

Transmedial Narratives in the Age of Mixed Media

What's in a medium? These days, the answer is close at hand for any student of narrative media worth their salt: *affordances*. Each medium, we are told, has unique affordances, properties baked into the medium itself that allows stories to be told in certain, medium-specific ways. As Marie-Laure Ryan puts it “the choice of medium makes a difference as to what stories can be told, how they are told, to whom they are told, and why. By shaping narrative, media shape nothing less than human experience” (Ryan 25). That sounds and feels right. And yet, what difference *does* media make when it comes to narrative? To open up Seymour Chatman's vital question from 1980: what can Media X do that Media Y cannot (and vice versa)? (Chatman).

Almost forty years since that foundation moment in the study of narrative across media, we don't have definitive answers to these questions (and the variables have only multiplied in the intervening years). And now we have a whole new category that depends on a confidence in the difference that media makes: transmedial narrative—storytelling that takes place *across* media. Not everyone believes in the existence of this category, but I want to say at the outset that I do believe in it. I say this because much of what follows will sound hostile to the attempt to study

and understand it. I believe transmedial narrative is a thing and that it is worth knowing. I just don't believe we've done a great job in identifying what that thing is, or in figuring out how to go about knowing it.¹

We must begin with the influential 2007 definition by Henry Jenkins:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. (Jenkins)

This definition describes wonderfully well a very particular thing produced by horizontally integrated multinational media conglomerates in the twenty-first century. After all, it is only an entity large enough to own (or be in a position to dictate terms to) “multiple delivery channels” that would be capable of coordinated and systematic dispersal of an entertainment experience. Among US-based media conglomerates, there are roughly a half dozen or so large enough to do this on their own. There are roughly another dozen or so elsewhere in the world.

And indeed, if we are invested in “transmedial storytelling” as something truly *new*, then this is what we mean: a creative project—usually developed initially by an individual or small team—over which the conglomerate takes ownership and then distributes across a range of wholly owned or subsidiary media entities to extend the story through various delivery channels. Often the original “creator” (cartoonist, director, showrunner) remains nominally in place as the organizing figurehead of this dissemination (although subsequent memoirs or lawsuits remind us how nominal that role truly was).

From this definition only a small number of vast texts prove to be orthodox examples of transmedial storytelling—not adaptations or retellings, but expansions of a relatively unified or coordinated storytelling process. *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (both owned by Disney) are examples of the rare transmedial narratives that perfectly fit Jenkins's strict definition. The films, comics, animations, and games that constituted the narrative platforms for the *Matrix*—Jenkins's prime example—serve as another ideal. The reality is, few such transmedia texts can generate the engaged mass audiences willing to follow out all the synergistic threads across a transmedial tent pole endeavor. In fact, in the last decade it is hard to think of a new example of canonical transmedial storytelling to join the ranks alongside *Star Wars* and the rest. Adaptation and remakes remain the rule that keeps transmedial storytelling a baroque exception.

However, if we take pressure off top-down coordination across multiple media channels, systematic processes, and managed outcomes, then we begin to see the outlines of a version of transmedia storytelling that opens up broader lines of investigation than simply mapping tentpoles connecting the ABC television series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and the next *Avengers* movie. Of course, we also get a version of transmedia storytelling that is far messier, and much older. As Derek Johnson has argued, productively complicating Jenkins's initial emphasis on the "newness" of the phenomenon, while our current cultural embrace of transmedial storytelling has much to do with twenty-first-century convergence culture, "the processes by which stories have been spread across institutions, production cultures and audiences from different media have a much longer history" (Johnson 2011).

Think of superheroes—one of our earliest transmedial "properties"—going back eighty years to when two teenagers from Cleveland were trying to sell the story of a superpowered alien to newspaper syndicates across the country. In 1937, newspapers were pretty much the only place to publish comics, in daily installments called comic strips. The problem for Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster was that no syndicate was buying *Superman*. Instead, it ended up in a new format called comic books, where instead of being divided into daily installments of three or four panels, stories were run together in sixty-four-page issues. As the legend has it, a new industry was born from this unintended symbiosis of new genre and new format.

