



The Dark Art of Transmedia Storytelling

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Abstract. As one of the major art movements, German Expressionism of composing unbalanced images of high contrast geometric line and shape can often be seen as a distinct visual style in cinema, animation and video game. This article focuses on this particular visual style highly influenced by German Expressionism and has a rather dark tone in form and content. The visual style of Film Noir has occupied a very important part of cinema history from the 40 s that tell sinister crime and mystery stories. Film Noir is also called Dark Cinema. This article discusses that Film Noir or its revived form Neo Noir as more than just a film and game genre. It is a visual linkage of digital content across media. As a visual narrative media, cinema has influenced many works of visual and time-based media in animation and game, which in turn also influence cinema. The worlds of Neo Noir created by computer animation and game are darker in form and content. This article also aims to enrich the decade-long debate between the narratology and ludology in game design through discussing the shared topics on world building, an important aspect of transmedia storytelling. The visual aspect of world building offers an extended perspective of Jenkins' media convergence [1] and transmedia storytelling [2, 3], which is also about the making of a story world where timelines and side characters can be expanded and intertwined across media. This article examines this unique visual style and content in transmedia setting. It also examines the complex interrelation between visual form and content across media.

Keywords: Cinematic arts · Film art · Creative arts · Visual arts · Game design · Art of storytelling · Film noir · Neo noir

1 Introduction

Brightness can attract our eyes but darkness can capture our imagination. In darkness, there is no sense of control and direction. There is nothing more effective than darkness itself to create a sense of mystery, suspense, anxiety and powerlessness. We are afraid of the things that we can't see in the dark but yet we can also be fascinated by darkness. In visual media, darkness often associates with mystery, guilt, crime and the underworld. This article aims to address this dark aspect of world building in transmedia storytelling [2–3], which describes 'the flow of content across media' in creating an integrated whole with different meaningful pieces. In a networked society with media convergence [1], transmedia storytelling is also regarded as the art of creating a fictional world with potentials to further extend its timeline and side characters whose stories can be further

dispersed across media [4]. However, transmedia storytelling offers little discussion about the visual and thematic aspects of world building. This article aims to discuss examples of one distinct visual style of world building in transmedia storytelling.

2 From Film Noir to Neo Noir in Cinema and Game

Noir is the French word for darkness. Film Noir, first coined by French critics, refers to a series of post-war films from late 40s throughout the 50s that shared similar form of visual darkness and content of pessimistic themes. It was also this period in history that began the cold war and the fear of communist ideology, antithetical to the western capitalism. The world of film noir was dominant by sinister themes of crime, corruption and entrapment covering a wide range of topics on espionage, psychological thriller, scientific and the surreal. This oppressive atmosphere of anxiety and desperation was visualized by stylistic images of sharp geometric line and shape composition, low and Dutch angles and low-key high contrast lighting. Film Noir was influenced heavily from the early German Expressionist films such as *Nosferatu* and *Metropolitan*. Expressionist film master of the silent era such as F.W. Murnau, who gave us the classic vampire film *Nosferatu* with its unforgettable haunting image of the vampire. Combined with dark atmosphere with cinematic language, this haunting image of vampire looked scary even to today's standard. Another expressionist film master Fritz. Lang whose masterpiece was the classic *Metropolitan* also used sharp high contrast visual style of the expressionistic tradition to distinguish the rich and the underclass slaves in the film. This visual style later influenced what became known as cyberpunk visual style in many later sci-fi classic film such as *Blade Runner*. From expressionism to film noir, our contemporary visual artist and film master Tim Burton had wonderfully mixed this dark visual style with his unique sense of dark humor by creating many dark tales featuring many memorable outcast characters who possessed certain dark human quality haunted by dark secrets from the past. They were mysterious, sometimes frightening but also sympathetic. Like many of us, they struggled with their existential identity and they also battled in the world of lies and deception (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Influence of German expressionism in cinema [5]

The worlds and characters of Tim Burton have been adapted from comic drawing to stop motion animation, cinema and video game. One can easily see the influence of German Expressionism in all his creations. His art has grown from alternative art to mainstream popular and commercial culture. What make this transmedia storytelling uniquely Tim Burton's is his consistent mixture of dark visual style with dark comedy.

