

# Transmediating difference: Fictional filter bubbles and transmedia storytelling

Anne Kustritz 

Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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## Abstract

Transmedia storyworlds often stem from a blockbuster “anchor property” that connects numerous extensions in multiple media forms. Consequently, transmedia can potentially diversify the media industry’s narratives since each medium may follow a different character whose perspective re-interprets the storyworld’s central themes and events. However, this article argues that a narrative strategy has emerged for “transmediating difference,” wherein politically contested storylines, LGBTQ characters, and the perspectives of women and people of color are sectioned off in low-budget transmedia extensions while blockbuster narratives remain primarily the domain of straight, able-bodied, white male protagonists. This story structure reveals the resiliency of industry assumptions about marketability while also isolating the experience of transmedia audiences, allowing companies to profit from inclusive and sanitized versions of the same narrative world. Like algorithmic “filter bubbles,” transmediating difference undermines cultural pluralism, and ushers in a paradoxical new form of invisibility despite increasingly diverse representation.

## Keywords

Convergence, gender, political economy, race, representational politics, sexuality, storyworld, transmedia

Transmedia promises viewers the ability to travel both deeper and broader in their exploration of narrative worlds. By engaging with networks that extend a storyworld in a variety of media forms, transmedia audiences can interact with characters, plots, histories, and futures that exceed the edges of the screen and enrich their sense of immersion in an encompassing narrative reality. Yet, instead of truly accessing a larger and more inclusive narrative world, transmedia networks often serve to separate and isolate viewers into demographically determined alternate realities. Restricting certain narrative elements to the second screen (i.e., literally a mobile or digital device, but used here in a metaphorically resonant manner as secondary and thus less valued or less mass forms of media) also

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## Corresponding author:

Anne Kustritz, Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University, Muntstraat 2A, Utrecht 3512 HJ, The Netherlands.

Email: [a.m.kustritz@uu.nl](mailto:a.m.kustritz@uu.nl)

often has the effect of screening out representations that might challenge the mainstream media market, allowing the audience of mass broadcast media and the audiences of niche transmedia extensions to live in totally separate narrative worlds. On the one hand, such strategies seem to allow everyone to have the experience they want; by presenting a main storyline designed for blockbuster numbers then spinning-off transmedia extensions targeted to individual demographics, producers invite the maximum number of people to engage with their story. However, this splintering of narrative reality also sanitizes public culture from uncomfortable but vital encounters with otherness, alterity, and history, while further consolidating the notion that dominant cultural norms about what appeals to a mass audience are valueless and unmarked.

Thus, for example, it may not be a coincidence that Disney chose to release the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films with no backstory for background characters of color, and only provided transmedia access to a parallel narrative world where villains became evil because they profited from the sale of human lives (*Pirates of the Caribbean*, 2003, 2006, 2007). Similarly, *Harry Potter*, *Stargate: Atlantis*, and the 2004 reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* each profited from their heteronormative primary narratives while simultaneously seeking political kudos for the exclusion inherent in only including LGBTQ characters in their transmedia extensions. In addition, *Mass Effect* and *The Walking Dead* offer female and minority point-of-view characters, but not in their marketing material or main storyline, respectively. By separating and sealing off representations focused on race, gender, and sexuality into tertiary narrative threads on the second screen, the stream of the main narrative flow continues to connect audiences primarily to the perspectives of straight, white, male characters while transmedia increasingly invites specialized audiences to engage with pluralist conceptions of the world. This article argues that this phenomenon of transmediating difference results in the formation of separate fictional imaginaries for different audiences, much like the “filter bubbles” produced by algorithmic filtering of news media, and a paradoxical new form of invisibility despite increasingly diverse representation.

## Representing diversity from the top down

While transmedia historically comes in many forms, corporate transmedia currently receives strong academic attention, and as a result it is important to note that its terms and structures are set by the contingencies of the contemporary for-profit media industry. As argued by Hardy (2011), studies of transmedia often focus either on business strategy, such as Gillan (2010) and Gray’s (2010) analyses of the integration of the TV industry with new media “second screen” technologies, or on narrative and cultural consideration, such as narratologists like Ryan (2016) or fan studies like *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom* (Stein and Busse, 2014). Thus, I argue that further developing our understanding of transmedia storytelling requires examining how business considerations interact with storytelling and the legacies of bias and discrimination within the media industry. At its basis, transmedia refers to a storytelling structure wherein different parts of the same story or storyworld are spread across a variety of media, often with emphasis on gaming, the internet, and mobile media extensions. Any of these media forms can provide an opening into the overall storyworld and offer unique affective experiences and information that enrich the audience’s interpretation of the other components. As a result, theorists including Ryan (2016) and Jenkins (2014), acknowledge that transmedia is not strictly new, but instead may also be exemplified by much older storytelling traditions, as demonstrated by ancient tales like Homer’s *The Odyssey* that were continuously expanded and reinterpreted in a wide variety of media forms.