But that was only the beginning of the story. Shortly after setting off the comic book boom in 1938, *Superman* was released as a daily comic strip in early 1939, as a radio serial in 1940, a series of animated shorts beginning in 1941, a movie serial in 1948, and a television series in the early years of the new medium, beginning in 1952. As Ian Gordon has demonstrated, the modern comics form had from the 1890s lent themselves to franchising, adaptation, and branding, all of which Jenkins properly demarcates from the transmedial storytelling he is defining; however, with *Superman*, the story was not only crossing into new media but also bringing back from those excursions new narrative threads and storyworld foundations (Gordon). For example, while we know that *Superman's* weakness is kryptonite, in fact this crucial detail was not introduced until 1943—originating not in the comic book but in the *radio* serial, from where it made its way back and was ultimately retroactively incorporated into the foundational origin story (Daniels 57). Similarly, the foundations of what we know about *Superman's* home planet of Krypton were first introduced not in the comics but in the *newspaper* comic strip in 1939. Making matters more complicated, while originally *Superman* worked in his own

storyworld, by 1940 Superman had come to share a *storyverse* with the growing roster of costumed heroes at DC, including Flash and Green Lantern, all of whom would be retconned, killed off, and reborn across media (and parallel worlds) for decades before TimeWarner consolidated sufficient resources to coordinate its storytelling, late in the twentieth century at the end of a period of unprecedented media consolidation.

This first half century of Superman surely is transmedial storytelling. But is it *systematic, unified, coordinated*? Clearly not, and that messiness and disunity is a source of the pleasure fans take in the enterprise, summoned by the contradictions, gaps, and doubled-visions inherent to serial storytelling—setting themselves up as amateur scholars, historians, continuity editors, and critics. Modern fandom emerges out of this and related transmedial storytelling, debating over various potential “errors” and gaps in the multiply authored and often chaotic transmedial storytelling of superheroes, *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek*, and a range of other transmedial narratives that emerged over the next half century. Decades of passionate fans interrogating convention guests associated with these projects regarding continuity errors, contradictions, and other “problems” might have led to the mistaken impression that those fans were in fact upset by these “mistakes.” Far from it. Fandom as we know it was first called into being—much like religious scholars were in their turn—by the desire to explore the contradictions and to collaborate and compete over their resolution.

Indeed, this is where today’s corporate transmedial projects risk going wrong, at least from the perspective of such fans, who will find increasingly little that is not fact-checked, coordinated, and streamlined to achieve maximum corporate synergy and minimal fandom friction. Fans today are invited to consume, but not to talk back to their transmedial stories (as presentations at Hall H at the San Diego Comic-Con routinely demonstrates). My first point here, then, is that if we focus only on transmedial storytelling according to the initial definition Jenkins provided (one that he himself has complicated and opened up in the decade to follow, even as his initial definition perhaps inevitably took on talismanic power), we are talking only about a very narrow bandwidth of corporate-controlled productions in which the only work for fans and scholars alike remains essentially retracing the corporate synergies previously meticulously planned in the boardrooms of Disney or TimeWarner—the intellectual equivalent of connect the dots or paint by number.

However, my larger point takes us into potentially messier territory as it seeks

to put some pressure on a truism of media studies broadly construed: the notion of unique media affordances. Jenkins's original definition, for example, continues: "Ideally each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins). Media scholars—and especially those of us working on narrative across media—invest heavily in the notion of the "unique affordances" of specific media. After all, it allows us to refocus our field and our students away from the questions that dominated generations of adaptation studies—What are the similarities and differences between book and movie? Which is better? (spoiler alert: it's the book)—to new questions that considered similarities and differences as inhering as much in the media themselves as in the choices of writers, filmmakers, and so on. But what if media itself is no longer stable? What if it never was?

