



Transfictionality and Transmedia Storytelling: A Conceptual Distinction

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Abstract. This paper proposes the distinction between the concepts of transmedia storytelling and transfictionality. Despite the similarities, both concepts comprehend different meanings, which will be discussed in the current context of convergence culture, marked by the enhancement of interactivity, participatory culture, and media convergence. In this way, the fictional and narrative flows across works and media will be problematized based in the research of Jenkins [1], Ryan [2, 3], and Saint-Gelais [4] as theoretical foundation.

Keywords: Transfictionality · Transmedia storytelling · Fiction · Narrative · Media

1 Introduction

Transmedia storytelling and transfictionality are phenomena that have aroused the interest of the Entertainment Industry and of the researchers in Narratology, Communication, Culture, and Technology. In fact, transmedial and transfictional strategies involve multiple intelligences that comprise creative, technological, and market issues. They are also embedded in traditionally established domains of knowledge, such as narrative studies, and emerging ones, such as HCI research (Human-Computer Interaction). Certainly, these concepts are central for understanding current media culture. However, their definitions often get confused when are not properly delimited. The objective of this paper is to discuss and relate these two concepts from a narratological perspective, without losing sight of their media and technological relations. Although they understand different meanings, the transmedia storytelling and the transfictionality present connections that need to be discussed and, mainly, understood in the current context of convergence culture.

From the observation that the current culture enhances flows and relations across media, narratives, and diegetic universes, we seek, in this article, to understand how the processes of transmediality and transfictionality occur. Thus, we will examine these two concepts more closely supported by Jenkins [1], Ryan [2, 3], and Saint-Gelais [4] studies.

Before that, it is necessary, in this introduction, to clarify a few fundamental concepts for understanding transmedia storytelling and transfictionality, such as: *fiction*, *narrative*, and *media*. In this way, it will be possible to connect these concepts to the *trans* prefix and to explore its meanings in current media. After this stage, we will

explain what is and what is not understood by transmedia storytelling and the main conceptual confusions with other terminologies, such as: adaptation, remediation, multimodal narration, and even transfiction. Following, we will present an investigation into the notion of transfictionality developed by Saint-Gelais, highlighting the potential of any fiction to construct unlimited worlds. Finally, we will analyze the transmedia storytelling and the transfictionality combined, in order to contribute to the studies on the narrative and fictional flows across works and media.

1.1 Fiction

Under a narratological perspective, fiction is understood as the creation of imagined worlds (diegesis), made up of elements such as characters, events, places, objects, etc., generated by its authors and (re)constructed by the public.¹ The (re)construction of a fictional world also presupposes a kind of silent agreement between the public and the work. That means the reader, spectator, user, gamer or interactor of a fiction is inclined to accept the elements presented to him through the tacit pact that Coleridge² called “willing suspension of disbelief.” It is a voluntary agreement in which public momentarily disables their incredulity to allow themselves to be convinced by the diegetic universe presented to them.

Although it is formed by mental schemes, fiction does not necessarily oppose reality. Inevitably, the two concepts (fiction and reality) are associated. The philosopher Vilém Flusser presents a unique view on the subject, assuming that fiction cannot be understood as simply the opposite of reality. According to him, (2015, p. 64) [5]: “We must bid farewell to that naive separation between true and false, as Wittgenstein has already said. The disapproval of the fictitious cannot be sustained for long. Observing more precisely, the function of discourse is fiction, or, as we say today, alternative realities.”

Eco, in his *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* [6], reminds us that, as fantastic as they may be, fictional worlds are always “parasites of the real world.” (1994, p. 125). Even accepting the pact of fiction, we will always compare it with the reality we know. “In fiction, precise references to the actual world are so closely linked that, after spending some time in the world of the novel and mixing fictional elements with references to reality, as one should, the reader no longer knows exactly where he or she stands.” An example, according to Eco, is that some people believe in the actual existence of events and fictional characters, for example, Sherlock Holmes. Thus fiction transports us into

¹ This conception of fiction follows the perspective of researchers as: Gérard Genette *Figs. 3* (1972), Thomas Pavel *Univers de la fiction* (1988), Lubomír Doležel *Mimesis and possible worlds* (1988), Jean-Marie Schaeffer *Pourquoi la fiction?* (1999).

