

## M/C Journal, Vol 21, No 1 (2018)

### Transmedia Serial Narration: Crossroads of Media, Story, and Time

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#### Abstract

The concept of transmedia storyworlds unfolding across complex serial narrative structures has become increasingly important to the study of modern media industries and audience communities. Yet, the precise connections between transmedia networks, serial structures, and narrative processes often remain underdeveloped. The dispersion of potential story elements across a diverse collection of media platforms and technologies prompts questions concerning the function of seriality in the absence of fixed instalments, the meaning of narrative when plot is largely a personal construction of each audience member, and the nature of storytelling in the absence of a unifying author, or when authorship itself takes on a serial character. This special issue opens a conversation on the intersection of these three concepts and their implications for a variety of disciplines, artistic practices, and philosophies. By re-thinking these concepts from fresh perspectives, the collection challenges scholars to consider how a wide range of academic, aesthetic, and social phenomena might be productively thought through using the overlapping lenses of transmedia, seriality, and narrativity. Thus, the collection gathers scholars from life-writing, sport, film studies, cultural anthropology, fine arts, media studies, and literature, all of whom find common ground at this fruitful crossroads.

This breadth also challenges the narrow use of transmedia as a specialized term to describe current developments in corporate mass media products that seek to exploit the affordances of hybrid digital media environments. Many prominent scholars, including Marie-Laure Ryan and Henry Jenkins, acknowledge that a basic definition of transmedia as stories with extensions and reinterpretations in numerous media forms includes the oldest kinds of human expression, such as the ancient storyworlds of Arthurian legend and *The Odyssey*. Yet, what Jenkins terms “top-down” transmedia—that is, pre-planned and often corporate transmedia—has received a disproportionate share of scholarly attention, with modern franchises like *The Matrix*, the Marvel universe, and *Lost* serving as common exemplars (Flanagan, Livingstone, and McKenny; Hadas; Mittell; Scolari). Thus, many of the contributions to this issue push the boundaries of what has commonly been studied as transmedia as well as the limits of what may be considered a serial structure or even a story. For example, these papers imagine how an autobiography may also be a digital concept album unfolding in reverse, how participatory artistic performances may unfold in unpredictable instalments across physical and digital space, and how studying sports fandom as a long series of transmedia narrative elements encourages scholars to grapple with the unique structures assembled by audiences of non-fictional story worlds. Setting these experimental offerings into dialogue with entries that approach the study of transmedia in a more established manner provides the basis for building bridges between such recognized conversations in new media studies and potential collaborations with other disciplines and subfields of media studies.

This issue builds upon papers collected from four years of the [International Transmedia Serial Narration Seminar](#), which I co-organized with Dr. Claire Cornillon, Assistant Professor (Maîtresse de Conférences) of comparative literature at Université de Nîmes. The seminar held sessions in Paris, Le Havre, Rouen, Amsterdam, and Utrecht, with interdisciplinary speakers from the USA, Australia, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. As a transnational, interdisciplinary project intended to cross both theoretical and physical boundaries, the seminar aimed to foster exchange between academic conversations that can become isolated not only within disciplines, but also within national and linguistic borders. The seminar thus sought to enhance academic mobility between both people and ideas, and the digital, open-access publication of the collected papers alongside additional scholarly interlocutors serves to broaden the seminar’s goals of creating a border-crossing conversation. After two special issues primarily collecting the French language papers in *TVSeries* (2014) and *Revue Française des Sciences de l’Information et de la Communication* (2017), this issue seeks to share the Transmedia Serial Narration project with a wider audience by publishing the remaining English-language papers, accompanied by several other contributions in dialogue with the seminar’s themes. It is our hope that this collection will invite a broad international audience to creatively question the meaning of transmedia, seriality, and narrativity both historically and in the modern, rapidly changing, global and digital media environment.

Several articles in the issue illuminate existing debates and common case studies in transmedia scholarship by comparing theoretical models to the much more slippery reality of a media form in flux. Thus, Mélanie Bourdaa’s feature article, “From One Medium to the Next: How Comic Books Create Richer Storylines,” examines theories of narrative complexity and transmedia by scholars including Henry Jenkins, Derek Johnson, and Jason Mittell to then propose a new typology of extensions to accommodate the lived reality expressed by producers of transmedia. Because her interviews with artists and writers emphasize the co-constitutive nature of economic and narrative considerations in professionals’ decisions, Bourdaa’s typology can offer researchers a tool to clarify the marketing and narrative layers of transmedia extensions. As such, her classification system further illuminates what is particular about forms of corporate transmedia with a profit orientation, which may not be shared by non-profit, collective, and independently produced transmedia projects.

