Transmedia Storytelling: The Roles and Stakes of the Different Participants in the Process of a Convergent Story, in Divergent Media and Artefacts

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1   Introduction and Problem Discussion

Transmedia Storytelling has lately become a buzzword, massively used by academics, professionals, and consumers alike to describe a novel phenomenon promoted by digital media. Though this is not altogether a new practice, it was primarily identified in the 1990s, by authors in different areas, such as media economy, video games and television studies. It was not, however, until Henry Jenkins's coining (2003) that authors were brought together and started to circumscribe an autonomous concept, and an independent field of inquiry. As a diffuse field, and a diffuse practice, and because it embraces several media (media studies have tended to be single-media), there are still serious gaps in the understanding of what transmedia storytelling is, which extends to non-academic discourse.

Scolari (2009) speaks of an apparent "conceptual chaos", surrounding the terminology. Many authors use Jenkins's definition, but adopt different terms to refer to the same phenomenon; others use the same term to refer to different practices, either different types of transmedia storytelling, or other media convergence dynamics, cross-fertilizations between media, or intertextual practices such as adaptation or the serialization of stories (Sousa, 2011). In non-academic discourse, the term seems to be used rather indiscriminately whenever several media are used in the same media project, which, at this day and age, is almost always the case.

But this indefinition originates and runs alongside other problems. Though it might not be entirely novel, transmedia-related projects have sprung from

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everywhere like mushrooms in the past few years, not always identified as that, not always produced by the media industries or distributed through the usual channels, with a growing audience intervention. Formats are increasingly diverse and fluid. The media landscape is changing very fast and very radically, and we do not yet fully grasp its potential and limitations. The new convergence culture, as Jenkins (2006) puts it, involves a change both in media production and in media consumption, stories along with every other type of media content. As such, the relationship between producers and consumers is also changing dramatically.

As a result, the different stakeholders in the matter are struggling to find the best way to adjust their practices, in order to adapt to the new challenges. Media companies, authors, and the public (which is much more empowered than ever before), have their own particular interests in the matter, and they are not always compatible. Consumers are becoming more intervening and demanding; media producers have to adapt, even though, whatever they do, the outcomes are often unpredictable and not always the most desirable. As Jenkins (2006: 11) points out, "we are in an age of media transition, one marked by tactical decisions and unintended consequences, mixed signals and competing interests, and most of all, unclear directions and unpredictable outcomes".

But we cannot settle for chaos. What are the stakes for each of these groups? How do their stakes diverge and converge, and in what way do they influence how transmedia stories are being produced, distributed and consumed? Is transmedia storytelling simply a way for media conglomerates to cash out on their resources, or are there real creative possibilities? Media companies have to earn their keeping. How can they guarantee profit, in a context of free flow of contents, decreasing consumer loyalty and generalized public participation? Is consumer participation actually threatening the media industry? On the creative side, a lot of practices are being called transmedia, but are they actually *transmedia storytelling*? Could this be a good opportunity for content creators or is authorship getting lost in the collaborative and participative process? Is the public able and willing to actively participate in the transmedia process?

This paper springs from questions already raised by scholars and practitioners, and aims to further investigate the practical implications of the power struggle between the major stakeholders in the process, and the results of that struggle on how transmedia stories are being told and experienced. We do this by observing the phenomenon through the perspectives of the different stakeholders, describing their interests and roles in shaping the transmedia process. Our thesis is that a better understanding of what transmedia storytelling is, or could be, and a more "transmedia storytelling approach", could lead to a more effective and productive convergence, and a harmonization of the stakeholders' conflicting interests.

2   Literature State-of-the-Art of Transmedia Storytelling and the New Media Culture

Before we take a closer look at these questions, it is vital to understand the development they have already had and frame the context in which they spring. We begin by clarifying the theoretical concept of *transmedia storytelling*, and then review the main literature on the characteristics of this new communication model, this new culture so deeply influenced by digital media.

In Jenkins's (2007) view, "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". Though it is often summoned by different terms, such as cross-media, multi-channel or multi-platform storytelling or entertainment, it basically refers to "a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.)" (Scolari, 2009: 587), in order to create a larger story, or story world (Dena 2009), where "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Phillips, 2012: xi).

As such, this larger story becomes so rich and compelling, and the story world so complex, that it "cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium" (Jenkins, 2006: 114). As Bernardo (2011) puts it, the story content is "platform and media agnostic", because it can be told through many—possibly all—media platforms, even though, of course, it must then be materialized and adapted to each medium's specificities (Bolin, 2007: 243).

Many different media may be used, not only traditional media, such as books, comics, films, and television fiction shows, but also more recent ones, such as narrative games, blogs, websites, or social media. These franchises might even include theme parks, mobile phone text messages, and the staging of live events. In its ideal form, each medium tells the part of the story that is most suited to its specific semiotic determinations (Jenkins, 2006).