² The critic and writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge used the expression: ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ for the first time in his book *Biographia Literaria* (1817) to refer to the agreement between the reader and the work of fiction. In this agreement, the reader accepts as true the postulates created by the fictional world, without necessarily invalidating them when compared to the postulates of reality external to the work.

an imagined world, governed by its own rules and principles, which can resemble or distance enormously from what we call reality. In this sense, fiction is a kind of alternative universe shaped by a narrative that relates, in a certain way, to reality.

1.2 Narrative

On the other hand, narrative refers to the discourse that organizes the elements belonging to a universe (fictional or factual), ordering them according to temporal, enunciative, and others criteria. In the article *Transmedial storytelling and transfictionality* [2], Ryan presents a broad definition of narrative. For the author, narrative is, in general, a sequence of events that develop in time. According to Ryan (2013, p. 364), narratives are mental representations of dynamic models of developing situations – Ryan takes as reference the concept of chronotope (indivisibility of space and time) created by Mikhail Bakhtin. A narrative is characterized by the configuration of a discourse that organizes a succession of events and presents itself through some expressive form (oral, written, audiovisual, etc.). Therefore, we can distinguish fiction from narrative since fiction relates to the creation of worlds, and narrative, to the operation of organizing a discourse. Then, every fiction is structured by a narrative, but not every narrative is fictional.

1.3 Media

Since a fictional narrative organizes elements of a diegetic universe, it can be realized through diverse media, using its language properties. Thus, the media chosen to narrate a particular fiction presents specificities that will shape the narrative. For example, television and film use audiovisual language, such as montage, framing, sound uses, among others. Video game, in turn, is supported by interactive and audiovisual elements. Literature, in textual language. Comics books, textual and visual languages. Therefore, media is here understood as a system of communication that brings together techniques, language, and interaction forms. These systems, or media, present sets of features (aesthetic, narrative, technological, and spectatorial) recognized and shared by the public and the creators in the cultural context. Therefore, we consider media as a form of communication, that is a medium that is a producer of meanings. It is this characteristic that allows media (such as book, radio, television, film, and video games) to communicate innumerable narratives, whether fictional or not.

The current media context, named by Jenkins [1] as convergence culture, is characterized by the coexistence of old and new media, technological and symbolic exchanges, and by the mixing of languages and contents. In addition, profound changes in production systems, distribution and reception, merging the roles, previously delimited, of transmitter and receiver. According to Jenkins (2006, p. 104), convergence culture “makes the flow of content across multiple media platforms inevitable.”

2 What Is and What Is not Transmedia Storytelling?

Combining prefix *trans* to the concepts of fiction, narrative, and media, we highlight flows, passages, and displacements that can occur across them. In this sense, transmedia storytelling and transfictionality imply the transposition of diegetic, narrative and/or media borders. To start, it can be inferred that these are strategies that act at the extra-compositional level, through the breaking of limits and the establishment of new relations.

It is known that one of the most important scholars of the transmedia storytelling is Jenkins [1]. The researcher investigated transmedia in popular culture, identifying the expansion of a narrative universe across media. A practice enhanced by technological convergence and by the participatory and collaborative culture. Jenkins notes that media react to current convergence culture by expanding their content across platforms. From this synergy among media, forms of interaction and narrative models emerge, resulting in the phenomenon of the transmedia storytelling. Not surprisingly, Jenkins uses the film *Matrix* (Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, 1999) as a remarkable case to develop his conception of transmedia storytelling. This transmedia project (composed of films, comics books, and video games) presents a fictional narrative of cyberpunk genre, which narrates the adventures of the Neo, a hacker within an informational universe named Matrix, very similar to cyberspace. For Jenkins (2006, p. 95), *Matrix* “is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium”.

In academic studies, the transmedia occurrence had already been identified and investigated by other researchers who used different terminologies. Kinder [7], for example, introduces the term ‘transmedia intertextuality’ (1991, p. 1) which refers to the expansion of an entertainment super-system across different media. Another precursor concept of the transmedia storytelling and the convergence culture is the term ‘remediation’, developed by Bolter and Grusin [8]. Remediation happens when a new medium reshapes elements of previous media. Bolter and Grusin [8] argue that in this process there is not substitution of one media for another, but a reciprocal movement of repair, reform and remodeling. In this sense, transmediation can be understood as a phenomenon contained in a broader process of remediation, in which different media establish many kinds of connections (technology, language, business), as well as narrative integration.