However, in an often cited blog post, Jenkins (2007) also provides the following influential definition of transmedia: “A process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed

systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.” Particularly the words “systematic,” “unified,” and “coordinated” are critical because they imply a single creator who began with an *a priori* transmedia design, criteria that exclude storyworlds like *The Odyssey*. As a result, this definition starts to clarify that most contemporary transmedia scholarship actually focuses much more narrowly on one specific style of transmedia storytelling that has become prominent in the mainstream media industry only recently and is only practiced by corporations. Indeed, many scholars including [Scolari \(2009, 2018\)](#) explicitly focus on transmedia primarily as a business practice. Jenkins and Ryan call this “top-down” transmedia. Exemplified by properties like *Lost* and *The Matrix*, top-down transmedia storytelling relies on a strong central author (or proxy-author) who designs the entire storyworld to ensure the coherency of the overall narrative across media, and takes advantage of the unique storytelling affordances of each medium. Top-down transmedia properties may invite audience participation, including the creation of user generated content like fan fiction, art, and video, but they also must retain firm boundaries between legitimate story extensions authorized by the creator, and illegitimate, unauthorized extensions ([Kustritz, 2014, 2017](#)).

In contrast, what Jenkins and Ryan call “bottom-up” or “snowball” transmedia refers to the arguably older model wherein story extensions accumulate over time, as many people add to and reinterpret the storyworld. The clearest examples predate copyright, like Arthurian legend and other folklore. However, in modern media the difference between a top-down and bottom-up structure often hinges upon legitimacy. For example, many fans of the *Lord of the Rings* books had already seen drawings of the characters and read story extensions that fleshed out the lives and thoughts of secondary characters, before the *Lord of the Rings* films were made. Although the books and movies certainly reached more people than any one amateur extension, I have argued elsewhere that many fans still developed very strong feelings about particular characters’ appearance and inner lives based on experience with unauthorized transmedia ([Kustritz, 2017](#)). For them, canon, or what “really happened,” is not necessarily based on the vision of the original creator but instead develops in unpredictable patterns as they navigate the larger snowball transmedia structure, which includes both official and unofficial extensions ([Kustritz, 2017](#)). Likewise, although *Star Trek* has a clear TV and film canon, the characters, stories, and icons of the *Star Trek* storyworld circulate widely throughout popular culture in allusions, parodies, and references, and take on a collective life of their own. As a shared system of signs, anyone can draw upon the language of *Star Trek* to construct new meanings, expressions, and arguments. Thus, like a snowball, these properties accumulate numerous extensions as their significance within popular culture grows.

As demonstrated by *The Odyssey*, bottom-up participatory transmedia has been around for almost as long as humans have been telling stories and making art. However, a top-down structure, especially within the mass media industry, requires a higher investment of resources and new business strategies. On the one hand, top-down transmedia requires either vertical conglomeration, or a complex licensing strategy: in other words, a single company must either own many different production companies, such as TV, film, and video game studios, or they must devise partnerships for licensing interpretation of their copyright to other studios loosely enough that new extensions add meaningfully to the overall story, but narrowly enough that the overall storyworld remains narratively and aesthetically coherent. The collaborative strategy could offer opportunities for smaller studios and a more diverse range of producers to add extensions to blockbuster projects and achieve greater recognition. However, the rate at which media giants have continued to conglomerate over the past decades suggests that collaboration with small players may not form the main strategy for transmedia production ([Birkinbine et al., 2016](#); [Woodhull and Snyder, 2018](#)).

The second shift in strategy to accommodate top-down transmedia deals with the planning and greenlighting process. Jenkins (2014) describes this as a progression from stories to characters to spaces. Ryan (2013) recounts a conversation between Jenkins and a filmmaker about project pitches in Hollywood, which is emblematic of this change. They discussed that once, if you wanted to pitch a project as a writer or producer, you had to hook the studio on a story. However, in the franchise era, studios did not want an elevator pitch about a single story—instead, pitches described a character, around whom many stories could be told. In other words, studios were most interested in greenlighting a character who could support a movie with many sequels. Yet, according to the filmmaker, this franchising logic has shifted again—contemporary studios now require a pitch that describes a vast and rich narrative space—a “storyworld” space in which many characters could live, around whom many individual stories may be told. As a result, the anchor property, or “mothership” (Jenkins, 2016) of many transmedia storyworlds, that is the narrative element with the highest budget and largest audience, is often primarily responsible for mapping and opening the space. Other individual extensions will then develop the characters and stories that unfold there in much more detail. Thus, Jenkins (2014) describes seeing the movie *Oz the Great and Powerful* with friends and coming out of the theater with very different impressions. His disappointed friend explained that the movie did not really have a plot and did not really build toward a climax. Summing up her experience she explained that she felt it was “all over the map”; yet, Jenkins (2014) replied that was exactly what he loved about it. Mapping transmedia narrative space offers both audiences and professionals incredible freedom to expansively imagine endless new characters and stories, and provides an invitation for collaborative, imaginative play. This is the aspect of transmedia that seems to offer so many possibilities for diversifying modern representations; within a transmedia storyworld, there is enough space for all kinds of characters and perspectives, in some cases built both by the industry and by amateurs. Transmedia does not tell one story from one perspective, but from its very nature designs a storyworld that houses an enormous diversity of plots, characters, and perspectives, and relies on differences between perspectives to complicate and deepen understanding of the narrative world.

