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Exploring Transmedia Through Practical Application: Part 1

Today's media landscape is a cultural battlefield. Big corporations are dominating the box office with their multi-million dollar motion picture franchises, and online content creators are competing with one another to gain the interest of a consumer with a minimal attention span and thousands of alternative forms of entertainment. This ultra-competitive environment places independent storytellers in a unique position - how does one tell a movie-length story without the financial means to do so, while simultaneously keeping the undivided attention of a consumer trained to enjoy bite-sized content? The answer to this issue lies in a complete reinterpretation of the linear method of storytelling through the usage of the transmedia model. Put simply, transmedia storytelling is telling a narrative over a multi-faceted universe made from different mediums, both online and off. In this paper, I will explore the timeline of creating a Hollywood production, analyze what it means to be living in the Age of Convergence, and define the core vales of transmedia storytelling; while simultaneously demonstrating why using the transmedia model is the best route for independent creators and preparing for my own personal transmedia project.

Before exploring why the transmedia model of storytelling is perfectly crafted for today's digital audiences, it is important to first understand the intricacies of Hollywood's traditional method of big budget storytelling. In order for a movie to be green-lit by a major production studio, it must be seen as a profitable investment. The most profitable of these films often result in sequels, spin-offs or franchises ensuring higher ticket sales through audience loyalty. This method is highly successful - the top ten highest-earning films of 2019 were all part of a

franchise, and the highest earning non-franchise film of the year was Jordan Peele's *Us,* which came in at number 12 ("Domestic Box Office"). Most major studios excel at creating and marketing films for their audiences, but one studio in particular soars above the rest: Disney.

Due to Disney's large pool of intellectual property, their revenue has almost quadrupled since 2009 ("Net Income"). Disney produced the top six highest grossing movies of 2019 ("Domestic Box Office"). *Star Wars: Episode IX - The Rise of Skywalker* grossed $390,000,000, *Frozen II* grossed $430,000,000, and *Avengers Endgame,* the highest earning movie of the year, grossed an astonishing $858,000,000 ("Domestic Box Office"). Furthering the notions discussed earlier, these three films were all a part of a franchise or shared universe. Worldwide, Disney's total profits exceeded $13.15 billion dollars - a far cry from the $3.3 billion they made ten years earlier (Vary, "Net Income"). This rapid increase in profits is strongly correlated to their massive acquisitions of preexisting companies. Currently, Disney owns ABC, ESPN (80%), Touchstone Pictures, Marvel, Lucasfilm, A&E (50%), The History Channel (50%), Lifetime (50%), Pixar, Hulu (majority), 20th Century Fox and many more (Max). By purchasing these companies and the rights to all of their media content, Disney is able to continue creating, rebooting, and merging franchises together to ensure continued engagement for audiences of any age.

Now that Disney has been identified as the leading studio in large scale productions, it is important to break down how these films are actually made. There are approximately five stages in the creation of a motion picture from start to finish: Development, Pre-Production, Production, Post-Production, and Distribution (Coutaud). Simply stated, development is sourcing the ideas for the film and signing the core creative team, pre-production is signing the actors, writing the script and preparing to shoot, production is shooting the film, post-production is editing and

reshooting parts of the film, and distribution is marketing and releasing the film to theaters. To fully understand the intricacies of this process, the production timeline of Disney's *Avengers Endgame* (and, to an extent, its precursor *Infinity War* because the two films were shot concurrently) will be analyzed with the proper terminology and categorization. It is also important to note that these stages often overlap one another - directors Joe and Anthony Russo emphasized they were in a constant state of pre-production, production, and post production for a year straight ("Production of Avengers"). Furthermore, this timeline is a heavily simplified version of the actual production schedule, as it is used primarily for emphasis on the structure of different categorical processes.