3 Art of the Dark World Building

Filmmaker and game designer often begins their creation by building a fictional world of crisis and conflict [6]. As seen in the famous noir games like *Limbo* and its sequel *Inside*, both of which feature a dark world in the noir tradition. *Limbo* features a lone boy who somehow found himself trapped in a surreal hostile world full of dangerous obstacles. There is a strong feelings of helplessness and isolation in this ambiguous and absurd dark world where the boy was constantly being chased and attacked by larger-than-life monsters and deadly killing machinery. The main theme was survival and the main gameplay was to overcome the physical obstacles by getting around them and sometimes by solving puzzles. *Limbo*'s sequel *Inside* was another dark atmospheric game genre in the tradition of noir. Like *Limbo*, the dark world continues to be ambiguous and absurd with better game graphics and sound effects. Improved game graphics enhanced the immersiveness of the strange dark world with stronger feelings of helplessness and isolation. Both games featured a lone boy in a surreal hostile world constantly being attacked and chased by bizarre creatures, monsters and killing machinery. The world of *Inside* also featured some secret sinister activities going on in the background where zombie-like creatures could attack but could also come to the boy's rescue. Both *Limbo* and *Inside* are the only two games created by the game studio Playdead. Both games featured very dark world building with great atmospheric effects created in the visual tradition of noir. These games do not explain why the worlds were the way they were and let players to create and construct their own story or mental experience of the story through their actions within and outside the gameplay [7] (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Influence of german expressionism in video games [8]

World building created in sharp black and white lighting contrast was a dominant visual style of the noir tradition as seen in films and video game. Film noir tradition

had evolved into color with a term called Neo Noir, which of course meant more than just a color version of noir. In neo noir, the intense conflict and struggle between social classes and divisions continued. Many of these neo noir stories were set in the near future dystopian world of cyberpunk featuring a dark world of inequality between the technologically affluent and the underclass. The neo noir visual contrast of cyberpunk also extended the same influence from German Expressionism as shown in the classic expressionist film *Metropolitan*, which depicted a division of the rich and the underclass in sharp visual contrast. The dark vision of cyberpunk world was also why the city of Hong Kong was chosen as the backdrop of some of these famous neo noir films such as the original and the Hollywood remake versions of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Blade Runner* [9]. Hong Kong as a mixture of high tech buildings in sharp contrast with many run-down populated urban areas in poverty had given cyberpunk a great living visual reference.

Neo noir themes continued to explore the many film noir themes of despair, fatalism entrapment with new themes on existential identity crisis and struggle between human and cyborgs. Ultimately, it was also the theme of survival in a hostile world. The three parts trilogy of *Blade Runner* as parts of the classic Blade Runner franchise were good examples of neo noir world building in transmedia storytelling. These films consistently and coherently inherited the world of darkness; they continued to express oppressive atmosphere and themes of pessimism, anxiety, fatalism and entrapment. The original Philip Dick's novel and the classic film *Blade Runner* dealt with the theme of what it meant to be human. They explored the conflict between human and cyborgs who were slave in the new world and were given only limited lifespan and fake memory. The sequel of the 1982 classic was released in 2018. The old and new films of *Blade Runner* were thirty years apart between the year 2019 and 2049 in story time and about thirty five years apart in reality. The film director Denis Villeneuve of the new *Blade Runner 2049* wanted to see for himself, before embarking on the new film, what happened between the two settings of franchise thirty some years apart. He commissioned two artists, animator Shinichi Watanabe and filmmaker Luke Scott, to make three short films to fill the gap years about the ongoing conflict and struggle in this dark sinister cyberpunk world of inequality. These three short films had become important parts of the Blade Runner franchise (Fig. 3).

From animation to live action, these three short films set in the different times of the world of Blade Runner, during which the conflict of human and cyborgs intensified with heavy costs to both sides. *Blade Runner 2022: Blackout* was the first instalment of this series, which was about a major blackout of the city as a revenge plot of a group of cyborgs in response to the violence of the Human Supremacy Movements and the many years of oppression from the human. The second instalment *Blade Runner 2036: Nexus Dawn* was about the reaction from the human authority by prohibiting the building of new cyborgs until a blind corporate scientist came up with his 'perfect' solution by introducing a new model of cyborg, one that was only capable of showing absolute obedience including taking a self-destructive order from the human master. The final instalment *Blade Runner 2048 Nowhere to Run* was the continuous prosecution of the remaining replicants in exile and the introduction of the new blade runner as the indifferent hunter of these replicants. These three short films as parts of the Blade Runner franchise were released on the Internet before the release of the film.



Fig. 3. The three short films of Blade Runner franchise 2022–2048 [10]

4 Conclusion

In the world of noir and neo noir, it is not just the visual style but also the recurrent themes that consolidate the different pieces of content together in transmedia of world building. Moreover, the three short films of Blade Runner not only helped extend the franchise; they also served a particular function in connecting the dots and filling the missing gap of the two major film stories told in very different timeframes. Further study on the topic of visual and thematic content adaptation in transmedia world building is needed as media platforms and content are becoming more interconnected.

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