who franchise. His conclusion is that through the excellent execution of these properties the media company has been able to create a successful world of entertainment for their variety of audiences, who can enjoy the storytelling at the level of audience participation and interaction that they feel comfortable with (Perryman, 2008).

David Kushner discusses this phenomenon and trend towards transmedia storytelling in his 2008 article Rebel Alliance. This is a discussion of the new players in the Hollywood media scene and how they are using new media approaches while monitoring the frequently changing

current media. The fact that those creators he featured are self proclaimed geeks ties into their success, “because their inherently dweeby shows are the most extensible brands in the industry, playing out seamlessly across platforms from TV to video games, Web sites to comics” (Kushner, 2008, p.1). He predicts that “as network television migrates increasingly to the Internet, transmedia interaction is likely to grow only more important” (Kushner, 2008, p.4).

Other innovative ways television creators are expanding their universe outside of the TV set include CSI: New York’s Second Life entity (McIntosh, 2007), Joss Whedon’s ARG for his highly anticipated show of 2009, Dollhouse (Anderson, 2008), the ARG for FOX’s Fringe (www.imaginethepossibilities.com). Also included are the serial web shows for shows such as CBS’s Ghost Whisperer (www.cbs.com/ghost) and NBC’s Heroes (www.nbc.com/Heroes). All these various examples of transmedia storytelling have at least one thing in common, their creators are exploring new ways of reaching their audience to ensure more investment in the storylines and to, hopefully, reach a larger fan base.

Long proposed the question of which means of transmedia storytelling best work in his article on San Diego Comic Con 2008. This discusses which forms of cannon material that is produced would be the most effective use of continuing a story in the current media environment. Robert Picard also discusses this in a 2009 blog on his website. Although a large number of people are experimenting with these new technologies, the success of transmedia storytelling using convergence techniques is still in question (Picard, 2009). Picard advocates the use of realism when deciding the mediums to use in telling a story; some may be more appropriate than others (2009).

In her study of the media corporations involved in social shows, Catherine Morris discusses the need for a marketing strategy that fits the company that has created the

entertainment. In her conclusion she states “although at the beginning of this case study the aim was to provide details on which marketing strategies work best for internet serial drama companies, it could be concluded that different companies have a need for different strategies, depending on the financial climate, their positioning in the world, what technology they have available to them, and of course their financial backing” (Morris, 2009, p. 58). From this one may come to the conclusion that, in order to be successful, different forms of entertainment also lead to different forms of transmedia storytelling as well.

Although there are multiple case studies on various forms of transmedia storytelling, such as Doctor Who (Perryman, 2008) and Alias (Örnebring, 2007), there are still many unanswered questions. The ability of the convergence of media to enhance the fan base of established media has not been studied. Also, the effectiveness of transmedia storytelling to feed on each other and promote each other outside of their natural environments has not been examined. With the advent of the social show (Harper’s Globe, 2009) it can be questioned if this is an effective means to the introduction of a new entertainment offering or if it would be best used to enhance established franchises that already have a steady fan community.

Once completed, this study can be used by entertainment companies to help decide the best use of their funding and which means of convergence will be the most effective to their transmedia storytelling. This has the advantage of looking into new ideas and technological advances that have previously been unexamined and helping the current media theory environment understand how new media can enhance current media rather than distract from it.

In order to conclude if these new matters of transmedia storytelling, in the forms of ARGs and social shows, are effective in creating a larger fan base for the television offering the website traffic before, during, and after television broadcasts must be measured as well as the

ratings for the programs themselves. In addition, the study must understand the use of the users of the website and what various levels of interaction are used to create the most pleasure entertainment experience. This can introduce Herzog's uses and gratification theory (1944) into Jenkins' theory of convergence culture (2006). The conclusion of this study would provide the media theory world with a better understanding of how and why the theory of convergence culture exists and why transmedia storytelling is the trend of the future.

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