However, Ryan [2] relativizes the concept of transmedia storytelling. According to her (2013, p. 362): “it is tempting to regard transmedial storytelling as something radically new and revolutionary if not as the narrative form of the future”. It should be emphasized that narrative expansion in multiple media is not an unprecedented phenomenon. This practice dates back to the earliest days of human culture and can be identified, for example, in Greek mythology, biblical narratives, fairy tales, and popular stories. All of them are founding narratives of social groups that, at certain times and places, have been massively consumed and propagated through multiple expressive forms. Although it is an old process, the transmedia storytelling finds, in the current culture and technology, propitious circumstances for its potential. “Transmedial storytelling is a response to the proliferation of media and delivery systems that the digital revolution of the past fifty years has brought upon us”, writes the author (2013, p. 384).

Although it is a concept well studied today, there is much imprecision in defining transmedia, which is confused with several other similar and related terms. In the paper *Transmedia storytelling: industry buzzword or new narrative experience?* Ryan [4] presents four arguments about what should and should not be transmedia storytelling. In the first argument, the author comments that transmedia is not a simple adaptation. Based on Jenkins, Ryan ([4], p. 2) states that what differentiates adaptation from transmedia storytelling “lies in the fact that adaptation tries (with greater or lesser success) to tell the same story in a different medium, while transmedia storytelling tells different stories about a given storyworld.” Second argument for Ryan is that transmedia storytelling presents similarities with Saint-Gelais’s concept of transfictionality, but they keep different meanings, which will be better distinguished in the final part of this article. Third, Ryan (*ibid.*, p. 3) declares that “our concept of transmedia storytelling should not include the use of various media platforms to advertise a certain narrative product.” After all, products generated to promote a certain work do not necessarily add elements to fictional universe. Finally, the fourth argument is: transmedia storytelling should not be confused with the concept of multimodal narration. This is because this last concept is linked to the idea of several types of signs telling a narrative. As for example in the use of images and texts in children’s books, or in the union of music and theater in the opera. Ryan explains the difference between transmedia storytelling and multimodal narration in the following passage:

While in multimodal narration the different semiotic channels are organically connected, so that the story would make no sense, or at least lose a great deal of its appeal, if one types of signs was disabled, in transmedia storytelling the different semiotic or media objects are autonomous entities that can be consumed separately from each other, and there is no need to consume them all: the user can explore the database more or less thoroughly ([3], p. 4).

In order to progress in our discussion, we choose the seminal definition of Jenkins [9]: 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. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story”. However, we cannot ignore Ryan’s lucid critiques [2]. She points out that the transmedia process can differ in the way it is constituted and can be understood as a narrative form and/or only as a marketing strategy. The author names “snowball” the transmedia storytelling scheme, which begins with a work that has its narrative expanded through a spontaneous production by fans and other authors. Diversely, the type “project transmedia” would be a more recent practice. In this case, a certain fictional universe is conceived from the outset as a transmedia project. This is, as a narrative that will be created from many media, each one contributing with a part of the whole story. In these cases, there is an explicit interest in marketing the same narrative world that is complemented by various media. Finally, we endorse the idea that the transmedia storytelling is characterized by approaching distinct media for the constitution of a narrative whole, each of which contributes, albeit autonomously, with new elements for the construction of a single diegetic world.

3 Why Is the Concept of Transfictionality Fascinating?

One of the most intriguing aspects of fiction is the ability to construct universes that can be exploited in an unlimited way. There are no fixed boundaries for fiction. It can be as vast and detailed as life is. This inexhaustible ability to compose a diegetic universe was named by Doležel [10] of “indeterminate domain of fiction.” In other words, it is the infinite potential of set of elements that create a fictional world. Transfictionality acts precisely in this insatiable narrative desire in which the boundaries of a fiction are not capable of containing possible diegetic relations with others.

Transfictionality concept was examined in-depth by the Canadian researcher Saint-Gelais in his book *Figures Transfuges: transfictionnalité et ses enjeux* [3]. Although the author has developed his study within the literature, his contributions are equally pertinent for understanding fictional flows and displacements in other expressive forms. In an interview with *Vox Poétique* magazine [11], Saint-Gelais states:

There is transfictionality when two or more texts “share” fictitious elements (i.e., making reference jointly), whether these elements are characters, (sequences of) events or fictional worlds; as for the “texts”, it can be as well of texts in the strict sense (novels, news, but also essays in certain cases) as of films, comics, TV episodes, etc.³ [11].