Therefore, for Erigha (2016), the growing prominence of transmedia and convergence culture implicitly promised that transformations in distribution, technology, and participation would also engender changes in the ideological content of the mass media. Approaching television and films as just one component in an overall storyworld wherein numerous individual stories and narrative elements might unfold greatly multiplied the number of characters who could provide their own perspective on the narrative’s events, and even tell their own separate stories, offering audiences multiple vectors for identification. In addition, new business models encouraged a less antagonistic relationship with productive fan communities, enormously magnifying the scope of fans’ ability to directly challenge, modify, and potentially influence the on-going narrative (Jenkins, 2006). All of these trends may have seemed to pave the way toward greater industry responsiveness to audience desires, as well as greater diversity in casting and story structure, in order to take advantage of emerging platforms and meet new and more vocal audience demands.

However, according to several recent studies, the march of progress for representational politics has not been as dramatic as many originally foretold (Young, 2016). The 2011 findings of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film was particularly troubling since it documented a decline in the representation of women between 2010 and 2011, both in front of the camera and behind the scenes (Lauzen, 2012a, 2012b). Although overall the number of women, LGBTQ characters, and characters of color in film and television has increased over time, they still remain underrepresented, especially as main characters (Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, 2019; Smith et al., 2016). As audiences spend the most time with main characters and

generally access the storyworld through their eyes, this form of underrepresentation is particularly important because it limits the depth of characterization for those female and minority characters who do exist, may undermine the audience's empathy and identification with such characters, and very rarely structures the narrative from the experience or point of view of women or people of color, meaning that such characters still primarily serve as foils for the stories of straight, able-bodied, white male characters. Some producers blame the market for these persistent inequalities, arguing that a female actress cannot anchor a major film franchise, white audiences will not tune in to watch television with characters of color as the main cast, and lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and queer characters and storylines alienate viewers (Kuppuswam and Younkin, 2020).

These patterns may persist partly because of entrenched beliefs about profitability among those at the top of the industry. For example, when films like *The Body Snatchers* with Nicole Kidman failed, Warner Brothers studio executive Jeff Robinov blamed Kidman's lack of clout and vowed to never green-light another female-led film, but when films like *The Hunger Games* succeed they become merely an exception that fails to significantly unseat accepted industry practices or beliefs (Danielsen, 2007). Widespread shock over the success of male stripper film *Magic Mike* also speaks to tenacious industry beliefs about the market's supernatural ability to meet demand. Many commentators presented the film as responding to an inherently new audience, as though women's and gay men's desire for films oriented toward their visual pleasure had never existed before (McNary, 2015). They thus blame industry discrimination and superstition, what Powdermaker (1979) called taboo, on the very same underserved audiences that entrenched industry practices exclude.

This article therefore argues that transmedia has been utilized to make claims about increasingly diverse representation without challenging industry superstition about the economic necessity to retain white male point-of-view characters, by spinning-off story segments headed by diverse characters into secondary and tertiary media forms. These storyworlds are generally structured with their first, largest-budget, mass-marketed component, usually television or film, centered on a straight able-bodied white, male protagonist, sometimes as part of a larger ensemble cast, using existing mass media logic to access the widest possible audience. Numerous other narrative elements and fan engagement strategies then spread across media, each narrowly marketed and designed for a different "niche" audience. These transmedia components are generally lower-budget and sometimes produced as a form of viral marketing, fan outreach, teasers, behind-the-scenes footage, or platforms for circulation of user generated content, all aimed toward drawing viewers to the main property often with little or no expectation of independently producing their own profits. Notably, the big-budget central property need not come chronologically first, as lower-budget properties may initially test the market. Thus, these peripheral narrative elements pose a "low risk" way to incorporate controversial, experimental, or otherwise unconventional material, and to reach out to so-called specialty audiences. In many cases, these peripheral extensions may not be considered canonical and their additions to the plot will never impact the anchor properties, especially when they consist of interviews, marketing material, or user generated content.