In one approach, maintained by Jenkins and his followers, each extension should be "self-contained", so the public can enjoy it even if they have not experienced the other extensions, while at the same time completing the story (Jenkins, 2006). Each extension can "be experienced separately and still be enjoyable", but at the same time become "part of a single unified storytelling experience" (Long, 2007: 15). Other authors (e.g. Dena, 2009), however, consider that extensions need not be "self-contained", the consumer having to experience all of them so as to make sense of the whole story. Some authors include both possibilities (Long, 2007; Phillips, 2012). In any case, each transmedia extension becomes a different "point of entry" into the story as a whole (Jenkins, 2006), because it "relates a different aspect of the story or relates it in a different manner" (Miller, 2008: 150).

Another characteristic of transmedia storytelling is that at least part of the story is interactive, so people can participate in it (Miller, 2008: 150). In most cases, we only have interaction, such as the one enabled by browsing a website or playing a videogame. In a growing number of cases, however, "fan speculations and

elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions" (Jenkins, 2006: 114), since they are given the chance to actively participate, either by choosing from a set of given possibilities or by pitching their own original ideas as the story is being developed. In some cases, as those described by Bernardo (2011), fiction is extended through social media and cell phone communications so that the public can interact and get responded to as if the characters were real-living people.

One of the reasons why this practice is so difficult to define, possibly the strongest one, is the seemingly endless mutability of the new media landscape. This communicative paradigm was promoted by the advent of new media and their connection through the Internet, due to the compatibility of their format: the digital format. The question with digital data is that it "can be stored easily, accessed quickly, and transferred among a great variety of devices. It can also be readily reassembled in an almost infinite number of ways, and thus it becomes a viable form of content for interactivity" (Miller, 2008: 4). As such, it also promotes the design of innovative and creative formats, both narrative and non-narrative.

New media, however, despite all apocalyptic forecasts, did not replace traditional media, which, though mostly digitized and available on different "delivery technologies" (Jenkins, 2006), did not disappear. For that reason, we have now more media than we have ever had in the past, old and new, existing side by side.

Also, both new and old media have very different specifications: they allow us to do many different (and very different) things, since their technology is becoming more complex. Being digital, the content in one medium can be easily accessed in other devices: in a simple device, such as a mobile phone or tablet, we can access the internet, watch films, read books, listen to music, play games, take pictures, etc. (Bolin, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). As a result, the traditional boundaries between media are becoming more and more blurred: "it becomes increasingly difficult to make distinctions between different media technologies, as they adopt functions and forms from each other" (Bolin, 2007: 237).

Furthermore, the creative tools and massive distribution systems now available make it possible for anyone not only to easily access most media messages, anywhere in the world, but to create their own messages as well, and spread them massively, through growing networks of people connected through the Internet (Shirky, 2008; Sousa, Zagalo, & Martins, 2012).

Though media technologies are at the centre of these discussions, Jenkins (2006: 15/6) believes that this is not fundamentally a technological, but rather a cultural, shift. "Convergence", as he calls this phenomenon,

> . . . alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences. Convergence alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment. Keep this in mind: convergence refers to a process, not an endpoint.

In that sense, the dynamics between the stakeholders are constantly changing. The public is becoming a definitely active participant: being now able to massively distribute their own contents and opinions, and even to make the industry's contents circulate (almost) freely (even if not always legally), they can exert a much greater

power in what is being said and done in the media sphere. Media companies and creators were not used to this, and they are having to adapt, though most of the time, they are just guessing to what they are adapting, because no one is able to predict what the public will do next (Bolin, 2007; Jenkins, 2006).

So, if media and media uses change, so do narratives. New media are "transforming the way that we communicate with each other and how we tell, deliver and share stories. We're beginning to see the emergence of new forms of storytelling inconceivable before the Internet" (Rosenthal, 2011: XIII). According to Murray (1997: 9/10), the computer promises "to reshape the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework". But, in Phillips's (2012: 9) view, these emerging kinds of storytelling "are more than just "a book you read on your Kindle" or "a movie you watch on your iPad"." It means more than putting old contents in new delivery technologies, or using several media alongside each other. It means creating new forms of storytelling, and new ways to consume and participate in the stories, that imply new ways to produce and finance stories.

3   Methodology and Approach

The question now is to understand how these changes affect the participation of each stakeholder in the process of a transmedia story. Our approach begins by evaluating the particular points of view of each partaker separately. We do so by applying a deductive methodology: based on data found in other scholarly works, in layman and professional accounts in the media, and in deductive reflections on observed empirical dynamics, we try to infer logically what their actual role and interests are, and how much they converge or diverge. The main interlocutors we focus on are the media industry, big and small, the creators who design and materialize the stories, and the public (or better, publics, since audience members are not all alike). This is presented in the next part of the chapter.

In Sect. 5, we then put the several views in perspective, so as to devise a possible solution to harmonize those divergent interests.

4   Role and Stakes of the Different Partakers in the Transmedia Process: A Deductive Survey

4.1   The Media Industry

To the media industry, this has not been an easy change, because they have had to adapt to totally different market logics, technologies and distribution systems, to the public's changing demands, and to the need to diversify their offer. The biggest change probably resides in the empowerment of the public, which is taking an increasing control of the media (Jenkins, 2006; Rosenthal, 2011).