Likewise, Radha O’Meara and Alex Bevan map existing scholarship on transmedia to point out the limitations of deriving theory only from certain forms of storytelling. In their article “Transmedia Theory’s Author Discourse and Its Limitations,” O’Meara and Bevan argue that scholars have preferred to focus on examples of transmedia with a strong central author-figure or that they may indeed help to rhetorically shore up the coherency of transmedia authorship through writing about transmedia creators as *auteurs*. Tying their critique to the established weaknesses of *auteur* theory associated with classic commentaries like Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” and Foucault’s “What is an Author?,” O’Meara and Bevan explain that this focus on transmedia creators as authority figures reinforces hierarchical, patriarchal understandings of the creative process and excludes from consideration all those unauthorized transmedia extensions through which audiences frequently engage and make meaning from transmedia networks. They also emphasize the importance of constructing academic theories of transmedia authorship that can accommodate collaborative forms of hybrid amateur and professional authorship, as well as tolerate the ambiguities of “authorless” storyworlds that lack clear narrative boundaries. O’Meara and Bevan argue that such theories will help to break down gendered power hierarchies in Hollywood, which have long allowed individual men to “claim credit for the stories and for all the work that many people do across various sectors and industries.”

Dan Hassler-Forest likewise considers existing theory and a corporate case study in his examination of analogue echoes within a modern transmedia serial structure by mapping the storyworld of *Twin Peaks* (1990). His article, “Two Birds with One Stone: Transmedia Serialisation in *Twin Peaks*,” demonstrates the push-and-pull between two contemporary TV production strategies: first, the use of transmedia elements that draw viewers away from the TV screen toward other platforms, and second, the deployment of strategies that draw viewers back to the TV by incentivizing broadcast-era appointment viewing. *Twin Peaks* offers a particularly interesting example of the manner in which these strategies intertwine partly because it already offered viewers an analogue transmedia experience in the 1990s by splitting story elements between TV episodes and books. Unlike O’Meara and Bevan, who elucidate the growing prominence of transmedia *auteurs* who lend rhetorical coherence to dispersed narrative elements, Hassler-Forest argues that this older analogue transmedia network capitalized upon the dilution of authorial authority, due to the distance between TV and book versions, to negotiate tensions between the producers’ competing visions. Hassler-Forest also notes that the addition of digital soundtrack albums further complicates the serial nature of the story by using the iTunes and TV distribution schedules to incentivize repeated sequential consumption of each element, thus drawing modern viewers to the TV screen, then the computer screen, and then back again.

Two articles offer a concrete test of these theoretical perspectives by utilizing ethnographic participant-observation and interviewing to examine how audiences actually navigate diffuse, dispersed storyworlds. For example, Céline Masoni’s article, “From Seriality to Transmediality: A Socio-narrative Approach of a Skilful and Literate Audience,” documents fans’ highly strategic participatory practices. From her observations of and interviews with fans, Masoni theorizes the types of media literacy and social as well as technological competencies cultivated through transmedia fan practices. Olivier Servais and Sarah Sepulchre’s article similarly describes a long-term ethnography of fan transmedia activity, including interviews with fans and participant-observation of the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) *Game of Thrones Ascent* (2013). Servais and Sepulchre find that most people in their interviews are not “committed” fans, but rather casual readers and viewers who follow transmedia extensions sporadically. By focusing on this group, they widen the existing research which often focuses on or assumes a committed audience like the skilful and literate fans discussed by Masoni.

Servais and Sepulchre’s results suggest that these viewers may be less likely to seek out all transmedia extensions but readily accept and adapt unexpected elements, such as the media appearances of actors, to add to their serial experiences of the storyworld. In a parallel research protocol observing the *Game of Thrones Ascent* MMORPG, Servais and Sepulchre report that the most highly-skilled players exhibit few behaviours associated with immersion in the storyworld, but the majority of less-skilled players use their gameplay choices to increase immersion by, for example, choosing a player name that evokes the narrative. As a result, Servais and Sepulchre shed light upon the activities of transmedia audiences who are not necessarily deeply committed to the entire transmedia network, and yet who nonetheless make deliberate choices to collect their preferred narrative elements and increase their own immersion.

Two contributors elucidate forms of transmedia that upset the common emphasis on storyworlds with film or TV as the core property or “motherhood” (Scott). In her article “Transmedia Storyworlds, Literary Theory, Games,” Joyce Goggin maps the history of intersections between experimental literature and ludology. As a result, she questions the continuing dichotomy between narratology and ludology in game studies to argue for a more broadly transmedia strategy, in which the same storyworld may be simultaneously narrative and ludic. Such a theory can incorporate a great deal of what might otherwise be unproblematically treated as literature, opening up the book to interrogation as an inherently transmedial medium.

