

» Transmedia Entertainment: the new Library of Babel

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In 1999, the Wachowski brothers released *Matrix*, a melting pot of cultural influences parallel to the narratives of Lewis Carroll, the animes of Mamoru Oshii (*Ghost in the Shell*) and the comics of Grant Morrison (*The Invisibles*). Following the success of the film and during the preparations of the simultaneous filming of the second and third sequels (*Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions*), the Wachowskis devoted themselves to throw significant fragments of content pertinent to the universe they had outlined in the original movie. They did so through a cross-platform, which included comics, animated shorts (Animatrix) and video games that shot off complimentary or alternative narratives. This labyrinth canon created by the Wachowskis gave birth to new corridors in the form of fandom, content created by fans that to this day continues to feed the *Matrix* universe and it multiplies in constant connection/disconnection to the official story.

While the first usages of the term transmedia are credited to Marsha Kinder, it is Henry Jenkins who popularized it by analyzing the galaxy of narratives that ended up shaping *Matrix* in his new book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*,¹ particularly in the chapter entitled *Searching for the Origami Unicorn: The Matrix and Transmedia Storytelling*. The title's reference to the last scene in *Blade Runner*, in which the figure of the paper unicorn plays a central role, allows Jenkins to put forth the narrative's capacity to suggest areas of meaning that had been explicitly left out. However, the referential echoes of that reminiscent title allows us to go further and ask: in the era of transmedia, what is real? What is official? Does the canon continue to direct the narratives or is it becoming more and more confusing due to fandoms ability to multiply content?

FROM CANON TO FANDOM

In the story *Pierre Menard, the author of Quixote*,² Borges is pictured as an author who, centuries after Miguel de Cervantes, rewrote, word by word, several chapters of *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Some postmodern North American writers, led by John Barth,³ made reference to Borges' texts in the 1960s to proclaim the death of the author and of an identity that was understood as a static and single formulation. The authors claimed that the work's identity was a fluid, unstable construct subjected to a series of constant changes depending on varied coordinates. In the words of the post-structuralist **Roland Barthes**, "the text is not made of a line of words that relay a single meaning in a certain theological way (the message of author -God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which different writings are compared and contrasted, none of which is the original"⁴. Another postmodern author, **Robert Coover**, revitalized, years after Ted Nelson, the term 'hypertext' in his article *The End of Books*,⁵ in order to define a new system of contents based on multi-directionality and often presented in the form of a maze of connections that we are invited or bound to create. Coover highlighted that "creative imagination is now more preoccupied with forming these links, creating routes and maps, than with the affirmation of a style of what we traditionally called characters or plot."

In the revision of the traditional cultural models in which we live, the concept of property is increasingly diluted, prioritizing a cultural experience that grows in the networks and not in a linear fashion. Similar to what happened in the narrative of J.J. Abrams's *Lost*, another example of transmedia in which fandom outlived the canon, the universal narratives of entertainment, led by *Marvel*, *Star Wars* and *Game of Thrones*, seem to spread infinitely. We live in the throes of a licensing system that has propelled the entertainment industry during the past two decades and are submerged in a transmedia universe in which, facing the authority of the trademark, which is always associated to a specific area and time, the final democratization of storytelling primes more and more every day. If licenses allowed, and they still do, millions of dollars' worth of sales through the concept of merchandising, the explosion of a social entertainment prompts

¹ Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: La cultura de la convergencia en los medios de comunicación*. Ed. Paidós, 2008

² Jorge Luis Borges. *Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote*. Ficciones. Debolsillo, 2011

³ John Barth. *The literature of exhaustion*. Friday Book: Essays and other non-fiction. Londres, The John Hopkins University Press, 1984.

⁴ Roland Barthes. *La muerte del autor*. Traducción: C. Fernández Merdrano Fuente: <http://www.cubaliteraria.cu/revista/laletradelescriba/n51/articulo-4.html>

⁵ Robert Coover. *The End of Books*. The New York Times, June 21, 1992.



the development of increasingly complex mythologies that feed the industry's production. Brands like HBO made of transmedia the ultimate tool of promotion, but today the phenomenon is closer to the field of semiotics and narratives than to marketing.

FROM TRANSMEDIA TO DEEP MEDIA

Jenkins defines transmedia as "the integration of entertainment experiences through a broad spectrum of media platforms." As explained by Derek Johnson, "transmedia entertainment is not new in its extensible exchange; however, the conceptual frameworks that we use to imagine and give meaning to their social use often are⁶." This is where the true revolution resides, one that implies a different way of understanding and processing stories. Our way of experiencing entertainment, as well as our way of consuming information, is modifying our semantic framework. 'Single-media' is dead. It no longer corresponds with our hyperlinked vision of reality, nor with the consumer's needs of current content, always in search of more vertically profound storytelling nodes of interest.

The idea of 'deep media', as coined by Frank Rose⁷, looks directly at the same phenomenon as that of transmedia, but it does so, according to him, from the perspective of the outcome and not of the process. Consumers of content need more fluid structures, but above all, deeper ones that allow them to keep digging, either through canonic materials or, in most cases, through the products of fandom. So what is the role of today's producers of entertainment, including brands? According to Jenkins, the practices involving transmedia narratives expand the potential

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market through the creation of different points of entry for different segments of the audience. From the perspective of the digital transformation of communication, transmedia multiplies the opportunities of connecting with communities through shared territories in which the brand is no longer an intruder but a collaborator in the construction of a great narrative. Future producers of entertainment should introduce themselves as advocates of a canon that aspires to fandom, or, in other words, as promoters of the best use of the medium, once the rules of the canon have been established.

Transmedia entertainment has completed a cycle without us even noticing. While we thought that huge corporations such as Disney were the ones that constructed

contemporary mythologies based on superheroes and outer space battles, and that HBO and Netflix had managed to come up with new ways of enjoying social series, in reality we were looking at the picture upside down. The revolution has gravitated to the other side, that of millions of fans who, in the scope of expanding their communities and with the excuse of hoping to interact, were generating content and interactions, constructing, Borges again, a modern Library of Babel. But this time ... an endless one.

⁶ Derek Johnson. *A History of transmedia entertainment*

⁷ Frank Rose. *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue and the way we tell stories.* W W Norton & Co. 2012

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges. *La Biblioteca de Babel.* Ficciones. Debolsillo. 2011



David G. Natal is director of the Consumer Engagement Area at LLORENTE & CUENCA Spain. He holds a degree in journalism from the Complutense University of Madrid. He has worked in El Mundo and Cadena Ser, and was part of the press department of Madrid's Fine Arts Circle. As chief coordinator at Actúa Comunicación, he led national communication campaigns for brands such as Heineken, Red Bull, Movistar and Ron Barceló. He is also one of the creators of the website Numerocero.es and of the audiovisual production company that carries the same name. At LLORENTE & CUENCA he has managed campaigns for clients such as Campofrío, Telefónica, Red Cross, Caixabank, Indra and Bezoya.

dgonzalez@llorenteycuenca.com



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