

Transmedia storytelling: the narratives of new media

Human beings are capable of constructing narratives from the scantest of details. Presented with a chronological sequence of events, we are given to establish causal links, and thereby to create a narrative. It is more than a mere capability, however. While the weaving together of disparate and otherwise unconnected threads of story does indeed require skill, it is also a tendency of the species, an instinctive reaction to the randomness of experience which imposes order and fulfils a basic need. We are all authors after a fashion, whether or not we commit our narratives to paper, canvas, celluloid, or various forms of digital media.

The novel, and later the film, created for the reader and audience member a story world to inhabit. Inhabiting this world evoked a sense of belonging. This felt real – intensely so – despite the fact one was engaging with a fiction. There is no disputing the reality or intensity of that feeling, as anyone who has read a book or watched a film and experienced a sense, not merely of gratification through engagement with the characters, but of sadness and loss when the narrative came to a close, will attest. Whether the reader experiences a sense of belonging to a fiction or to a reality (albeit a cerebral and/or emotional 'reality') is beside the point. It is the sense of belonging which matters. Further, books and films have been providing this immersive experience for generations of readers and viewers.

In the age of transmedia, this sense of belonging is intensified as the reader/spectator becomes an active participant. Jenkins describes transmedia storytelling as follows:

Transmedia storytelling is the art of worldmaking. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience. (Jenkins 2006:20-21)

Transmedia storytelling is, thus, an entertainment experience requiring the consumer to roam, hunt, and gather across multiple platforms and a range of different media, such as films, comic books, and video games, suggestive of a journey to far-flung places, of Indiana Jones-style pan-global travel in search of the various bits of information required to piece together the

narrative. If the transmedia story involves action and adventure, this is experienced by actively participating in the 'adventure' of reassembling the various elements of the narrative residing across multiple platforms, rather than simply by engaging with the diegesis or story world. There is a sense, then, in which the 'world-making' of transmedia storytelling involves the consumer as much as it does the media producer, with the lines between the two becoming indistinct. In addition, producers and consumers are also part of an online community to which one might also feel a sense of belonging. This has been my own personal experience in playing the 'Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game' (MMORPG) *Guild Wars 2*. I will focus, briefly, upon gaming as an entertainment experience per se, situating it within the broader contexts of convergence culture, transmedia storytelling, and narrative.

Arguably, the gamer's experience of *Guild Wars 2*, is no more or less immersive than the reader's experience of, say, *Pride and Prejudice*. Both texts rely upon the seemingly innate ability/need of human beings to inhabit the story world. It is important to acknowledge the commonality between different modes of storytelling before proceeding to discuss the differences. However, the differences are extremely significant.

For instance, the text of *Pride and Prejudice*, while open to interpretation, will always be the text of *Pride and Prejudice*. The text of *Guild Wars 2*, on the other hand, is mutating as we speak. It is not, in any sense, a fixed entity. Of course it is updated frequently – but so is my Windows operating system. More importantly, however, the outcomes of the game are determined by the player – the participant – and more importantly than that, by the joint participation of teammates, that is, of guild or 'warband' members. The actual nature of the gameplay is determined via consultation with the consumer during 'beta' testing, while in-game support is available, not only from the game developer AreaNet's staff, but, crucially, from the player community, referred to by Jenkins as the 'knowledge community'.

For the ultimate in knowledge community involvement – or user participation – in gaming, perhaps one might look to *The Sims*, the 'life simulation' game, where the developer, Electronic Arts, has made available a vast array of in-game content designed by the players/users themselves. Had Jane Austen been able to draw upon such resources (and who is

to say she wouldn't have wanted to?) then how would this have affected the text? In fact, it is not so much the nature of the text itself which is at stake, but the respective roles of producer and consumer which are the focus of attention. In 2018 the consumer may rightly claim to play a part in production, whether literally, as with *The Sims*, or figuratively, as with *The Matrix*, whereas, in 1818, this was not merely impossible, but inconceivable.

It is not merely the experience of playing the game, but one engagement with the various iterations of the game, which become imbedded within one's memories, to the extent that many gamers will have a sense of their own development and growth being interlinked with that of the game (or franchise) concerned. This adds an extra dimension to the sense of belonging. The experience may appear similar to that of the reader who eagerly awaits the latest novel from Donna Tartt, Jo Nesbo, or Ian McEwan, perhaps even more so an installment of a series, say, of the *Interworld* trilogy by Neil Gaiman.

One notable difference, however, is that video-gaming is in its infancy. Particularly if one was born during the last twenty years, one would quite literally have a sense of 'growing up' with the medium itself. It is quite possible that early adopters of the novel may have had a similar sense of involvement as the medium first blossomed during the early- to mid-eighteenth century, and marveled, not only at the development of narrative technique between Defoe, Fielding, Stephenson, and Sterne, but at improvements in print quality, in much the same way that gamers marveled at the evolution of gaming, for instance, by playing the *Tomb Raider* franchise from its earliest iterations in the 1990s to the present. This is not to imply that gaming is more enjoyable than reading or that new media is in any way superior to old media. It is to argue that gamers derive an intense sense of belonging from an activity which is not merely part of their everyday experience, but which enables them to feel part of a community, in many cases, to be able to contribute to and enhance the experiences of fellow gamers, and, occasionally, to assist with game development. And this is merely to talk about gaming: imagine the possibilities if new media, far from displacing old media, could work in concert with books and films. This, of course, is what transmedia storytelling is all about.

