

Towards a Poetics of Multi-Channel Storytelling

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Abstract

In 2001 Henry Jenkins discussed the growing prevalence of ‘transmedia storytelling’. Transmedia storytelling is, simply put, franchises: a movie is followed by a game, then perhaps a comic, website and so on. An example is the Wachowski brother’s *Matrix* franchise. For Jenkins each media, each channel, communicates different aspects of a storyworld. Since 2003 Jane McGonigal, and others, have been researching the phenomenological and social aspects of ‘alternate reality gaming’. Alternate reality gaming requires players to traverse websites, games, public play, SMS and so on. Microsoft’s *The Beast* was the first of such ‘games’ that required participation with websites, posters, faxes, hacking, chatbots and Spielberg’s film *AI* (McGonigal, 2003).

Academic research into multi-channel storytelling is at present approached from the media studies and phenomenological perspective. As yet no poetics to address transmedia, alternate reality gaming, cross- or multi-platform and cross-media of content have been proposed in academia; in addition no poetics has been invented for multi-channel single-story creation (that is: one story told over multiple media).

This paper provides an overview of the poetics being developed for multi-channel storytelling. It is a narrative schema intended for instructional use in story creation and literary criticism.

Keywords

Multi-channel storytelling, mixed media, hybrid media, cross-media, multi-platform, hypertext, electronic literature, print, enhanced storytelling, multi-modal discourse.

1 Introduction

I will begin this presentation where I began. A few years ago I had an idea for a way to extend the novel I was writing. Along with the book, I thought, I could have a website with a chatbot on it. Whilst reading the book the reader could go the website and chat with a character in the novel. Great idea, but now to instantiate it. I studied storytelling devices used in books, and those being developed for interactive platforms, from ‘Freytag’s Triangle’ to Brenda Laurel’s ‘flying wedge’ (Laurel, 1993), and found both helpful but critically insufficient for this multiple media or multi-channel approach. [I should make clear here that the term ‘multi-channel’ is adopted from advertising industry

channel usage that describes a medium, for example radio, internet and so on. The term has resonance for me with the notion of ‘apparatus’ and so when referring to channel like film I refer I refer to the cinema, seating, dark lighting, big screen and so on. I am aware that the work ‘channel’ has problematic connotations to the idea of a medium being a seamless conduit of a message and also an audio or video channel. The conduit association is not intended and may influence a decision to move away from the term ‘multi-channel, but not for today. Another term that I will use in this paper is ‘modal’ and ‘mode’. I use these terms as per Kress and Van Leeuwen’s notion of a mode as being a representational resource. Image is a mode, gesture is a mode, sound is a mode. So with my novel and chatbot we have 2 channels, that of a book and a computer; and we have numerous modes.]

I searched for research into multi-channel storytelling and found some very interesting movements in this area. Media researcher Henry Jenkins observed in *The Matrix* phenomenon a different storytelling approach. *The Matrix* films, anime DVD, comics and games coalesced for Jenkins into what he terms ‘transmedia’ (Jenkins, 2003). The growing prevalence of a story or a franchise across media had caused many in the entertainment industry to consider how to better pool their resources and indeed control the manifestation of their product in different mediums. It was decided that “transmedia, multiplatform, or enhanced storytelling represents the future of entertainment” (ibid.). Book writers wanted to work more with film makers, who also wanted to work with game developers. Rather than approach the multiple media independently and leave each to be an adaptation of the previous a collaborative and all-encompassing/whole approach was deemed appropriate.

For Jenkins, “the most successful transmedia franchises have emerged when a single creator or creative unit maintains control over the franchise” (ibid.). This control allows ordered development of characters, plot and storyworld. Jenkins cites Lucasfilm’s *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars* franchises as early examples of clever management of the various channels – the books, films, comics, TV series and so on. With each of the channels the audience member was able to find out more about characters, back-stories, possible futures and experience the stories from different perspectives. For Jenkins:

‘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.’ (ibid.)

Hold on a minute! That means my book and chatbot story does not fit into the ‘transmedia’ definition. The book is meant to be read in conjunction with the conversations with the chatbot, not each channel self-contained. I tucked Jenkins valuable observations in my pocket and ventured further to find a researcher who addresses multi-

channel usage with singular storytelling aims. To my delight I found Jane McGonigal's work on what she terms 'alternate reality gaming' (McGonigal, 2003).