A generous reading of this strategy would argue that such experiments may demonstrate the viability of these characters, topics, and audiences, paving the way toward increasingly diverse representations in the future. It is also worth noting that these increasingly diverse transmedia components do offer something important and valued to many underserved audiences. It could thereby be argued that pursuing this strategy offers the best of both worlds: a widely accessible base property designed to offend no one, from which every demographic may have their own transmedia extension. Yet, I argue that isolating female and minority point-of-view characters and culturally critical or politically controversial content in transmedia narrative elements impoverishes the overall

intermedial story and the quality of discourse in mass mediated public culture, while reinforcing the notion that excluding this material is normative and inoffensive. Allowing each demographic niche their own separate version of the story facilitates ideological isolation, undermining the potential for uncomfortable but vital public interrogation of the complexities of history, and the meaning of contemporary life in a pluralist, global society. In blunt terms, it also allows companies to profit from both racist and anti-racist storylines in the same property, both LGBTQ friendly and homophobic storylines, and thus does not require them to choose between these demographics or take a political position. In this way, transmedia may form a fictional version of what has come to be known as the news “filter bubble,” wherein people are only exposed to ideas that they already like and agree with (Pariser, 2011). The result, as many commentators argue, is a decline in pluralist public sphere critical dialogue, and a rise in polarization, although Bruns (2019) offers an important reminder that in this case technology facilitates rather than causes a primarily social problem. In such a climate, just as there is no longer any consensus about facts, there is no truly common culture. Even when we are all watching mass media blockbusters like *The Avengers* or *Superman*, because of our experience with transmedia extensions we may actually each experience a fundamentally different version that has been tailored to our tastes, prejudices, and demographic profile.

### **Separation and containment: Mapping deceptively diverse transmedia storyworlds**

In practice, perhaps because corporate transmedia remains in a somewhat experimental phase, each narrative structure is unique. Yet, by mapping how several very different corporate transmedia projects approach diverse characters and culturally critical storylines, a similar pattern of separation may begin to emerge. I do not claim this pattern is exclusive, nor that it need be entirely conscious on the part of producers. This study is not quantitative or ethnographic in nature and does not seek to directly access producer’ thoughts, nor to establish the frequency of this pattern’s appearance, nor to say that every transmedia network uses the pattern in the same way. Rather, this article maps out a variety of ways that very different transmedia structures all engage in transmediating difference and thus suggests an underlying continuity in business logic.

The methodological approach therefore borrows broadly from the qualitative and humanistic traditions of cultural studies exemplified in Hall’s (1981) “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” and in particular Halberstam’s (2011) notion of popular culture as the “silly archive” in which ephemera and other detritus of “low culture” may be read seriously as a repository of cultural tensions. Likewise, this study is inspired by scholars who examine media industries at the interstices of political economy and media anthropology, such as Mayer (2017). In particular, this study results from the impasse identified by media ethnographer Ortner (2013), who argued that the American media industry has increased in opacity and social distance to such an extent that Powdermaker’s (1979) classic anthropological study of Hollywood in the 1940s is no longer practically possible. In response, this project close-reads an eccentric silly archive of transmedia ephemera scattered across film, TV, ads, games, chat rooms, podcasts, magazines, and press releases. These traces are indirect reflections of an often insular industry at work. Case studies were chosen not because they are representative of all transmedia but because they each show and help to explain a different facet of the way that difference has been interpreted in transmedia. The overall goal is not to produce a definitive blueprint of how transmedia functions in all cases, but to document one among many trends that stretches through the silly archive of often forgotten transmedia materials and thus to tap into a shared set of assumptions that animates them.



To begin, Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean ride may seem like an extremely unlikely underlying piece of intellectual property for the launch for a blockbuster film and transmedia network. Yet, it was the broad popularity of the ride that inspired producer Jerry Bruckheimer, who stated his intention to ensure the similar mass-appeal of the films in his forward to *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Complete Visual Guide*: "Like the original Disneyland 'Pirates of the Caribbean,' we've tried to make our movies an 'E' ticket attraction which everyone can ride together" (Platt and Dakin, 2007: 7). Like most pop culture artifacts, *Pirates of the Caribbean* is a mixed text that interacts with narrative elements of multiple and contradictory ideological value. For instance, it includes a number of characters of color, but none in central roles, and in the case of the Carib people, often utilizing extreme ethnic stereotypes (Pheasant-Kelly, 2013; Poluha, 2018; Samuel, 2012). In terms of representation of women, Elizabeth is a prominent female character who becomes Pirate King but Calypso, although potentially the most powerful character, ultimately serves as a foil to the stories of the men around her and is unable to act in her own interests for most of the films. Subtextually, the films contain several references to same-sex characters and practices, including Johnny Depp's famously swishy performance as Captain Jack Sparrow, which was nearly axed by a studio executive and only overturned by Depp's threat to leave the film (Smith, 2006). When asked by a studio executive directly about his performance Depp reports saying "Well don't you know all my characters are gay?" (Robinson, 2015); yet his star persona and the coded significance of his stylized gestures speak only to some parts of the audience, and in the second film Jack recoils when presented with the prospect of a male lover (*Pirates of the Caribbean*, 2006).