Some companies are more open to innovation and to the public's inputs, being able to recognize the advantages of having the public not only give their intake on the changes, but also actually drive the process of convergence (Jenkins, 2006; Phillips, 2012). In this model, they have a constant barometer of the public's approval, which allows them to adapt more rapidly and invest only on the products they know will be well received. However, these market dynamics are very unpredictable, and thus hard to manage. As the audience gains power over contents, these become harder to control and capitalize, and, being free to choose from a wide span of media, the audience becomes a "moving target" (Bolin, 2007: 246).

Furthermore, the digitization of media technologies has led to a dramatic decrease in production and distribution costs, which is an obvious economic benefit for the industry; but, at the same time, this also enabled the consumers to have easy access to these tools. Consumers are now able "to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (Jenkins, 2006: 17/8). Their resources might not compare to the resources of the big industry (as much as their skills might not compare to those of the professionals), but now the public can intervene in a sphere that used to be exclusive to the media industry.

This participation often collides with the need to protect intellectual property. Production may be cheaper, but it is also harder to capitalize, because a lot of contents are being shared for free, without due financial retribution to the producers and often without their agreement. When companies work on these new models, they have to devise new ways to finance their activity. And this is not impossible: the owners of companies that work on this new model, such as Apple, Amazon, or Facebook, are millionaires. Parallel products and advertising, often conquered from traditional media, are two of those strategies. They work because audiences are increasingly dependent on the means of consumption (Bolin, 2007: 242), being predisposed to decide what to consume by influence of these new platforms, and to consume the new, parallel products they have to offer. Furthermore, if one medium or one media product runs onto the public spotlights, gains are possibly massive. Of course the industry has to develop a great deal of creativity and improvisational skills to be able to quickly respond, since public adhesion is fleeting. Company policies and procedures have to be restructured often and rapidly, and the managerial models have to be driven by consumption rather than production. Not all companies are ready to take the leap; many still prefer to adopt aggressive copyright-protection measures instead of embracing change.

According to Jenkins, the balance has not yet been established: "Sometimes, corporate and grassroots convergence reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes, these two forces are at war" (Jenkins, 2006: 18).

In any case, the new economic model, namely the part of it that concerns industry ownership, has been favourable to transmedia storytelling. In the past, book publishing, newspaper, cinema, television, videogames, or radio industries were made of independent, specialized companies, but they have tended to integrate into large conglomerates (Jenkins, 2006). This monopolist tendency has been a cause for alarm to many media professionals and thinkers, because it might threaten

diversity, independence and creative freedom. On the other hand, this has also favoured the achievement of synergies: since copyright is held by the same label, a story can be passed on freely from one media company to the next. Experts in different media can cooperate more closely, integrating their different resources and know-how to create transmedia texts (Bolin, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). In this perspective, transmedia storytelling "makes economic sense" (Scolari, 2009: 589).

These kinds of synergies have long since been identified and taken profit of: in the cinema industry, for instance, blockbusters have tended to be surrounded by an extensive "commercial paratext", composed of toys, games, merchandising, books, music, etc., the story becoming a powerful commercial brand that stimulates further consumption (Stam, 2005: 28). Television, book publishing and games industries have, for decades now, used the same strategy. These "paratexts" attract the attention of the consumers and allow them a continued contact with the story, even after they have left the theatre, closed the book, or shut down the computer. These are, of course, also ways to cash out on the notoriety of the main narrative artefact: stories such as *Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix* and *Harry Potter* become "heavyweight narrative brands" (Scolari, 2009: 590), which tend to constantly surpass the boundaries of one single medium and be recycled and reshaped to fit other media. These brands, ever extendible (note the overwhelming number of extensions to the *Star Wars* franchise), are aimed "to create a symbolic universe endowed with meaning" (Scolari, 2009: 599), which appeals, seemingly irresistibly, to fan communities and individuals. The industry has long since recognized this marketing break and turned fiction stories and characters into high-rate commodities (Bolin, 2007).

Actually, the first authors to refer to *transmedia*, Kinder and Kearny, used the term to express a "primarily promotional practice involving merchandising, adaptations, sequels and franchising", not necessarily dealing with digital media, but with commercial practices involving different media (Evans, 2011: 21). And this is an undeniably good way to make money. Media industries embrace these franchises because they consolidate consumer loyalty in an age of market fragmentation (Jenkins, 2006: 243). In this logic, creating licensed goods and narrative spin-offs is an excellent way to capitalize upon previous work.

The transmedia storytelling logic in particular makes the consumer dependent on the story, whatever platform or format, whether narrative or not, it is presented on. It stimulates the public's curiosity to learn more about the story and track down the characters' adventures wherever they are available, thus being led to consume more, because each extension provides new and diverse information.

However, many of the fore-mentioned franchises and spin-offs, though often called thus, are not properly transmedia storytelling: could it be that the public notices the difference and responds negatively? We will come back to this later.