L.J. Maher similarly examines the serial narrative structures that may take shape in a transmedia storyworld centred on music rather than film or TV. In her article "You Got Spirit, Kid: Transmedial Life-Writing Across Time and Space," Maher charts the music, graphic novels, and fan interactions that comprise the Coheed and Cambria band storyworld. In particular, Maher emphasizes the importance of autobiography for Coheed and Cambria, which bridges between fictional and non-fictional narrative elements. This interplay remains undertheorized within transmedia scholarship, although a few have begun to explicate the use of transmedia life-writing in an activist context (Cati and Piredda; Van Luyn and Kläebe; Riggs). As a result, Maher widens the scope of existing transmedia theory by more thoroughly connecting fictional and autobiographical elements in the same storyworld and considering how serial transmedia storytelling structures may differ when the core component is music.

The final three articles take a more experimental approach that actively challenges the existing boundaries of transmedia scholarship. Catherine Lord's article, "Serial Nuns: Michelle Williams Gamaker's *The Fruit Is There to Be Eaten* as Serial and Trans-serial," explores the unique storytelling structures of a cluster of independent films that traverse time, space, medium, and gender. Although not a traditional transmedia project, since the network includes a novel and film adaptations and extensions by different directors as well as real-world locations and histories, Lord challenges transmedia theorists to imagine storyworlds that include popular history, independent production, and spatial performances and practices. Lord argues that the main character's trans identity provides an embodied and theoretical pivot within the storyworld, which invites audiences to accept a position of radical mobility where all fixed expectations about the separation between categories of flora and fauna, centre and periphery, the present and the past, as well as authorized and unauthorized extensions, dissolve.

In his article "Non-Fiction Transmedia: Seriality and Forensics in Media Sport," Mark Stauff extends the concept of serial transmedia storyworlds to sport, focusing on an audience-centred perspective. For the most part, transmedia has been theorized with fictional storyworlds as the prototypical examples. A growing number of scholars, including Arnau Gifreu-Castells and Siobhan O'Flynn, enrich our understanding of transmedia storytelling by exploring non-fiction examples, but these are commonly restricted to the documentary genre (Freeman; Gifreu-Castells, Misek, and Verbruggen; Karlsen; Kerrigan and Velikovsky). Very few scholars comment on the transmedia nature of sport coverage and fandom, and when they do so it is often within the framework of transmedia news coverage (Gambarato, Alzamora, and Tárca; McClearn; Waysdorf). Stauff's article thus provides a welcome addition to the existing scholarship in this field by theorizing how sport fans construct a user-centred serial transmedia storyworld by piecing together narrative elements across media sources, embodied experiences, and the serialized ritual of sport seasons. In doing so, he points toward ways in which non-fiction transmedia may significantly differ from fictional storyworlds, but he also enriches our understanding of an audience-centred perspective on the construction of transmedia serial narratives.

In his artistic practice, Robert Lawrence may most profoundly stretch the existing parameters of transmedia theory. Lawrence's article, "Locate, Combine, Contradict, Iterate: Serial Strategies for PostInternet Art," details his decades-long interrogation of transmedia seriality through performative and participatory forms of art that bridge digital space, studio space, and public space. While theatre and fine arts have often been considered through the theoretical lens of intermediality (Bennett, Boenisch, Kattenbelt, Vandsoe), the nexus of transmedia, seriality, and narrative enables Lawrence to describe the complex, interconnected web of planned and unplanned extensions of his hybrid digital and physical installations, which often last for decades and incorporate a global scope. Lawrence thus takes the strategies of engagement that are perhaps more familiar to transmedia theorists from corporate viral marketing campaigns and turns them toward civic ends (Anyiwo, Bourdaa, Hardy, Hassler-Forest, Scolari, Sokolova, Stork). As such, Lawrence's artistic practice challenges theorists of transmedia and intermedia to consider the kinds of social and political "interventions" that artists and citizens can stage through the networked possibilities of transmedia expression and how the impact of such projects can be amplified through serial repetition.

Together, the whole collection opens new pathways for transmedia scholarship, more deeply explores how transmedia narration complicates understandings of seriality, and constructs an international, interdisciplinary dialogue that brings often isolated conversations into contact. In particular, this issue enriches the existing scholarship on independent, artistic, and non-fiction transmedia, while also proposing some important limitations, exceptions, and critiques to existing scholarship featuring corporate transmedia projects with a commercial, top-down structure and a strong *auteur*-like creator. These diverse case studies and perspectives enable us to understand more inclusively the structures and social functions of transmedia in the pre-digital age, to theorize more robustly how audiences experience transmedia in the current era of experimentation, and to imagine more broadly a complex future for transmedia seriality wherein professionals, artists, and amateurs all engage in an iterative, inclusive process of creative and civic storytelling, transcending artificial borders imposed by discipline, nationalism, capitalism, and medium.

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