Centering on Microsoft's and Dreamworks' *The Beast* game, essentially a marketing device for Spielberg's film *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001), McGonigal traced out the phenomenological and social aspects. *The Beast* requires gamers to traverse websites, work out puzzles, hack code, receive faxes and SMS, find clues in posters, make phone calls and so on. The use of real world devices such as faxes and phones, and fictional websites, propelled the players into an 'alternate reality' what is also known as 'unfiction'. Although not a single linear story the work had the hallmarks of controlled singular entity that I required, except for one element. The work was designed to be played by many and unable to be 'won' or beaten by a single person. The puzzles and clues for instance were difficult and spread over sites around the world. The design worked because an organized group emerged with hours of the first clue: *The Cloudmakers*. Once again, though my pockets were now bulging I still did not have what I needed to develop a single-story, multi-channel, single user work, and what I did have was only phenomenological perspectives. Where is a poetics of multi-channel storytelling?

So in 2003 I began my Masters in Creative Arts to investigate and develop a poetics of multi-channel storytelling. This paper is based on my preliminary observations. Many of terms I use in this paper are intended as a placeholder for more appropriate terminology or neologisms, so please feel free to suggest terms.

2 The X,Y,Z of multi-channel works > X

As a first step I had to come up with a name for the single-story, multi-channel work I was experimenting with. In the spirit of Jenkins' 'transmedia' I termed it 'transfiction'. To differentiate between transfiction and transmedia I needed to classify how each channel is used in storytelling. Indeed, in the media-rich world we live in how can any work not be transmedia? What is the difference for instance between a *Harry Potter* soft-toy and the film and the book?

So, I assessed channels according to the role they played in the overall narrative and how they reference each other. I observed that we can have channels that need to be experienced in order to move through or progress the plot, channels that reference each other and extend the experience of each other but have no direct role to play in the plot, and channels that are not part of the plot, are not necessarily part of the storyworld but can be associated with a plot and storyworld. These three channel types are story, storyworld and commodity and they form the X coordinate of a multi-channel definition.

2.1 Story channel(s)

Story channels are:

- 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;
- 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;

Examples are the *Star Wars* films, *The Matrix* films. However, if we consider films like *iRobot* and *Artificial Intelligence* they are not an entry-point for all audiences: *iRobot* was originally a book written by Isaac Asimov published in 1950 and *Artificial Intelligence* was based on a short story written by Brian Aldiss titled *Supertoys Last All Summer Long*, published in 1969 (Aldiss, 1969). There are two points to be made from this apparent anomaly: one, that the first form is not akin to being the entry-point to a channel. Remember, we are discussing multi-channel works, not adaptations, and so a first channel with that is not designed to have other channels is not a multi-channel work. When more than one channel is involved and is designed to be multi-channel it is then a multi-channel work. So the *iRobot* film and *A.I.* films are story channels in a multi-channel work and the original books are also primary channels by association. The original books however can also be mono-channel works; they therefore have a dual identity. The second point is that the film is a familiar and preferred channel for many audiences in the current entertainment climate.

When one story is designed and experienced over more than one channel then it qualifies as ‘transfiction’.

2.2 Storyworld channel(s)

Storyworld channels are characterised by:

- 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;
- Does not play a direct role in the unfolding plot;
- Augments story comprehension;
- Consistent with characters, setting and plot in story channel;
- 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;

An example of a channel that plays a storyworld role is the the *iRobot* website¹. It is a site pretending to sell the robots that are in the film, in the story. Interacting with the website has no impact on the unfolding impact on the film but it can play a role in the audiences’ experience of the film if visited before and meaning formation if visited after. It is consistent and perpetuates the fictional world, allowing the user to immerse themselves further and be a part of the fictional world.

¹ iRobot website: <http://www.irobotnow.com/index.php>

Another example are some *Harry Potter* products. The *Harry Potter* scarf and student hat allow the consumer to participate and perpetuate the storyworld. The scarf and student hat are worn by characters in the story. These products are within the story but use of them have no impact on the story. I have classified these as storyworld devices rather than commodities for these reasons. But let us now clarify what commodities are.