Another question is that Transmedia Storytelling demands multidisciplinary teams: being spread through different media, you need different specialists, with skills in different media, to collaboratively create the franchise. Media conglomeration obviously favours these exchanges. However, Jenkins (2006: 107) believes that there is often aggressive competition, rather than collaboration within media

conglomerates: "While the technological infrastructure is ready, the economic prospects sweet, and the audiences primed, the media industries haven't done a very good job of collaborating to produce compelling transmedia experiences."

Of course, things are changing very rapidly. Big companies are starting to accept collaboration in new projects more easily, because the market demands it (Phillips, 2012). Also, the new generations of professionals were already born in this new paradigm, and are thus used to a closer social connectivity and collaboration, which is the hallmark of this new era. Though business structures at the higher level are often still working on the old logic, the professionals getting the work done will increasingly press old mentalities to break.

New projects and new business models, by small, independent companies or even individual creators, are springing everywhere. Many tend to escape the mainstream radar, maybe received well, but by a very limited audience; some, however, have had significant success. Such is the case of *The Blair Witch Project*, created by three students that proudly stated their limited budget but still made millions. Of course, small companies do not have the resources to compete continually with big conglomerates; however, because they are small, they are not only more prone to synergies with other companies, big and small, and easier to sustain if results are not significant, but also willing to try innovative projects that are cheaper, but still possibly very appealing to this new type of audience. And this often indeed challenges the big industry. All it takes to succeed is a good story.

4.2   The Creators: Artists and Storytellers

Transmedia Storytelling has strong advantages, not just for media companies looking for profit, but also for the authors, since it presents undeniable creative, artistic possibilities (e.g. Miller, 2008; Rosenthal, 2011). Typical franchisation of stories involves the creation of new narratives, and thus demands creative work, but all the authors have to do is reshape the same story into other formats. Transmedia stories, however, demand the creation of new content for each extension; each of them needs to add something new to the story, and that *something new* has to be intertwined with the other parts of the story, so that they all make sense and form a larger whole. They obviously demand a harder creative work to coordinate the story and create new nuances that may be explored in new extensions.

Therefore, transmedia may be a lot more than a mere marketing strategy, than the mere spreading of a story through a commercial franchise. It means more work, and for different professionals, specialized in different media. In order to unfold across multiple media and artefacts stories need to be extremely rich, deep or complex: transmedia storytelling has a "unique ability (...) to import a rich dimensionality to a property and to tell a story in a deeper and more lifelike, immersive way than could be possible via a single medium" (Miller, 2008: 153). Of course, this is not new: Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is possibly one of the best examples of a story so rich that it could easily generate a large number of extensions, in different formats. Today, with the ease to create more effective

synergies, this can be more easily accomplished. And, being necessary to coordinate the extensions of a story from within, so that every artefact becomes an integrated part of a larger puzzle, we agree with Jenkins (2006: 115) when he says that art direction is replacing production and marketing departments at the centre of franchise conception.

The problem here lies in the fact that, often, big companies with good resources still settle for spin-offs that simply repeat the same story, and often not very skilfully; though transposed into another medium, they present no novelty, they are not true *transmedia storytelling*. In this context, the authors' creative efforts are highly restrained, especially if they are urged to work fast to comply with release deadlines and deterred from making significant changes or appropriations.

Another obstacle is the need for collaboration between professionals trained in different media and art forms. Experts in different areas, with differently formatted views on storytelling, can sustain conflicting perspectives on how the story should evolve. Each author is experienced in telling stories in a specific medium, characterized by a specific semiotic language, and can find it difficult to agree with other experts' views, as well as to create stories that can be effective in other media. Training courses still focus mostly on specific media. But the reverse is also true: each extension is to be presented in a specific medium, with specific determinations, in which not all professionals are skilled. So more effective interdisciplinarity and collaboration are highly necessarily, and are still to be attained.

A specific type of transmedia projects presents good advantages for authors, though; it includes frequent (sometimes daily) updates of the story, on web platforms such as blogs and social media. One example is *Sofia's Diary*, a Portuguese project by BeActive, later on internationalized. Before they created the television show, and the books series, they began with a website, where fans could not only read Sofia's daily updates on her diary, but also post messages and subscribe to receive mobile phone text messages with the latest updates (Bernardo, 2011). Well, this implies the constant need for creative work, because writers have to design new contents continuously. Also, that creation has to be conciliated with the audience's suggestions, which is good for authors, on the one hand, because they can take fresh new ideas and make their work grow from there; they also have a constant feedback on what they are doing, so they can fit it to the audience's demands, and, as such, create much more compelling and sellable products.