These strategies are well documented ways for Hollywood to speak to different parts of the audience through encoded, subcultural symbolism, part of what Vito Russo famously called the "celluloid closet" (1987). However, more significantly, many parts of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* story never appear in the films in any form, the most dramatic of which is the history of the films' principle villain and Captain Jack's ship, The Black Pearl. Lord Cutler Beckett first appears in the second film when it is revealed that a vaguely defined unfavorable meeting between Beckett and Jack turned Jack to piracy and resulted in the East India Company brand on his arm, as well as his ill-fated captaincy of The Black Pearl (*Pirates of the Caribbean*, 2006). Beckett is presented as evil in the film largely because he antagonizes the main cast and the only hint of larger geopolitical stakes appears in the form of Beckett's passion for map-making, a practice that provides less and less space to hide for the whimsical and supernatural world inhabited by Captain Jack, denoted by the traditional edge of the map stating "here there be monsters." Again, in a subtextual manner, this might be read as a critique of emerging market logics and capitalist rationalization, leaving no room for pre-capitalist forms of self-determination and spiritualism beyond the totalizing power of production.

Yet, crucially, the missing piece of this story deals with the price of state corporations' expansion through colonialism and slavery. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* young adult novel *The Price of Freedom* reveals that the disagreement between Captain Jack and Beckett occurred over traffic in slaves (Crispin, 2011). Jack agreed to transport a cargo for the East India Company as captain of a ship called The Wicked Wench; however, he rebelled upon discovering that the cargo would be human, broke his contract with Beckett, and freed the slaves. In retribution, Beckett ordered the ship burned and sunk, and Jack branded a pirate. Jack made a deal with Davey Jones to retrieve The Wicked Wench from the bottom of the ocean, and he then renamed the charred ship The Black Pearl. This element of backstory, present only in peripheral media extensions of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, drastically changes the stakes and significance of the films' central conflicts and characters. Do we, as the audience, side with Jack because he represents a primal kind of freedom and whimsy while Beckett is boring and petty or are we invited to engage in a more

complex conflict about power, wealth, and the value of human life? While characters of color appear throughout the films, they are not main characters with fleshed out backstories, and all together only a few transmedia extensions make direct reference to slavery, including an encyclopedia and video games (7 Studios, 2006; Kidd, 2009, 2012; Platt and Dakin, 2007; SilverTree Media, 2007). In a world still shaped by colonialism and profoundly structured by the inequalities of globalization's flows of wealth and resources, discussion of slavery and its legacies is both much more challenging and much more pressing for contemporary life than the conflict between whimsy and rationality. Yet, it is a story available only to those who venture past the edges of the anchor property's map, to explore the extensions at the periphery. In the main film franchise, "freedom" becomes what Frank may term the commodified stylistics of politics drained of ideological content (1997); Frank argues that the stylistics of cultural critique and activism can easily become commodified as signifiers of youth and rebellion if separated from their historical and political context. Likewise, on film Jack's style of freedom is an empty cipher that anyone can endorse because it involves no political stakes. Adding in the more specific backstory from transmedia extensions re-signifies the "freedom" that Jack stands for and requires reconsideration of the ethics of solidarity and racial justice.

Although a landmark for diverse casting and contentious storylines in many respects, the 2004 reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* also pursued a similar strategy for siphoning off gay, bisexual, and lesbian storylines into transmedia extensions (*Battlestar Galactica*, 2004–2009). Like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the main series of the franchise includes characters the mass audience was able to experience very differently from transmedia audiences. Admiral Cain, captain of the Battlestar Pegasus, becomes the series' principle human antagonist in the second half of season two, symbolized most notoriously by her brutal treatment of a prisoner of war. Her story arc concludes when another character frees the prisoner and supplies her with a weapon to assassinate Cain. For viewers of the series on its own, this is a clearly structured arc wherein a brutalized prisoner righteously kills her captor and justice is served.

However, in the made-for-TV spin-off movie *Razor*, it is revealed that Cain and the prisoner had been lovers before the war when Cain believed her to be a human named Gina rather than an android and one of many versions of Six, the sixth human form created by the cylon androids (*Battlestar Galactica: Razor*, 2007). As the only lesbian relationship portrayed in the *Battlestar* franchise, this revelation adds complexity to the already horrific and dark story of Cain's leadership and demise but unfortunately also reinforces many lesbian media stereotypes, first because both characters end up dead, one by suicide, but in addition, because while *Razor* seems to give audiences two lesbian characters, the main series takes one away. For viewers of the main series, the dialogue of Cain's death scene seems completely average, as confronted with her impending demise Cain tells Gina "Frack you," and Gina responds with the seemingly pithy "You're not my type," before shooting Cain in the head. This scene reads differently for the audience sub-section that also viewed *Razor* because Gina's assertion that Cain is not her type solidifies the suspicion that she seduced Cain only to gain strategic access to the Pegasus as a part of the war effort, and her subsequent attraction to men, as well as other versions of Six's relationships with men, seem to confirm her heterosexuality. In other words, although Cain was a monster in the main series of *Battlestar*, as the only lesbian in the franchise, *Razor* invites an association between her monstrous nature and her lesbianism.