2.3 Interaction with Commodities

Commodity channels are characterised by:

- Their low-level of relevance to story world;
- Little to no impact in story comprehension;
- No impact on story creation;
- Their lack of plausibility of existence in the story and storyworld;
- Can be inconsistent with characters, setting and plot as set up in the storyworld and story;
- Have a larger role as an attractor to the storyworld and story channels than as narrative devices.

Examples are other *Harry Potter* products: Hagrid plush doll and *Harry Potter* 'In Potions Class' Giclee. The materials, the doll and the animation cell, do not exist in the story, and have no impact on story creation or comprehension. They work to refer the consumer to the storyworld and story channels rather than extend or clarify the narrative. Consumers, despite the delight in playing with tangible manifestations of their favourite characters and scenes, can resent their artificial presence and thus commodity status.

A discussion in the Vivendi Universal Games Forum on the *Fight Club*TM game (Vivendi Universal Games, 2004) showed the disdain fans of the film have for the non-narrative commodities. As one forum member expressed:

'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)

The debate has continued with forum members arguing over what the film is actually about and whether the game does negate the film message; and interestingly whether a bad experience of the game influences the experience of the story in either the film or book. A forum member claimed that those who do not enjoy the game will “not bother”

with the film or book, while another stated that “most people who see a movie that 'sucks' know that the book was infinitely better”: meaning a game that sucks does not translate to a bad film or book (gmxx, 2004). Interaction with a commodity is therefore a volatile categorisation that cannot be identified by the level of input by the author. From a multi-channel story-creation perspective the recognition of the category can aid the designer in avoiding creating a commodity rather than a story-world product, if that is their intention.

2.2 Mutable Work Stages = Y

The debate over the *Fight Club* game highlights the need for further distinctions. A player may experience a commodity, a game as in the *Fight Club* example, **before the** story in film or book form. So there is on the one hand the path the user takes through a multi-channel work, indeed all works, and on the other the order of publication. The path of the user and the stages of publications are not the same. Let us begin therefore with an overview of the content creation stages and build from there.

Traditionally a work has always been viewed as having a pre-publication and post-publication stage. But networked environments allow daily, indeed, minute-by-minute updates to a webpage. It is for this reason that I consider a work to have three stages: pre-publication, initial publication and ongoing publication.

2.2.1 Pre-publication

Pre-publication is the stage that includes the conception, drafting and editing. This stage differs of course according to the industry or field producing a work. Computer science delineates the pre-publication stage as including a requirements statement, analysis, design, debugging and testing. Game developers begin with choosing a goal or topic, researching and preparation, then move into a design phase, pre-programming phase, programming phase, playtesting phase and so on (Crawford, 1984). The pre-publication stage is usually ends when the product is produced and is ready for distribution.

2.2.2 Initial Publication

The initial publication is the first form of the content that is publicly available in the intended medium. It is the product of the creator(s), the channels used to express the creator’s initial vision, and the user. A post to an email list is not the initial publication if the creator intends to have the content published in a book form or even with a particular design on a webpage. This stage of the content is identified as an initial publication in intended medium and mode, first edition, first reading by the reader/user, and in a networked environment is without updates.

2.2.3 Ongoing publication

The ongoing-publication stage occurs once initial publication integrity has altered. This takes place almost immediately and so the form is never final. The alteration is due to a variety of changes that affect the work or the experience of the work.

Changes can occur **within the work** instigated by either the producer or users. They can be updates on a webpage, patches in software, new edition. Note that updates can be enacted by the author (their own additions or those added from market influence), by

users (as direct invited submissions) or by hackers (as uninvited changes). They can also occur **to the work (channel and mode)**: if a user views a webpage on a different platform, operating system or resolution thus altering the display, the condition of the book, even a library stamp in a book is a change. There are also changes **around the work** as with Joseph Tabbi's notion of 're-entry' (Enns, 2003), fan fiction, forums and reading environment (for instance reading a book in bed or on a tram, or on a home computer or in an exhibition).

The reason why these stages are important is because the point-of-entry into a multi-channel work is mutable. Since post-initial publication is in constant flux the creator of a multi-channel work needs to consider how this can be managed. Content delivery controls are usually added to a website or program for this very reason. A site can have users login, for example, thus controlling what they see when. A creator, I believe, needs to consider the variety of changes that happen within, to and around the work as it transforms over time. The point-of-entry needs ongoing management and adjustment tempered with longevity and immersive force. The *Pokemon* phenomenon is an example of a carefully managed multi-channel work that allows multiple-points of entry relative to the age and product knowledge of the consumer or experienter (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004).