On the other hand, however, exposure to fans' opinions might also be cruel. During the development of the *Lost* and *The Matrix* sagas, for instance, fan communities were formed on the web, to share their views and theories on each story and how it would end. In *Lost*, a fan's idea at one time anticipated something the authors meant to do, thus ruining the surprise and dissuading them; in the case of *The Matrix* some fan theories have been reputed as better than what was actually done with the story (Jenkins, 2006: 96). There is even a fan fiction website, *howitshouldhaveended.com*, where fans propose different—often parodic— endings to popular films. Storytellers have to consider the chance that their work might disappoint the fans. And these fans will publicly assert their discontent, which could be embarrassing for creators and bad for sales.

Moreover, audience participation can be difficult because, in an honest attitude, all suggestions, even incoherent and uninteresting ones, have to be considered and weighed and decided upon. If the author has a highly formed, original idea, taking too much input from the fans might make the story stray into something totally different, and not always more interesting. Either for that reason or for demagogic purposes, participation is usually somewhat illusory: though it is asserted, the public's inputs are highly restrained, or manipulated into what the authors want the story to be, or simply disregarded.

In any case, the author's personal creative effort might be overshadowed and restrained by the public participation, as well as by the collaboration with other authors. A participative, collaborative process might not comply with personal goals, glory, or copyright claims. Questions of authorship in this new age are very pungent and there is still very little conversation on the matter, mostly, possibly, because the answers are extremely complex and hard to devise with any certainty.

4.3   The Public (or Publics)

Audiences are changing dramatically; as we have stated, they are becoming increasingly intervening, demanding, and active. The truth is they were never totally passive, since the reception of any message demands the use of intellectual operations—possibly different ones, for each media, but nonetheless necessary in any of them. A story is always presented in pieces, with gaps that must be filled, between a series of interrelated events and characters that must be organized so as to create a logical diegesis and fictional world, and to clarify the cause-effect relations between them (e.g. Cook & Bernink, 1999: 322).

However, in the old days, the consumers' activity was placed mostly in their own minds, or on the feedback they passed on to their personal, private and thus limited, relations. Today, however, digital technologies have enabled a radical change, best described by Jenkins (2006: 18/9):

> If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public.

Consumers are now willing to share their opinions, and also participate, both collaborating with media companies on the production of artefacts, and producing their own. The cheap and easy access to multiple creative technologies enables them to produce their own materials, with no need for highly specialized training or big budgets (Sousa et al., 2012). Therefore, they are able to compete, when competent enough, with industries and trained professionals. Often, high budgets do not correspond to high quality stories and, although indie projects do not have the significant marketing apparatus of the big industries, the Internet and social

media allow them to gather an unprecedented attention and engagement from the public whenever they can accomplish a good story.

Stories are a particularly keen context for this type of production because they stimulate the consumers' imagination, and inspire them to produce continuations for the adventures they are not willing to abandon after they consume their formal, commercial manifestations. Stories that are able to enter people's hearts and imagination become myths, being endlessly recycled and appropriated (e.g. Campbell, 1949), and inspire the public to use new media technologies to do that (Jenkins, 2006: 131). Even though some of these things already happened before, the Internet allowed fan participation to be visible on a wide, global level.

Furthermore, participation is not primarily individual, as reception has been in the past: it has become collective (Shirky, 2008). Hard-core fans used to be many, but they were disconnected, and sometimes even frowned upon; now, they are able to find each other and gather around communities with the same interests that they find on the Internet, thus working together to push things to their advantage. Their power, both because they are many and because they are more visible, is increasing, and pressing established institutions, dominant in the past, to reconsider their behaviours and strategies (e.g. Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Shirky, 2008).

However, this new approach to media and fiction consumption is not evenly spread through all audience members. If media consumers were always somewhat different in the past, convergence has brought about what Bolin (2007: 241) calls "user divergence". There are still different types of users, but now they are more different from each other. Many still prefer the old media model, because they simply are not willing to spend so much time and effort in media surfing and participation (Evans, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). Also, not all have the same abilities to participate. The number of people who still cannot at all access new technologies is highly decreasing, but they are still plenty, around the world. Many others do have that access, but do not have the skills to fully understand media messages and participate in their exchange, production, and discussion (Jenkins, 2006).

The ones pioneering convergence are typically young people that were already born in a world packed with digital media—the "digital natives" (Prenski, 2001). Though they still constitute a narrow group now, they will carry their habits along as they grow older, and that means more people will consume media in this way. Also, being young, they are entering the media sphere primarily through entertainment, namely through games and fiction (Jenkins, 2006). These audiences are "actively engaged in the stories that they love, sometimes as collaborators in terms of co-creation and fan fiction or avidly spreading the word as evangelical marketers and distributors" (Rosenthal, 2011: XIII). Considering how likely it is that this market segment will grow in the future, this will be a vast opportunity for media producers willing to engage with transmedia and other new forms of storytelling.

Another feature of this "new" public is that they are more dispersed along media (e.g. Bolin, 2007). Since there are more media than ever, the public has to choose some media in favour of others, and though they might not totally abandon any of them, they certainly have to divide their time. That choice, though it may seem that

way at times, is not random: they search for those media that provide the contents they prefer, and when they enjoy a specific story, they expect to be given more, and on formats that are stimulating and satisfy their need for novelty. They expect, not to say demand, media industries to provide that (Rosenthal, 2011).