Likewise, *Battlestar* also used its "webisodes" to enrich the backstory of Felix Gaeta, including exploring his romantic relationships with both men and women (*Battlestar Galactica: The Face of the Enemy*, 2006). However, this knowledge again restricted itself to the sub-audience who viewed the short online-only "webisodes," and never resurfaces in the main series. Thus, his male lover from the webisodes evinces no greater reaction to his death in the main series than any other



character, a jarring lack for transmedia viewers (Angeli, 2009). In both cases, *Battlestar* sealed off these representations of sexual diversity from affecting the central narrative flow for most viewers.

In an even more paradoxical strategy of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, both the *Stargate* franchise and *Harry Potter* attempted to incorporate gay and lesbian storylines that were not available in any medium at all and were instead only available through peripheral transmedia extensions used for corporate outreach to fans. After *Stargate: Atlantis* ended, writer Mallozzi (2008) made a blog post wherein he retroactively claimed that *Atlantis* included sexual diversity, identifying Captain Vega as lesbian and an unnamed character as gay, even though those storylines never appeared in the series. In the case of Vega, a scene wherein she asked out another female member of the Atlantis expedition was cut from the final screened episode. In the case of the unnamed character, Mallozzi (2008) wrote that “In fact, for several years now, there has been one recurring character who, in my mind, is gay but there has never been an opportunity to confirm the fact.” Unlike *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Stargate* did not even mark these characters subtextually as gay or lesbian in any clear manner. Fans nevertheless created fiction and art pairing many same sex couples from *Stargate: Atlantis* both before and after the announcement, meaning that Mallozzi’s post had little effect on fan activities. Yet, these paratextual transmedia extensions also relied on authorial authority and the fan community’s connectivity to make an illusory retroactive claim about the published text’s inclusivity. It was only because *Stargate: Atlantis* maintained a highly active fan base that Mallozzi’s blog circulated widely within fan networks and in sci-fi-oriented news outlets.

Joanne Rowling’s announcement that she intended for Dumbledore of *Harry Potter* to be gay, in contrast, created a much larger response from fans and commentators (EdwardTLC, 2007; Tosenberger, 2008b). The *Harry Potter* franchise lacked any textually LGBTQ characters, and although Rowling discussed her love for same-sex slash fan fiction in interviews, and even gave an award to a slash fan fiction fan website, she nevertheless wrote heterosexual relationships into the books’ canon for characters frequently identified by fans as gay and lesbian (Jamison, 2013: 173; Tosenberger, 2008a). The revelation about Dumbledore, who never has an explicit partner in the books, built upon coded subtext from canon, which meant that Rowling’s retroactive framing still allowed audience members to opt-out of her interpretation, but her statement was also widely accepted and adopted by many fans who continued to creatively reinterpret and represent the character in a variety of media, sometimes using him as an opening into real-world politics (Jenkins, 2015). Dumbledore’s outing thereby capitalized both on maximum profitability by refusing to textually acknowledge the character’s sexuality, while simultaneously counting on active fan audiences to maximize the scope and impact of the author’s extratextual interpretation. Notably, the later *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* films continue to suppress explicit mention of Dumbledore’s sexuality, although they center on the character’s life as a young man and relationship with Grindelwald, the character Rowling identified as his lover (Bradley, 2018). Future films may explicitly incorporate the erotic layer of their relationship, but regardless the franchise certainly did not anchor the story in a world that includes gay characters.

This strategy underscores some top-down transmedia properties’ dependence on fan-created extensions for diversification and profitability, while relying upon a strong canon strategy to restrict official legitimacy to professionally produced, less inclusive story components. In this manner, *Stargate* and *Harry Potter* can count on LGBTQ fans and allies to readily link, forward, and spread the news that Vega and Dumbledore are lesbian and gay, while some members of the public will never hear these announcements. Likewise, many fans interested in LGBTQ content will engage further with this queer interpretation of the text and produce rich and full queer extensions to the storyworld in transmedia forms including fan fiction, art, video, and live performance, making these narrative universes fully comfortable and inclusive for diverse audiences to explore. Such fan works

diversify a narrative universe whether or not they are ever acknowledged by producers, but the official outreach to fans in these cases makes them more akin to canonical transmedia extensions than other fan material. Yet, members of the audience who are not interested in or actively hostile to LGBTQ themes can easily dismiss Rowling's and *Stargate* producers' announcements and continue to engage in the professionally published for-profit parts of these transmedia networks as straight-only fictional spaces.