There is more to a story than storytelling. The way the reader, audience member, and/or gamer

experiences (or consumes) a story is of equal importance to and inextricable from the way in which it is told or 'authored'. Wallace Martin describes St Augustine's wonder upon seeing St Ambrose reading – and thinking – to himself without speaking aloud, a feat made possible by the written word, a 'delivery technology' which supplemented rather than replaced the spoken word as a means of telling stories. Writing enabled a whole new way of experiencing the story world, namely – reading. As St Ambrose would attest, it allowed the reader or consumer a more intimate, one-to-one relationship with the text, and thus the opportunity to interpret the narrative oneself without the intervention – or performance, one might say interference – of a third party. The story could be re-read and perhaps even memorised by the consumer through repeated re-readings, a task which had, previously, befallen the storyteller, although one might call it a privilege rather than a task.

This was in 4th Century Rome, a thousand years before the invention of the printing press. With the advent of print, a widespread shift between the respective roles of the storyteller and consumer occurs, which, I would argue, is mirrored by the changes taking place within today's convergence culture. The role of the reader becomes more prominent, with the consumer exerting a greater degree of control over the way in which the story world is experienced. However, despite the fact that the written text is experienced in the mind of the reader, at the time and in the place of the reader's choosing, it is nonetheless a finite entity. *Robinson Crusoe* – much like *Paradise Lost* (what applies to prose forms such as the novel also applies to verse forms such as the epic) – begins and ends the same way every time you read it. And perhaps the most disappointing thing about any story is that it has to end.

This may seem like an absurd statement, but to fully appreciate the changes which are taking place during the era of convergence culture, one must imagine a transmedia *Robinson Crusoe* in which the construction of the story world requires the proactive participation of the reader, in which the outcomes are partly determined by the reader-participant, where the actual content of the next installment in an ever-expanding franchise may be subject to the involvement of a latter-day Defoe's fan-base, and where the story world is open-ended. Referring back to the sense of belonging one feels upon becoming immersed in a narrative, media experiences such

as the *Star Wars* MMORPG enable the consumer to inhabit the story world long after the text itself has concluded. Further, the *Daily Prophet* website, founded upon and around the Harry Potter novels, is able to foster creative-writing talent in the 'real world', while other fan sites such as those dedicated to *Game of Thrones* and *Arrested Development* enable consumer-participants to hone their ability to engage with and to analyse the text.

It seems fair to say, then, that the history of storytelling can be told in terms of the emergence of new media, which, rather than superseding the old media, converge with them. This seems a plausible narrative. In establishing a causal chain between chronological but nonetheless disparate series of events, one should acknowledge, however, that there are other narratives. To illustrate this point, while certain literary theorists believe *Robinson Crusoe* to be the first novel, others maintain that it is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Nonetheless, what seems beyond dispute is that the invention of the printing press was one of the factors which led, eventually, to the birth of the novel, and to the widespread availability of both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Don Quixote*. However, this availability would not have amounted to much unless one could read, whether aloud, or, like St Ambrose, to oneself.

This brings us to the important point, namely that print is not a medium. Rather, it is a 'delivery system'. As Lisa Gitelman has argued, 'a medium is a technology that enables communication' on the one hand, and 'a set of associated "protocols" or social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology' on the other (Jenkins 2006: 13). Thus, 'delivery systems' such as print are 'simply and only technologies', whereas media may be understood as 'cultural systems' involving 'protocols' or 'social and cultural practices'. Further, the human race is amassing an ever-expanding stockpile of media with the advent new delivery systems and the subsequent development of associated protocols, and with 'old media' co-existing alongside 'new media' as 'layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum' (Jenkins: 13-14).

Returning to St Ambrose, the 'delivery system' of the written word enabled a range of new 'protocols', including the option to read aloud, which, judging by St Augustine's surprise at seeing his colleague reading silently to himself, was the customary practice in 4th Century

Rome. The new medium of the written word did not entirely displace the old medium of the spoken word. Rather, the two media converged in much the same way that cinema converged with theatre, television converged with cinema, and streaming video is converging with television. Each new medium becomes the preferred storytelling vehicle of a given era (cinema in the early- to mid-twentieth century, television in the mid- to late-twentieth century, digital media in the late-twentieth to early-twenty-first century), affording new creative possibilities for producers, and generating new protocols for producers and consumers alike. The important point where the new media of twenty-first century convergence culture is concerned is that the roles of media producer and media consumer are growing indistinct. As we have seen, the transfer of power and control from producer to consumer has been in process since the delivery system of the written word enabled a new cultural practice or protocol, namely, that of reading. This process continued apace with the invention of the printing press and is now seen to be accelerating with the advent of digital media.