The fact that they are more dispersed means they are willing to surf the media in search of what they want. The skills they need to follow the flow of the stories are being developed on the way (Scolari, 2009: 589), so this is also a pedagogical exercise. These new consumers are becoming "information hunters and gatherers, taking pleasure in tracking down character backgrounds and plot points and making connections between different texts within the same franchise" (Jenkins, 2003). And they are expecting to find these flows and connections; if they do not, they feel discouraged, and seek other media products that indeed provide that dynamic.

5   Overcoming Divergence in Transmedia Practices: A Proposal

We argue here that one source of divergence, which may be delaying the progress of the transmedia practice and theory, is the fact that, in many cases, so-called transmedia franchises are not properly *transmedia storytelling,* as we understand it here. One example is Tim Burton's version of *Alice in Wonderland*, released by Walt Disney Pictures: a novel, a videogame, an illustrated book, and a website were released, among other products like toys and merchandising, but none of these artefacts actually adds any new information to the film. Each of them makes perfect sense within the whole, but they do not complete each other, expand the story in any way, or create a larger world. Hence, though some might use this fresh, new buzz term to describe the franchise, this is not *transmedia storytelling*.

All media enunciations are, in some way, derivative, in the sense that they are built upon what has come before, upon previous texts: this is the principle of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1981). Some enunciations, however, are more derivative that others, as are adaptations, franchises, serial fiction and transmedia storytelling, because they derive directly from other narratives, presenting the same characters and world, and some of the same actions. As such, adaptations, sequels, prequels, and other highly intertextual practices work on the same basic principle as transmedia: when consumers love or are in some way stirred by a story, or a fictional character or world, they enjoy coming back to it, reliving it somehow.

As far as adaptations go, Hutcheon (2006: 4) believes that part of the pleasure of experiencing them "comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise". Some adaptations, though, are better than others. They *can* be creative (or faithful, whatever criteria is used), and interesting, and inspire the public's appraisal, or simply more of the same, and even be fiercely criticized at times. In any case, revenues are typically high, because the story itself draws the public into consumption. And box-office figures show how profitable adaptations are. However, commercially produced, derivative franchises often called transmedia, not being particularly piquant, interesting, or innovative,

might represent a disappointment to fans. Redundancy between artefacts can be tiresome and deterring because there is no surprise or novelty; redundancy "burns up fan interest and causes franchises to fail" (Jenkins, 2003). The public, who expects more, and is better informed than ever before, might recognise the merely commercial strategy (as they often do), and, being able to make themselves heard, reproach it massively, thus influencing others against it.

In contrast, and that is our thesis, if franchises would better incorporate the transmedia storytelling principles, they might become more appealing to the public. As we have said, there are two sorts of transmedia stories: one includes more finished works, which are complementary but for the most part self-contained and do not usually include public participation, though they do include interaction. *The Matrix* is one of those cases. The attraction here is that the fan who experiences several of the extensions, or all of them, will get a different, richer, and more comprehensive experience out of the story; in a way, in searching for and uncovering the secrets behind it, they live their own little adventure. This corresponds to a greater immersion in the story and a more vivid experience of it, which can be highly rewarding for fans and is not accomplished by other types of franchises.

Other transmedia projects, on the other hand, do include participation: the public is allowed to pitch original ideas for the story's continuance (as in *Sofia's Diary*), solve mysteries (*Perplex City*), vote for several main decisions in the story, participate in it as an actor or inspire a character (*Axe Anarchy*), or post messages on social media and *get answered*, through other posts, emails or text messages (*Dawsons' Desktop*). In this kind of projects, the transmedia approach is much more powerful, because it engages the users as if the characters were real-life people and they were part of the adventure (Bernardo, 2011; Miller, 2008; Phillips, 2012).

The case of *Perplex City*, provided by Phillips (2012), can exemplify the full power of this approach: being used to "talking" frequently with the main character, Anna Heath, to getting her feedback, and helping her solve the mystery of a theft, audience members felt as if she was a real person. So much so that, when, in the story, she was sent to an ambush and killed, the fans felt her (fictional) death as strongly as if they had known her in real life. They sent condolence emails to the other characters and thought up a way to honour Anna's memory in real life, folding 333 origami cranes and personally delivering them to the producer Mind Candy's office in London. *Perplex City* was not a pure narrative, but a game, an ARG (Alternative Reality Game); however, these games function in the same way as this type of transmedia storytelling. As such, they have the same power:

> Any single-medium work can in theory make an audience laugh or cry. But make an audience feel directly involved in the events in a story? (. . .) This is the power of transmedia. (. . .) And it's not just you—it's a joyful collaboration, with hundreds or even thousands of individuals fabricating a common fiction together. (Phillips, 2012: 4/5)

Chasing after clues to unravel more information on the characters, world and story is gratifying and challenging in itself. But if the public understands that they have an actual say on how the story evolves and is given the opportunity to do so, it

will become involved in the story in a totally different way. Consumers will think this story to be their own, and thus consume more, and on top of it all promote it believingly. Though this is still a narrow market segment, they gather globally and their number is rising, as more and more people are growing into this new way of consuming and participating in media experiences and stories.