Consider, as one example, film, whose very name references a medium—celluloid film—that is today all but extinct. Beginning with the rise of digital editing in the 1980s and culminating with the rapid expansion of digital distribution in our current decade, the object we call "film" today resembles that of previous generations less with each passing year. Things get blurrier still when we consider that film is now consumed predominantly not in theaters but on small—and increasingly mobile—screens. Further, a large portion of what we see on these screens when watching commercial film—especially the superhero blockbuster—is closer to another "medium," animation, relying on green-screen motion-capture and digital animation for the majority of its action scenes.

On a certain level we must acknowledge that "film" is a fiction we agree to because it creates continuities—continuities so valuable that we still see tagged onto current features the names and logos of studios like Paramount and MGM that are now little more than black boxes into which combines of independent producers drop their investments to be laundered under the favorable accounting practices Hollywood has been allowed to maintain long after the classical Hollywood studios were dismantled by the Supreme Court's order in 1948 (see Epstein).

For that matter, what is "Hollywood"? Just as Hollywood films are no longer made on film, it is also increasingly the case that they are no longer made in Hollywood. In 2014, for example, Louisiana, not southern California, was the state where the most US releases were filmed. "Hollywood" is a brand—that fantasy of continuity from Cecil B. De Mille shooting *Squaw Man* in 1914 to Damien Chazelle filming *La La Land* in 2016. Indeed, films like *La La Land* are designed to reinforce the fantasy of those continuities: shot in Hollywood, and on actual 35 mm film. And such Oscar-bait films are so often *about* Hollywood nostalgia—about shoring

up the brand via a contemporary romance that looks as if it could have been shot, and often cast, in the 1950s.

So yes, “film” is a powerful, alluring, and very profitable brand. But it is not really a continuous medium. Films in 1914 are in many ways as different from those in 1939, or 1979, or 2017 as TV is from comics. The affordances are not—and never were—fixed in the media, but are always historically contingent, shaped by changing technologies, business practices, and larger media ecologies—along with the new reception practices they bring into being. There is much, I would suggest, that is transmedial when putting a James Bond film such as 1962s’ *Dr. No* in dialogue with the 2015 sequel *Spectre*. True, they were both films, and therefore the same media. But the affordances of film mean something completely different across the distance of the half century separating them. Indeed, it could reasonably be argued that *Spectre* has more in common with a *Bond* video game such as 2010s *GoldenEye 007*—despite existing on different media—than it does with the first Bond film in 1962.

Things only get more vexed when we attempt to carry this idea of “film” across not only historical changes but also national and cultural borders. When I was a young film teacher, I would get annoyed when students were unable to sit still during a silent film, believing, as I had been taught, that film was *film* and only a weakness of character prevented this generation of students from seeing that truth. It wasn’t until I started teaching serial radio many years later that I began to rethink this assumption. Playing episodes of radio soap operas from the 1930s or *Superman* from the 1940s for my students, I noticed similar responses to that which I had experienced when screening silent films to undergraduates: they looked around nervously, slinking beneath their desks as if embarrassed in the presence of a medium so foreign and vaguely unseemly.

From 1928 through the early 1950s, serial radio was a major narrative engine in the United States, churning out thousands of serial storyworlds, many of which were transmedial in ways similarly complicated and messy as the example presented by *Superman*. Stella Dallas, for example, who in 1937 walked off into the shadows at the end of one of Hollywood’s most heartbreaking melodramas—having lost her daughter forever—is reborn in serial radio just a short time later with her not-so-long-lost daughter by her side, investigating the case of a stolen Egyptian mummy. By the time I asked my students to engage with it, serial radio, where kryptonite was born and which for a short time had rivaled even Hollywood for the nation’s attention, had been extinct in the United States for a half century. The

students literally did not know *how* to be an audience for this medium, let alone how to process, engage, or analyze it—in precisely the same way that they did not know how to watch a silent film. Eventually, they did learn, but it took more time than the fantasy about “film” would suggest: they learn it as a foreign language—as something alien to their naturalized experience and practices. The fault did not lie with my students but with my own inherited fantasy of “media” as a meaningfully consistent category.