Another factor in this coordinate of mutable work stages is the advent of game architecture available for developers and gamers to contribute and create their own worlds. Game producers are now providing the option of access to programming architecture for those keen to create their own stories, within the producer's world. There are three types of this architecture: game engines², game creation software³ and generic sample worlds (settings, avatars or characters and props)⁴. BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights*TM provides the 'Aurora Neverwinter Toolkit' free to users (BioWare, 2002). This toolkit provides the engine, images, and an interface to build an environment and story. Programmers/players are still interacting with the author's storyworld (that of BioWare's *Neverwinter* world) but extending the world and creating their own subplots and stories. This brings us to the final coordinate, the Z coordinate.

2.3 Participatory Continuum = Z

The Z coordinate is a participatory continuum. It accounts for the various involvement humans have with a work. As we have noted a consumer can enter at various points and these can include forums, fan sites, unauthorized websites and so on. That is: channels and modes outside of the creator's world but nevertheless part of the path the consumer takes. These affect the experience of the work and can actually prevent engagement with a work in the channel intended, for example if a person reads a bad review and decides

² Quake Engine, Playstation Engine offered to developers for game creation.

³ Examples are: Adventure Game Studio...

⁴ An example of a generic game architecture is the BioWare (2002) 'Aurora Neverwinter Toolset', Builders Page, *Neverwinter Nights*, Infogrames [Online] Available at: <http://nwn.bioware.com/builders/> [Last Accessed: 2003, October 12]

not to see a film at all or chooses to wait to see it on video. We can divide the products into those that are sanctioned authorship -- that of the designers -- and those that are that are unsanctioned -- that of reviewers, fan sites and so on. Obviously the experience of these interpreters differs, but they do affect the work and so should be considered. If a work is successfully engaging or not users will want to comment and criticise, and the Internet allows them to do so with ease. The Vivendi Universal Games Forum is an example of a producer that has within its multi-channel repertoire the opportunity to manage unsanctioned comment. Vivendi can assess their games and therefore alter the marketing of them and future game development. Unsanctioned comment becomes sanctioned and the player is elevated to pre-publication play-tester and co-creator.

What also needs to be considered is how the user will participate with the authored work. This varies in the networked environment with the user being able to control the delivery of content -- for example by clicking to view the next webpage, to being able to collaborate in the creation of the story -- by inputting character dialogue to therefore influence the plot development. Many terms have been bandied about to capture these various activities: 'user', 'interactor' (Oz Project), 'ergodist' (Aarseth, 1997), 'viuser' (Smith) and more appropriately Tom Apperley has described the activity of the user of a multi-channel work as being an 'assembler' (Apperley, 2004). Though indicative of the task that traversing a multi-channel work entails further elaboration is needed on the different activity that can take place.

Multi-channel works summary

In summary, a multi-channel work can be created with three coordinates in mind: the narrative role of each channel, the stage of publication form, and the participatory role. It is with this fundamental scheme that I hope to develop the notion of a work being the sum of many channels and modes, at different stages of production and of contributors with varying involvement. The traditional view of a work being the words is being subsumed with the common sense approach of multi-modal discourse (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). The production approach of creating single channel works for 'single-point-in-time' consumption is being rapidly overtaken by franchise management (Jenkins, 2003), 'networked narrative environments' (Zapp, 2004), multi-user interfaces and 'simultaneous media usage' (Pilotta, 2004). The process of content creation and delivery is being mutated by interactive and networked media. The creator of a multi-channel work needs to collaborate, not just with expert teams but with channels and modes, with ergodists and with all over a longer period of time. It is a big task that in actuality is dealing with familiar concepts: in our minds we carry thoughts and stories with us, we rewrite them, share them and engage with others in lots of different media. Multi-channel poetics is basically about recognising and emulating the internal experience of life.

A P.S. I'd like to add to this presentation a note on my ongoing research. How the channels reference each other and how the user is inspired to move between channels is the subject of my research. I am investigating the grammar of ergodics for multi-channel works to assist with the creation of successful transmedia and in particular transfiction

works. Please feel free to contribute your own ideas through my blog, Star of Dena, and with direct emails. Thankyou.

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