5.1 The Proposal Viewed Under Each Stakeholder's Perspective

If transmedia storytelling principles are more often properly used, as we propose here, this will have consequences for each partaker in the process. On the perspective of the media industry, with transmedia, instead of one artefact, companies can produce several: the more products you create, the more you can sell, the more money you can make. Of course, many of these products have lower prices, some of them are even free (as are Facebook profiles and blogs), and audiences might not be interested in all of them, but they are also much easier and cheaper to create. Under the principle of synergy, when you create something based on what you have done before, it will be less laborious, since you already have something to build on. Also, a website, blog or social media profile update, though it is cost-less, does not take a lot of highly specialized technicians, as those you need to produce, say, a feature film, but only a few scriptwriters.

When companies are conglomerated, and partnerships and synergies exist, a competing or conflicting attitude will render difficult, if not impossible, the effort to create a coordinated story between the different artefacts, because communication between co-creators will fail. And other, sometimes very small, independent companies, or professionals, willing to unite, effectively manage to maximize efforts and resources, and to devise successful transmedia stories. Many recent transmedia projects are independent projects, because they are easier and cheaper to make and risk is minimum, since they have little to lose. In synergies, partners work side-by-side, and not one under the other. Independence frees the authors from corporate demands and creative restraints and they still get their name onto the spotlights. This model is proving itself to work, and all odds point to an increase in this tendency. If big companies are able to follow, in the spirit of making true transmedia stories (whichever the type), rather than often disappointing, more-of-the-same adaptations and franchises, they will have an edge on the future.

Transmedia is also a good way to attract to different targets (Scolari, 2009). Since there is a growing "user divergence" (Bolin, 2007), the different formats in the transmedia whole can attract to different market segments, traditionally not interested in mainstream media. Those audience members who enjoy surfing the media to complete a wider, more complex story can do so, but those who prefer the old paradigm can still consume the self-contained artefacts as they did in the past, finding the story in whatever format they prefer. Many did not watch the *The Matrix* animes, read the comics, or play the games, but they still enjoyed the films (even if they may not have fully understood them); furthermore, the comics, anime and videogames fans had the chance to access the story in their favourite formats. This

is also more democratic: people with different preferences, skills, and literacy levels can all find the type of stories that better suit their needs.

So, if there are such advantages to transmedia storytelling, in not pursuing it, media companies are missing out on a very profitable opportunity. The age of convergence is settled, and there is no turning back. It is not possible to put a stop to market dynamics where things are endlessly shared, and where the public demands to participate in the creative process. Trying to do so is like wanting to stop an avalanche with a stop sign: it will be violently run over. Contents flow, whether copyright holders like it or not. As we have come to think, today, they *need* to flow: the top-selling films, the most watched videos on Youtube, the hottest books and videogames are the ones people are talking about on social networks, and yes, sometimes sharing between themselves (not always legally). But, as Jenkins et al. (2013: 1) say: "if it doesn't spread, it's dead". Though some extensions of the transmedia franchises are free, they stimulate a buzz around the story that, in our view, is essential today for the massive acceptance and consumption of any media product. It is thus not in the media industry's best interest to stop that buzz.

Surely, the industry needs to make money; they need to survive somehow, and that should not be shameful to say. But even when contents get pirated, they also in a way addict the public to the story, and make way for new products; people *will* buy them because the story will have entered their hearts and minds. If, on top of that, fans are given the chance to participate, they will take the stories as their own and become their privileged ambassadors.

Since they are increasingly connected and organized into communities, they will have an important part in attracting still more public and in inspiring still more fans. The *Harry Potter*, *Millenium,* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* sagas may be said to have had success because the readers liked them so much that they inspired other people to read them; from there grew the (very profitable) idea to adapt the books to films. Had it been tried, a transmedia approach would have been economically viable. This mouth-to-mouth publicity is proven to be ever more effective than advertising, and, on top of it all, it is free. There are new models to be explored and capitalized upon. So the industry might as well embrace it. And, if some companies do not, the public will not hesitate to turn to those who do.

Undoubtedly, media conglomerates can be seen as a threat and thus feared: being bigger and stronger, they might (think they) have less need to accommodate the needs of the public and of the creative professionals, and they keep pressing their products to the market with massive amounts of advertising, with which indie projects will never be able to compete. On the other hand, independent projects are a possibility for anyone who does not share the corporative views, and these projects are so abundant that they do not allow big companies to monopolize the market. They are a force big corporations will somehow have to reckon with.

The solution to fighting anti-democratic pressures and corporative manipulation, we believe, must be based on media—or better, on transmedia—literacy. Being able not just to read and write but also to create and share their opinions and contents with others, consumers will be more empowered, and more able to

participate on their own matters and interests, and thus become full citizens on their own right (Jenkins, 2006).