What about comics, the other new narrative media born at the turn of the twentieth century alongside film? (see Gardner, chapter 1). For several years I taught a class on the history of American comics in which we studied both newspaper comics and the comic book, but recently I came to realize that I needed to split the course in two, the differences between the two making them ultimately as much like different media as film before and “film” after the collapse of theatrical exhibition and the rise of the DVD and streaming technologies. Both use the same formal elements—dialogue balloons, gutters, sequential panels—and share many of the same affordances and limitations when compared to, say, film or the novel. But the serial reading practices, the fan cultures, and the unique affordances and paratexts of daily newspaper and monthly comic book are so vastly different as to make them function in many ways as media worlds apart (as indeed they for the most part always have been).

But as I am reminded each year at the San Diego Comic-Con—in which TV, video games, and film occupy center stage—“comics” is a complicated medium beyond distinctions between comic strips and comic books. At the start of the comic book course, I ask my students how many of them are fans of the medium. Usually a bit more than half of the class raises their hands. When I ask those with hands raised to share with the class the titles they read regularly, however, inevitably most of the hands quickly go down. Few of the “comics fans” in my class read actual comics; instead, they are fans of the movies and (increasingly) the TV shows based on comic book properties. For them, “comics” are shows and movies adapted from comics, as much, or more, than they are the comics medium itself. The comics aren’t the thing itself, but a historical source from which “comics”—for them often a shorthand for transmedial storytelling—has emerged. Students approach my class with the kind of curiosity one might bring to other obsolete media whose rise and fall will help us see our own current media in a new light. Which, to be clear, is fair enough. After all, while it often seems today that “comics are everywhere,” in truth a top selling comic book sells only around 100,000 copies

an issue. The actual medium of comics—whether in newspaper comics or in comic books—has never been closer to extinction than it is right now (Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 522).

Of the now greatly diminished proportion of the class who *still* have their hands up, prepared to be identified as readers of actual comics, when I ask about their serial habits the divergences widen further. One or two prove themselves to be serious comic shop kids like I was myself at their age, with regular “pulls” at the store. A couple of others do all their comics reading digitally on tablets, whether legally through a commercial platform like Comixology or extralegally via torrents. Still others are “trade-waiters,” holding off on monthly “floppy” comic books in favor of trade paperbacks collecting five or six issues and available at brick-and-mortar or online bookstores. Many of these have never been to a comic book shop, having developed their own habits in the age of Amazon: they know comics only in “graphic novel” or “trade” formats.

So even in my American comic book class the definition of what “comics” are is about as messy as can be imagined. In my *newspaper* comics class, of course, there is no such conversation: none of them under the age of sixty reads a newspaper regularly or follows a syndicated newspaper comic strip. They do, however, in numbers considerably larger than my comic book class, read web comics—a born-digital medium whose readership, reception practices, and underlying business models remain something of a terra incognita for comics scholars. All these are “comics,” but no two people in my classes would agree exactly on what “difference” the medium makes, let alone the precise definition of the medium itself.

Indeed, we can extend this thought experiment to other, older narrative media. If we think about the novel, for example, we might be inclined to suspect that here at least we have a narrative medium that has survived for centuries with few changes. Certainly novels have retained more media specificity and “purity” than have any of the media that arrived after the turn of the twentieth century. As a monomodal form in which text alone carries meaning-making work of narrative, the novel feels relatively continuous from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. But similar questions arise in my early American novel class: how do I read this? how can this be a novel with no unifying plot and entirely constituted by personal letters? By the time they get to the nineteenth-century novel students are relieved to see consistent characterization and the emergence of psychological realism, not to mention a plot they can summarize. But their frustrations and question are far from over: why is this so long? Why are so many events repeated multiple times?

I explain to them about nineteenth-century serialization and its conventions, about how most of these novels first appeared in installments in periodicals where readers might first arrive at the text at any time, needing to fill in details from past installments in order to catch up. Think of the repetitions like the “previously on . . .” bit at the start of a serial TV show, I suggest, hoping to draw them in by connecting the old-fashioned novel to a medium they consume more regularly. As it turns out, they have no idea what I mean about the recap sequence, because, I discover, I am referring to something they generally don’t see. For those who regularly watch serial TV (and they watch far less than I did or do) their streaming binge-watching experiences often eliminate precisely those paratexts between episodes, as do the torrent they download.