Therefore, according to him, transfiction designates the relations between different fictions, which share elements of the same diegetic world. As we can see, the author applies the word “text” in the broad sense of any form of discourse, be it textual, sound, visual, or audiovisual. Thus, transfictionality encompasses any and all forms of discourse, whether literary or not. In this way, there is transfictionality when a certain “text” shares fictional elements with other “text(s)”, whether they belong to the same or different media.

Saint-Gelais develops the transfictionality definition from Doležel reflections (1998) [10] on “postmodern rewriting”, that is the literary practice of re-elaborating fictional texts through the development of their diegetic elements in other texts, through transposition, modification or expansion. Doležel, in turn, engender his studies of “postmodern rewriting” based on Gerard Genette’s concept of transtextuality [12].

Genette undertook an important theoretical classification, generating very useful concepts for literature studies, but also applicable to other media. Thus, extending dialogism’s notions, from Bakhtin, Genette ([12], p. 9) proposes the term *transtextuality*, defining it as “everything that puts a text in relation to other texts, whether this relation is manifest or secret.” Genette distinguishes types of relations between texts, of which we highlight hypertextuality: the derivation of one text (hypertext) from another (hypotext). In this category there are strategies such as parody (textual transformation with ludic function) and pastiche (textual imitation with ludic function).

³ Original text: “Il y a transfictionnalité lorsque deux textes ou davantage «partagent» des éléments fictifs (c’est-à-dire, y font conjointement référence), que ces éléments soient des personnages, des (séquences d’) événements ou des mondes fictifs; quant aux «textes», il peut s’agir aussi bien de textes au sens strict (romans, nouvelles, mais aussi essais dans certains cas) que de films, bandes dessinées, épisodes télé, etc.”.

Doležel [10] expands Genette's reflections on hypertextuality and states: "literary works are linked not only to the level of texture but also, and not less importantly, on the level of fictional worlds." (1998, p. 202) Therefore, the author is more interested in fictional than in narrative relations. As Saint-Gelais [4] reminds us: "transfictionality and hypertextuality do not cover exactly the same domains." (2011, p. 10). If hypertext establishes imitation and transformation (parody, pastiche), transfiction implies a migration of diegetic elements. Thus, transfictionality can also be understood as a particular form of transtextuality, which is established by sharing fictional elements.

Prequels, sequels, adaptations, spin off, crossover, alternative versions, counterfictions, fanfictions are some recurring forms of transfictionality in popular culture. These are distinct fictional works (sometimes in different media) that create diegetic intersections, sharing fictional elements. Following the strategies already identified by Doležel and discussed by Saint-Gelais, Ryan [3] writes that transfictionality consists of three operations: "expansion (such as prequels and sequels), modification (such as changing the ending of a story and consequently the fate of characters), and the transposition of plot into a new setting, such as Greek myth being transported into the modern world." (2015, p. 3)

Among the transfictional expansive operations, one of the most common is the migration of characters, who transpose the frontiers of the original work to inhabit others. Recognized in the media industry as spin off, this transfictional strategy is characterized by the derivation of a work from diegetic elements belonging to another. As an example of monomedia transfictionality we can quote the relations between television series *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013) and *Better Call Saul* (AMC, 2015-). Although they are autonomous and independent, the series keep a diegetic connection since they share characters, places, and events. *Better Call Saul* appropriates the *Breaking Bad* character Saul to create an extension of the original narrative. Although Saul occupies different diegetic status (in *Breaking Bad* he is secondary and in *Better Call Saul* he is the protagonist) it is the same character that has its narrative arc developed and extended in the derived series.

Another example of transfictionality, this time involving two distinct media (TV and Cinema), is the relation between the film *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and the television series *Bates Motel* (A&E, 2013–2017). Although they present big differences, both diegetic universes are linked through the characters Norman Bates, Norma Bates (his mother), and Bates Motel (central place in the narrative development of film, and series). Created 53 years later, the television series takes various elements of the film universe to expand its fiction, developing the previous life of Norman Bates (adolescence and early adult life), thus functioning as a prequel of the film. However, the relations between the two fictional works are more complex than they appear. After all, the character of Norman Bates teenager (series) lives in a contemporary time, in which he uses, for example, modern equipment such as cell phones, iPods, and the Internet. The Norman Bates adult (film) lives in the 1950s, immersed in a technological context and in a setting (scenery and costumes) typical of the fifties. The inconsistencies between series and film reveal a certain detachment from their transfictional relations.