As far as creators go, has we have seen, they have everything to gain from embracing transmedia storytelling. Of course not all narratives in the future need to be transmedia, but the target audience is growing, and so are the demands for new transmedia stories. If seen through the right perspective, co-creation and participation can actually generate more diverse, creative and original artefacts: in the *Sofia's Diary* saga, Bernardo (2011: XXI) assumed that

> Instead of just shaping the concept in a room with writers, we were shaping the concept every day with the help of the growing number of fans. This daily process helped us to shape and develop storylines and, as a team, get us into sync with what the audience liked and disliked about what we were doing.

In the *The Matrix* project, the Wachowskis' strategy was to call renowned artists in other creative areas (videogames, comics, and anime), already with a cult audience behind them, brief them upfront about what they absolutely had to respect in the story, and then give them total creative freedom to build the transmedia paratexts to the films. As a result, the artists felt free and inspired, and a horde of fans, that were not typical film fans but followed their idols wherever they went, was conquered to the saga.

Of course, it takes a lot of work to coordinate this collaboration. Each of the contributions has to make sense in the context of the whole story, and, in order to plant clues and informations that are complementary in different artefacts, there must be a general conceptual direction to coordinate them, as happened with the Wachowskis' project. Within a large, co-authoring team, not every idea is good, but having many ideas rather than few allows the authors to choose the best ones, and these will probably be better than anything any single author could have devised alone. All it takes is a good direction so everything fits together.

Authorship must, of course, be shared. But in the case of the Wachowskis, their talent was not overshadowed, but rather fortified by the fact that they surrounded themselves with worthy, competent and already famous artists in other areas and media. Artists willing to innovate and dare (at least those who show real talent) will still be recognized for their work. In Bernardo's (2011: XIX) view, "in a media world with an excess of stories, if you do something new, you can still capture an audience". Many consumers are actually more and more prone to following a limited set of stories more deeply, instead of many momentary and isolated narratives (Jenkins, 2003). And this is happening precisely because, and only if, stories are compelling, and rich, and stimulate the search for further information.

In the case of adaptations, they demand less creative work, because no new story is needed. Historically, we know that adaptation practices have always been seen with suspicion, but they have also always been profitable. However, it is plausible to say that the public might be even more enthusiastic about products that actually add something to the story, instead of simply reproducing it in another format. Plus, the more intertwined the different artefacts are, the more the public will become

"hooked" and feel the need to know (i.e., consume) the different extensions in order to grasp their full meaning and live the full experience.

6   Conclusion

The truth is people have always loved stories. This is a natural human activity, a natural human need. Stories have always been told, ever since the dawn of Humankind, in every human community (Barthes, 1966; Ryan, 2004). Through stories, humans learn to know the world and other people around them, and how to deal with the human condition and issues such as mortality, morality, and identity (Campbell, 1949); they also enable us to "explore alternate realities and expand our mental horizon beyond the physical, actual world—towards the worlds of dreams, phantasms, fantasy, possibilities, and counterfactuality" (Ryan, 2004: 2/3).

We, as well as Phillips (2012: 6), believe that transmedia storytelling is actually feeding "a core hunger of their truest fans: to have more, richer, deeper stories. Fans who love your creation are going to want to see more of it. They want to be a part of it. Transmedia (...) is the way to give them what they want". The public, the fans in particular, wish to immerse themselves in the fantasy world, because this represents a more enjoyable experience than the mere, passive consumption we were used to (Bernardo, 2011: XIX). Connections to other artefacts make the audience crave for more information, and search for it, and build communities so they can share their knowledge. As a result, the ancient need to live out our fantasy may even be being intensified by the participatory, immersive possibilities of digital media (Murray, 1997: 98).

Creators are still learning how to create good transmedia stories, whatever *good* means, to each different type of consumer/participant. They are still learning how to intertwine the partial stories in each artefact, so they can compose that larger story and fictional world, and stimulate the search for the other extensions. There are no guaranteed formulas yet (as there are in the cinema, for instance, with classic Hollywood films). Producers have to readjust heir way of thinking to the new ways of media technology and consumption, which are, most often, different from those they knew as they were growing up.

Academics and critics must also help in this process, not by closing themselves in nostalgic or catastrophic views of digital change, but by stepping out into the world with curious eyes and getting to know how this fresh, new model is actually functioning. Furthermore, it is vital that they start thinking in trans-media rather single-media terms, since these approaches, most common in the academia and training disciplines, are too narrow to fully account for transmedia phenomena.

Most importantly, we must take a step beyond established beliefs and learn how to know the public. It has taken charge of things. Anyone with a stake in creating positive, constructive, and successful stories has to get to know how they work so as to provide creators and the public with the most challenging options they can. And, of course, audience members are also still learning, and trying to figure out what works better for them, and how to use the amazing new tools at their service. And

this is not just important to create better narrative experiences. The shared participation and the convergence of efforts between all the partakers in the process may be a way to create a better, more informed, skilled, participative, equalitarian and creative society.

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