Finally, both *The Walking Dead* and *Mass Effect* include diverse, well-developed main characters, but these again remained isolated as peripheral parts of the franchise. Although there is a multi-racial ensemble cast, the television version of *The Walking Dead* narrates the zombie apocalypse primarily from Rick Grimes' perspective, a white ex-sheriff often associated with cowboy figures (*Walking Dead*, 2010). The original promo art for the series emphasizes Rick's protagonist status, showing him wearing a cowboy hat either horseback riding down a highway alone or standing in front of other characters, pointing a gun at the viewer (*Walking Dead Wiki*, 2020). Only by further expanding the storyworld through video games will some audiences encounter the same apocalyptic event from the point of view of Lee Everett, an African-American former university professor and a convict (*Telltale Games*, 2012). Of particular importance for game play, Everett is the only playable character, strongly encouraging identification by the player whose choices shape his personality and the game's outcome. A later expansion of the game allows players to further explore the background of Michonne Hawthorne, a female African-American character who initially played a secondary role on TV. This difference highlights the particular narrative importance of changing not only the overall diversity of the cast, but specifically of the main character, since this is the figure most intimately and deeply accessible to the audience and whose perspective organizes the storyworld. After the series' success was well established, Michonne replaced Rick as the series protagonist in its 10th season. Yet, even after Michonne became the series' protagonist, her backstory, which could bring viewers into much more intimate contact with her interiority, remained sectioned away in a separate transmedia extension.

Meanwhile, *Mass Effect* gained popularity and acclaim for the extent to which players' choices affected the game's structure and outcome, and the highly variable point-of-view playable character, who could be male or female, any sexuality, and any skin color. Yet, the many permutations of the game's protagonist were invisible in *Mass Effect*'s initial advertisements, promotions, and cover art, which featured only a white male lead character for the first 5 years of the franchise, leading to widespread protest (*Lavigne*, 2015). While *Mass Effect* allows for the polymorphic pleasure of endless experimentation with identity and appearance, it leaves these up to the player's choice and does not require that players confront or engage with these forms of difference. In the end, it matters that the *Mass Effect* poster-boy was a white man because it anchors the storyworld in a white, male point-of-view, assuring consumers that they can still experience the storyworld from this normative position. As a result, *Mass Effect*, like *Harry Potter*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Stargate: Atlantis*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, can simultaneously profit both from a storyworld rich in diversity and one sanitized from encounters with diverse points of view, while audiences' experiences with these separate narrative streams become increasingly isolated from each other.

## **Profit, attribution, and taboo: Economic stories the media industry tells itself**

The *Mass Effect* marketing decision returns this inquiry to an earlier point: if the structure of transmedia narration supports the inclusion of numerous points of view and diverse characters who all lead their own stories, then what other remaining industry logics and practices undermine

diversity? Why has the success of many transmedia extensions featuring diverse characters not resulted in industry recognition that these properties can be successful and deserve greater investment and inclusion in high-budget anchor properties? Unfortunately, underinvestment in blockbuster-level projects led by actresses and non-white actors persist. The transmedia structure allows studios to resolve two contrary instincts: the desire to sell to diverse audiences, and the persistent belief that diverse audiences and characters are unmarketable. This tension is noted by Lindner et al. (2015) in their article “Million Dollar Maybe?” when they find through regression analysis that the difference in profitability between movies with male and female lead characters can be explained largely by lower production and marketing budgets invested in female-led projects. They argue that their results demonstrate that it is not audiences who are unlikely to embrace female characters, but studios’ reticence to fund such projects that is responsible for their underperformance in the box office. They thus locate sexism and an unrealistic taboo against diversity at the production end, much more than the consumer end. These findings are echoed by Scott (2019) who tracks the “fake geek girl” trope. She repeatedly finds that despite clear and persistent evidence that a strong female audience exists for comics and comics-based transmedia adaptations, producers continue to delegitimize female characters and fans to focus their attention on cultivating male fan audiences. A similar dichotomy on diversity within production can be found in the work of Erigha, who once wrote in 2015 that digital media would decrease representational inequalities; yet only a few years later in (Erigha, 2018) in an article titled “On the Margins,” Erigha finds that although the number of black directors has increased in Hollywood, they remain disproportionately on the margins of the industry and almost never lead core blockbuster projects. Such research indicates that longstanding hierarchies within the mainstream media industry remain difficult to crack, largely because the riskiest big-budget projects remain the province of white directors and lead characters, partly due to an irrational attribution of success and failure; as in the botched *Invasion* movie, when projects with a diverse cast fail, industry professionals may attribute the failure to diversity, not to their own lack of investment, or numerous other production decisions.

