

# Transmedia Storytelling

## Twelve Postulates

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"Only he who perceives the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary."

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Transmedia storytelling happens in a wide range of cultural production environments: from commercial endeavors that gross billions of dollars to avant-gardist experiments depending on grants and other subsidies. At the popular end of the spectrum are globally distributed story worlds like JAMES BOND,<sup>2</sup> LORD OF THE RINGS,<sup>3</sup> STAR TREK,<sup>4</sup> STAR WARS,<sup>5</sup> HARRY POTTER,<sup>6</sup> RESIDENT EVIL,<sup>7</sup> or ASSAS-

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- 1 Agamben, Giorgio: *"What is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press 2009.
  - 2 Novels since 1953, TV adaptations since 1954, feature films since 1962, digital games since 1983.
  - 3 Novels since 1954, radio adaptations since 1955, animated films since 1978, digital games since 1982, feature films since 2001.
  - 4 TV series since 1966, board games since 1967, novels since 1968, digital games since 1971, animated TV series since 1973, feature films since 1979, theme park attractions since 1998.
  - 5 Novels since 1976, feature films and comics since 1977, games since 1978/79, theme park attractions since 1987, animated films since 2003.
  - 6 Novels since 1997, feature films and games since 2001.
  - 7 Digital games since 1996, novels and comics since 1997, animated movies since 2000, feature films since 2002.

view (to contemplate or be a witness to) had for her been replaced by the notion of an image as a passage or a portal, an interface or part of a sequential process—in short, as a cue for action.”<sup>58</sup>

## XI. SIMULATION AND WORLDBUILDING

Artifacts that virtualize processes and procedures of real or imagined worlds are called simulations. Their technological basis is the transmedium’s ability to represent systems, the affordance of procedurality. Because of their medial characteristics, simulations do not simply—as is the case with literature—describe systems, or merely—as is the case with visual arts and photography, theater, film, television—represent them visually or audiovisually. Rather, digital games can simulate how systems function and thereby they enable players to experience these systems.

At the end of the 1990s, Janet H. Murray recognized this special quality of digital narrations: “The most important element the new medium adds to our repertoire of representational powers is its procedural nature, its ability to capture experience as systems of interrelated actions.”<sup>59</sup> Ian Bogost later introduced procedurality into Game Studies as a term describing the medial affordance for the construction of dynamic models of real-world processes: “This ability to execute a series of rules fundamentally separates computers from other media.”<sup>60</sup> Digital games use procedurality as their “core representational model.”<sup>61</sup>

Virtual systems can simulate biological, social, cultural, and economic conditions, while simultaneously enabling interaction with these simulations. Through their playful interactions users tend to build mental models: “The com-

58 Elsaesser, Thomas: “Die ‘Rückkehr’ der 3D-Bilder. Zur Logik und Genealogie des Bildes im 21. Jahrhundert,” in: Gundolf S. Freyermuth/Lisa Gotto (eds.), *Bildwerke: Visualität in der digitalen Medienkultur*, Bielefeld: transcript 2013, pp. 25-67, p. 54. (Quote taken from Thomas Elsaesser’s English manuscript.)

59 Murray, Janet Horowitz: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, New York: Free Press 1997, p. 274.

60 Bogost, Ian: *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2007, loc. 125.—Bogost himself points out that Janet H. Murray, already in 1996, recognized procedurality as a central characteristic of the digital transmedium, from which its special storytelling capabilities result. See *Ibid.*, loc. 119.

61 *Ibid.*, loc. 36.

puter is just an incremental step," says Will Wright, "an intermediate model to the model in the player's head."<sup>62</sup> In general, simulations concern themselves— independent from any degree of realism—with simplified abstractions of real-world role models: "A simulation does not attempt to simulate every aspect of its referent, but instead focuses on those elements necessary to the game."<sup>63</sup> Different principles can underlie these abstractions, from the production of specific experiences to the teaching or training of specific skills.<sup>64</sup> "Ultimately, of course, we don't care about creating either stories or games—we care about creating experiences," Jesse Schell states: "Stories and games can each be thought of as machines to help create experiences."<sup>65</sup> Most transmedia simulations, however, aim for hyperrealism, i.e., they try to build audiovisual worlds which are not only functionally but also aesthetically consistent.

Such fictional worldbuilding is certainly not an entirely new practice in the history of the arts. Epic storytelling strove to capture dying worlds, as, for example, Honoré de Balzac undertook with the *Comédie Humaine*.<sup>66</sup> Others attempted to invent entirely new fictional worlds, like J. R. R. Tolkien with *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>67</sup> Dramatic storytelling, however, bound to audiovisual representation in

62 Quoted after Fullerton, Tracy/Swain, Christopher/Hoffman, Steven/Books24x7 Inc.: *Game Design Workshop: Designing, Prototyping and Playtesting Games*, San Francisco, Calif.: CMP 2004, loc. 4092.

63 Salen, Katie/Zimmerman, Eric: *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press (Kindle Edition) 2003, loc. 785.