All of this is quite exhausting for a middle-aged media professor, of course. But also exciting. After all, that analogy *worked* just a few years ago. But now none of my students watch TV “live,” or even own a DVR. They watch “TV,” but they are not watching it in anything like the way I did in the 1970s (racing home from school to be there for *Star Trek* reruns), or even like their predecessors from just a few years earlier with their (now obsolete) DVD binges. They are accessing TV predominantly through streaming services or Plex servers, watching it on laptops and phones. How do we identify its media affordances when “TV” from 2007 is already all but a different species from TV in 2017?

. . .

I could go on and on. But since my point here is not to say it cannot or should not be done, I’d like to end in more positive terms. After all, my argument is not that transmediality does not exist but that it plays a much bigger role than our approaches to media have acknowledged. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that I believe, properly explored, transmedial narrative is not a microscopic category describing a small range of massive texts—*Star Wars*, *Matrix*—but is more properly understood as an umbrella term that enfolds and includes that much older category of adaptation (which has traditionally been bracketed from the study of transmedial narrative as an embarrassing ancestor). After all, what do we call, for example, the television series *Walking Dead*? Yes, it is an adaptation, taking a storyworld from the medium of comics and transplanting it to another medium. But it is also one that presents a parallel narrative trajectory, presenting alternate events and roads-not-taken within the “same” storyverse. A fan of the “franchise” is asked not to choose between them but to keep them both simultaneously in mind as each

continues to move serially forward. But this storytelling is not restricted only to comics and TV. There also exist a series of novels, coauthored by the comics series cocreator Robert Kirkman, which fill in background or follow through on events not fully explored in the comics or the TV series. And there exists as well a terrific series of interactive story games by Telltale Games that extend the storyworld in complicated and fascinating ways, drawing on both comics and TV versions for their ingredients and using crowdsourced data from players' decisions to determine future narratives (Sulimma).

Or Brian K. Vaughan and Marcos Martin's recent digital-only comic *The Walking Dead: Alien* from 2016, which opens up a new extension of the storyworld in Europe. While the novels and comics series are authored by Kirkman, the games and the Vaughan and Martin comic are something else entirely, closer to the original Superman transmediality, as projects spin out and as big companies and independent creators are entrusted with the storyworld, and fans are invited to figure out how it all might fit together even if on parallel tracks. Even the television series is only nominally under Robert Kirkman's authorial control, despite his official title as an executive producer, as three showrunners, ten executive producers, and dozens each of directors and writers have all had their hand on the tiller.

All of this is adaptation, extension, and pure transmedial storytelling all at once—but in a weave that is necessarily inseparable. So let's stop trying to parse the distinction and instead accept *all* of it under the umbrella term of *transmedial storytelling*—literally and simply storytelling across media—and come up with a new term for the more specific body of largely corporate storytelling Jenkins was thinking about when he first worked up his definition. (Indeed, we could just use the corporate lingo itself: “cross-platform strategic synergy” or some such.)

What I am calling for here is not a repackaging of adaptation studies under new media trendiness. Nor does my identification of the fantasy that undergirds our conceptions of the “media” in “transmedial narrative” mean that I do not believe that there are in fact specific affordances, unique work an individual medium does. I just don't believe that this work can be accounted for in any meaningful way without the deployment of a rigorous media history, one that includes technological, industrial, and reception practices and that places the media under investigation into a larger media (and technological, industrial, and reception) ecology that is constantly changing, even before the twentieth century began. Attentiveness to form and theory—which have thus far dominated the discussion—are not sufficient, any more than media history without formalism and theory would get us anywhere.

This means attentiveness, for example, to the ways in which, as I suggested earlier, a film series that extends from 1962 to the present is itself in important ways transmedial, in that the “film” on whose back the series is strung is not the same medium by 2015 it was when it started. It means being able to account for how and why it is so and what difference it makes as surely as it means being able to account for the medial specificities of some platonic idea of “video game” or “comics” in expanding a given storyworld in various ways. It means, in short, more than most of us who are not superhuman are likely to be able to do alone.