Recently, this phenomenon surfaced around Marvel’s declining comics sales. Marvel has invested heavily in the very sort of top-down transmedia strategy outlined here: several core anchor properties with white male leads or ensemble casts, connecting to a variety of lower-budget transmedia extensions designed for smaller niche audiences, often lead by women, characters of color, and disabled characters. Thus, the original core blockbuster properties all feature white male leads: *Iron Man*, *Captain America*, and *Thor*, bringing in Black Widow and Falcon only as secondary supporting characters, while the much smaller and non-ratings dependent Netflix adaptations, *Jessica Jones*, *Daredevil*, and *Luke Cage*, show the Marvel universe from the perspective of disabled, female, and black characters in much more intimate detail. The attribution-bias inherent in the lack of female-led Marvel movies was underscored by internal Sony emails revealed by Wikileaks, wherein Marvel Entertainment CEO Ike Perlmutter states that what he calls “female movies” are always a disaster, citing the failed *Catwoman* and *Electra* projects as evidence (Riesman, 2015). Meanwhile, Marvel comics properties, which have much smaller investment costs than blockbuster films, have become a laboratory of increasingly diverse experimentation, recently featuring a gender-reversed female Thor, Muslim-American female Ms. Marvel, and black Captain America. All of these comics titles achieved solid sales and critical acclaim, with the female Thor outperforming the previous run of male-Thor comics, and the first issue of the rebooted Muslim Ms. Marvel becoming the second best-selling graphic novel of 2014 (D’Orazio, 2015; Magnett, 2017).

Yet, when sales of the most recent Marvel comic series began to sink, VP of sales David Gabriel again blamed the slump on audiences’ preference for straight, white, male characters, and the supposed unmarketability of diverse characters, infamously stating, “What we heard was that

people didn't want any more diversity" (Gustines, 2017). His comments not only overlook the success and profitability of Marvel's female, African-American, Arab-American, and disabled character lines, but also ignore all other possible factors for declines in sales, including the incredible backlash not against diverse characters, but against Marvel's depiction of white supremacy in their new series "Secret Empire." As a result of "Secret Empire's" representation of a world overthrown by the Nazi-associated Hydra, including the rebranding of Captain America as a Nazi, there has been widespread fan protest and retailer refusal to participate in marketing campaigns or even to carry the new comics (Gaudette, 2017; McGloin, 2017).

One of the most controversial images from the new series features Nazi Captain America lifting Thor's hammer (Grebe, 2017). Within the Marvel comics mythology, only the purest and most noble can lift the supernatural weapon and Captain America's ability to lift it testifies to his unique moral goodness. Associating Captain America with Nazi genocide and white supremacy and then framing him as morally good through the act of lifting the hammer seemed like the worst possible betrayal to many fans, and an enormous reversal of what had seemed like Marvel comics's strategy of increasingly diverse, tolerant, pluralist representational politics. The move is also out of step with the planning and commercial success of Marvel's recent "phase three" slate of Blockbuster films including the Africa-centric *Black Panther* featuring a largely black cast, and the female led and directed *Captain Marvel*, not to mention the runaway success of rival DC film *Wonder Woman*, although notably none of these films anchor a new storyworld. In such a context, the Marvel executives' blaming of slumping sales on diversity becomes a perverse form of deliberate ignorance. This extreme form of attribution-bias and denial suggest that diversification of mass media representation via transmedia extensions may not actually influence the diversity of big-budget anchor properties, and even this form of segregated diversity may prove fleeting, so long as studios continue to ignore shifts in their audience and the success of their own products.

## **Conclusion: diverse representation and transmedia market logic**

In conclusion, while transmedia storyworlds hold the potential to construct a holistic narrative that emerges from betwixt and between numerous elements spread across media, the decision to address only select demographics in each extension also isolates transmedia audiences from the overall story, creating a sanitized main property for the mass media. The result is a paradoxical increase and decrease in diverse representation as transmedia narratives offer curated experiences of normativity and alterity to separate audiences within the same narrative property. Thus, like algorithmic filter-bubbles for news and information that connect demographically determined groups only with content predicted to affirm their worldview, transmedia networks may construct fictional filter-bubbles that curate different content for mass and niche audiences within the same overall storyworld. Only time will tell if producers will use the success of peripheral media featuring female and minority characters, as well as contentious and politically rich storylines, to challenge reigning market logic, or if they will continue transmediating difference, directing segments of the audience into separate storylines and thus impoverishing the depth and pluralism of shared cultural landscapes.

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**ORCID iD**

Anne Kustritz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0350-8702>

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## Author biography

Anne Kustritz is an Assistant Professor in Media Studies at Utrecht University. She received her PhD in American Culture from the University of Michigan. Her scholarship focuses on fan communities, transformative works, digital economies, and representational politics. Her teaching specializes in sexuality, gender, media ethnography, and convergence. Her articles appear in *Camera Obscura*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *The Journal of American Culture*, and *Refractory*. She also serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Transformative Works and Cultures*.