64 Quoted after T. Fullerton et al.: *Game Design Workshop*, loc. 4092.

65 J. Schell: *The Art of Game Design*, loc. 5474. Also, McGonigal, Jane: *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, New York: Penguin Press (Kindle Edition) 2011, loc. 595. "A good game is a unique way of structuring experience and provoking positive emotion."

66 French writer Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) conceived the idea of a panoramic portrait of society which came to be known as *La Comédie humaine* in 1832. It "consists of 91 finished works (stories, novels or analytical essays) and 46 unfinished works (some of which exist only as titles)." See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_Comédie\\_humaine#cite\\_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Comédie_humaine#cite_note-1)

67 British writer and professor of English language John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) wrote the epic saga *The Lord of the Rings* as a sequel to his children's book *The Hobbit* (1937) between 1937 and 1949. Published in three parts in 1954 and 1955, the saga created a whole fantasy world whose strong influence on popular culture and specifically games and transmedia productions is ongoing.

time and space, was largely barred from such worldbuilding—mostly for media-technological reasons: both the production requirements and the circumstances of reception in theater, cinema, and television. Only with the transition to virtual, i.e., software-based audiovisuality, did the construction and reception of entire audiovisual worlds move into the realm of possibility. Worldbuilding was pioneered in games but has become important in filmmaking as well. “Constructing worlds is the main idea,” states *WATCHMEN* production designer Alex McDowell: “By creating a 3-D virtual production space, you can work with your fellow filmmakers in a very descriptive, data-rich, virtual representation of the film before you even start making it.”<sup>68</sup> In a similar way James Cameron described *AVATAR*’s hyperrealistic “movie-scape”: “It’s like a big, powerful game engine. If I want to fly through space, or change my perspective, I can. I can turn the whole scene into a living miniature.”<sup>69</sup> Tom Chatfield thus considers the “aesthetics of world-building” as a central moment of digital culture.<sup>70</sup>

In contemporary transmedia, *story worlds* or *story universes* may not completely replace linear storylines, but they certainly start to compete with them. These three-dimensional action areas have to be designed rather than simply described. Henry Jenkins speaks of the “story architecture” of narrative transmedia worlds: Designers, who develop these forms of ‘environmental storytelling,’ work as “narrative architects [...] privileging spatial exploration over plot development.”<sup>71</sup> This holds true for intensive as well as extensive forms of transmedia. Consequently, a defining trend in transmedia storytelling—whether extensive or intensive—has been, as Elizabeth Evans analyzed, a switch from succession to layering:

“Rather than building a single narrative flow from screen to screen, leading the viewer from a webisode prequel to the episode to a game in sequence, multiple micro flows are in place within individual episodes and across screens, from the television to the app and

68 Quoted from Hart, Hugh: “Virtual Sets Move Hollywood Closer to Holodeck,” *Wired*, March 27, 2009, <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2009/03/filmmakers-use/>

69 Quoted from Chatfield, Tom: *Fun Inc.: Why Games are the Twenty-First Century’s Most Serious Business*, London: Virgin (Kindle Edition) 2010, loc. 623-625.

70 Ibid., loc. 2188-92.

71 Jenkins, Henry: “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in: Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Pat Harrigan (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2004, pp. 119-129. Quoted from: <http://web.mit.edu/21fms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html>

back again, and through different components within the app. [...] The early transmedia storytelling strategies that led viewers through different narrative experiences, separated by a linear temporal structure as well as different devices have evolved into a layering of experiences onto a single narrative moment."<sup>72</sup>

My eleventh postulate: Based on the affordance to procedurally simulate systems functionally as well as aesthetically, *transmedia enables a new kind of spatial and layered storytelling. Its core element is the hyperrealistic construction of consistent 'worlds'—whether fictional or documentary—that can be navigated and experienced in real-time.*

## XII. VANISHING POINT

In summary, the story of transmedia seems to go like this:

An age-old desire to overcome the mechanical and industrial separation of media (I) found its technological realization in the digital transmedium of software (II). It promises more efficient ways to express and transfer cultural knowledge (III) by progressing from intermedia exchange and multimedia integration to a full-fledged merging of media (IV). In its dialectical unit of technological convergence and aesthetic complementarity (V), transmedia has the aesthetic affordance to reflect and express the cultural experiences of digitalization, specifically new perceptions of time and space (VI). So far, two new variants of storytelling have emerged: intensive and extensive transmedia, the fusion of several media within one artifact and the distribution of narratives over several media (VII). Both variants require and establish (in the structurally open-ended creation of transmedia works) a new kind of distributed authorship involving many networked individuals, professionals, and users (VIII). Artistically, three signature features characterize transmedia storytelling: first, a twofold gamification, i.e., a reflection of the growing cultural importance of games and play as well as the specific application of game design principles in non-game-related areas (IX); second, hyperrealism, i.e., the use of non-indexical visuals and audio in fictional as well as non-fictional contexts whose authenticity depends on

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72 Evans, Elizabeth: "Layering Engagement: The Temporal Dynamics of Transmedia Television," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 2015, pp. 111-128, [http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/30924/1/Evans%20-%20Layering%20Engagement%20\(Storyworlds\).pdf](http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/30924/1/Evans%20-%20Layering%20Engagement%20(Storyworlds).pdf) \*