Especially here in United States, our system of humanistic inquiry and rewards are premised overwhelmingly on individual research and accomplishment—on an academic version of the romantic author. But it could be argued that one of the few upsides to an academic system on the verge of collapse is that there are few rewards left and the structures themselves are fast dissolving. So let me end with a call for a new model of collaboration for those invested in understanding this complicated object of study, just the *consumption* of which in many cases can be the work of months or even years (here I am thinking for example of *Doctor Who*—a half century of TV, radio, comics, magazines, and more—or the DC comics storyverse that launched in 1938 with *Superman*, which few if any of us could hope to read in a lifetime). And then there is the theory, the formalist work, and the media history, the kind of thing any self-respecting profession would be doing as laboratory teams and *not* as romantic individuals haunting our lonely garrets.

It means, ultimately, that if we are serious about transmedial narrative we need to be serious about not just interdisciplinarity—that increasingly vacuous term in the face of all the institutional barriers that are hardening like arteries in the death throes of the academy we all inherited—but something closer to Piaget’s 1970 call for a transdisciplinarity: “not be limited to recognize the interactions and or reciprocities between the specialized researches, but which will locate these links inside a total system without stable boundaries between the disciplines.” Of course, it could be asked of me as it was surely of Piaget: would this not constitute a call for a new uber-discipline to rule them all? Speaking only for myself, I would say: yes, why not? (one of the nice things about an academy in its death throes is that we can say such things). In fact, suddenly Jenkins’s original definition seems more useful than I earlier implied, not just as a way of describing transmedial narrative but also as a model for describing the kind of *transdisciplinary* approaches needed to finally start studying transmedial narrative systematically and responsibly. Adapting his definition for this purpose:

Transdisciplinarity represents a process where integral elements of research get dispersed systematically across multiple scholarly channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated understanding of transmedial stories. Ideally each *scholar* makes her own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story about the story.

That can get us somewhere. That would be a place to start—and maybe in the process a place from which we can finally shake free of the old postclassical university and begin making one that actually supports the kind of work we long to be doing.

Jared Gardner is Professor of English at Ohio State University, where he also directs the Popular Culture Studies program. He is the author of three monographs, including *Projections: Comics and the History of 21st-Century Storytelling* and *The Rise and Fall of Early American Magazine Culture*. He is editor of *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*.

■ NOTE

1. As I will several times in the essay to follow—one meant to be a playful (and hopefully productive) provocation—I overstate the case here. Of course, many have done incredible work in trying different approaches—formal, institutional, theoretical—to an object that we only fully recognized in the last generation. For me personally, I am indebted in this and in all things media studies, to Henry Jenkins and Marie-Laure Ryan, my adopted mentors. And more recently, I am grateful for a recent magisterial book whose lessons I am still absorbing, Jan-Noël Thon's *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2016).

■ WORKS CITED

- Chatman, Seymour. "What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (And Vice Versa)." *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980): 121–40.
- Daniels, Les. *Superman: The Complete History*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004.
- Epstein, Edward Jay. *The Hollywood Economist 2.0: The Hidden Financial Reality behind the Movies*. New York: Melville House, 2012.

Gardner, Jared. *Projections: Comics and the Future of 21st-Century Storytelling*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 2012.

Gordon, Ian. *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890–1945*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution P, 1998.

Jenkins, Henry. “Transmedia Storytelling 101.” March 21, 2007. http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

Johnson, Derek. “A History of Transmedia Entertainment.” 2011. Accessed August 21, 2017. <http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/johnson/>.

Portwood-Stacer, Laura, and Susan Berridge. “Introduction: Feminism and Comics.” *Feminist Media Studies* 15 (2015): 522.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. “Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology.” *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Ed. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2014.

Sulimma, Maria. “Did You Shoot the Girl in the Street?: On the Digital Seriality of *The Walking Dead*.” *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 8 (2014): 83–100.