According to Saint-Gelais [4], “transfictionality necessarily leads to a crossing and therefore, at the same time, to a rupture and a contact, and the contact comes to suture, but never perfectly, that which has been broken.” (2011, pp. 23–24).⁴

According to Boni [13], from a fictional perspective, the *Bates Motel* series represents “a transfictional expansion of a world in the mode of hyperdiegese.”⁵ In this sense, if we evaluate the whole *Psycho* transfictional universe⁶, we can agree with Boni when she says that the film “is the top of the iceberg, while the many sequels and prequels, including the *Bates Motel*, are the hidden portions, yet ready to emerge with each new media incarnation.” (2016, p. 11). The transfictionality notion is often associated with the iceberg figure to illustrate the fascinating “indeterminate domain of fiction”, allowing us think of the existence of a diegetic hidden part that remains latent. In transfictional logic, a “text” is nothing more than the top of a diegetic iceberg, from which we access only a fraction of a potentially larger universe.

4 Perspectives: Transmedia + Transfictionality

Although they are distinct concepts, transmedia storytelling and transfictionality have gained importance in the current media culture. They can be seen as strategies that act through fictional, narrative and/or media connections and displacements, enhancing the symbolic production of humanity. We have seen that there is transfictionality when two or more “texts” share fictional elements, such as characters, events, objects, places, etc., increasing the original diegetic universe. Although it has been more extensively studied in the literature, transfictionality can be identified in any form of discourse, and may even involve “texts” of different media. In Ryan’s words [2], transfictionality “refers to the migration of fictional entities across different texts, but these texts may belong [or not] to the same medium [...]” (2013, p. 365). Transmedia storytelling, in turn, implies the combining of different media for the composition of a narrative whole. Thus, as Ryan points out (ibid., p. 366), “transmedia storytelling can be regarded as a special case of transfictionality – a transfictionality that operates across many different media.”

It is difficult to establish a rigid boundary between transfictionality and transmedia storytelling. Discerning these strategies can become a daunting task. We know that

⁴ Original texte: “La transfictionnalité entraîne forcément une traversée, et donc à la fois une rupture et un contact, le second venant suturer, mais jamais parfaitement, ce qui la première a séparé.” ([4], pp. 23–24).

⁵ In his *cult culture* studies, Matt Hills adopts the term *hyperdiegesis* to designate “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension”. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, Londres, New York, Routledge, coll. «Sussex studies in culture and communication», 2002, p. 104 [13].

⁶ The *Psycho* transfictional universe comprises a wide variety of works, such as the original Hitchcock’s film, the sequels *Psycho II* (Richard, Franklin, 1983) and *Psycho III* (Anthony Perkins, 1986), the prequel *Psycho IV* (Mick Garris, 1990), the remake *Psycho* (Gus Van Sant, 1998), the telefilm *Bates Motel* (NBC, 1987), the TV series *Bates Motel* (A&E, 2013–2017), as well as other productions such as books and graphic novels. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psycho_\(franchise\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psycho_(franchise)) (Accessed: 28 January 2019).

concepts are created to identify and to investigate complex objects with clarity and discernment. Although different, these concepts are not mutually exclusive. In many cases, they can illuminate distinct faces of the same phenomenon. When we approach narrative relations between distinct works from a fictional perspective, we are in the field of transfictionality. When we observe the same event from the media relation's angle, we are on transmedia domain.

The assembly of fictional works across different media in a single narrative system has been a very recurrent strategy in popular culture. The value of *transmedia transfictionality* is in the possibility of transcending the original fiction limits, expanding its universe, its events and characters by different media and languages. The transmedia transfictionality concerns the heterogeneous construction of a fictional world and, at the same time, the activation of different language and media. The main condition for an object to be classified as transmedia transfictionality is the verification of a qualitative fictional narrative system composed by different media, each one presenting certain parts and ways of telling stories. Extracompositional flows across "texts" and media involve complex issues, such as narratological, communicational, technological and marketing efforts. Undoubtedly, an intricate phenomenon that finds his potential in convergence culture and provokes attention of public and scholars from different fields of knowledge.

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