The first stage in this timeline is the development process, where the rest of the production timeline is created, initial ideation for the storyline is proposed, and the core team of the film is selected. The development process for *Avengers Endgame* began in 1991 when the source material was written by Jim Starlin in the Marvel Comics *Infinity Gauntlet Arc* ("Production of Avengers"). The Marvel Cinematic Universe was started in 2008 when *Iron Man* was released, laying the groundwork for future films in the franchise. This actual development of this film began in 2014, when the plans for the two part finale of the series was laid out ("Production of Avengers"). Finally, directors Anthony and Joe Russo signed to direct both films in April 2015, and screenwriters Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely signed to write both films in May 2015 ("Production of Avengers"). Once the core members of the production team were established, the pre-production phase of the film came into fruition.

The very early stages of pre-production began before the plans were laid out for the two part finale - for example, Kevin Feige, the president of Marvel Studios, signed all actors from

previous Marvel Cinematic Universe films to return by July 2014 (before any of the actual plans for the film were discussed) because he knew there would be some sort of team up movie to end the story ("Production of Avengers"). In January 2016, once the core creative team and ensemble cast were locked, the script writing process began. At this time, a production window was established for the duration of November 2016 - June 2017. It is important to note that *Avengers Infinity War* and *Avengers Endgame* were produced concurrently, explaining choices such as the extra long shooting schedule and overlapping data. In mid 2016, the second draft of the screenplay was completed, the composer was hired, and there were direct lines of communication between every Marvel director to ensure characters were staying true to their values across films ("Production of Avengers"). The creative team realized they were running behind in October 2016, so they postponed production until the start of 2017 and hired another screenwriter (Eric Pearson) to stay on track for release. Finally, in January 2017, all additional actors were signed and prepared for production ("Production of Avengers").

On January 23, 2017, filming for *Infinity War*, the first half of the two-part finale, began. Official filming for *Endgame* began on August 10, 2017, and shooting was wrapped for both films on January 11, 2018 ("Production of Avengers"). The total production time for these films was approximately a year of concurrent shooting, with overlap occurring between both films' respective schedules.

Post-production for the films began less than a month after they started shooting - the visual effects companies received sequences to start working on in February 2017 ("Production of Avengers"). In December 2017, story editing for *Endgame* began, and a year later, half of the film was fully edited. This progress in editing also encouraged the directors to begin preparing

for reshoots, which were completed in January 2019, a year after the film officially finished production ("Production of Avengers"). The final story edit for the film was locked in March 2019, and the final visual effects were completed a month later, meaning the entire film was locked and ready for release ("Production of Avengers").

Although the film was only halfway done in December 2018, the first trailer was released at the beginning of the month, a year and a half before the release in April 2019 ("Production of Avengers"). More promotional material was released for the film in March 2019, and the film premiered on April 22, 2019 at the Los Angeles Convention Center ("Production of Avengers"). Four days later, on April 26 it was released in theaters to immense success - so much so that it was re-released on June 28th, 2019 with seven additional minutes of footage ("Production of Avengers"). The film was made available for purchase on DVD on August 13, 2019, and was available to stream on Disney+ on November 12, 2019 ("Production of Avengers").

Overall, excluding the major outliers and deep development, the film took five years to create. Even for a blockbuster, this is a very long instance of the development process, and due to that fact, the film cost a lot of money. Other Hollywood productions that follow a similar schedule may compress the timeline, often taking a year or two from development to release. This is true for even "indie" studios, such as A24. Their 2019 film *The Lighthouse,* a minuscule production compared to *Endgame*, still needed a large team - the film had a small budget of $4 million and took about a year to produce. With this information in mind, it is evident that no matter the type of film, this traditional route of storytelling takes a lot of time and costs a lot of money.

All of this data begs the question: how can a smaller-than-indie creator tell a story when the box office is dominated by massive blockbusters, and they cannot afford to pursue the traditional route of release? The answer is simple - these creators must use alternative modes of storytelling. In order for an independent project to gain recognition, it is important to break out of this big business cycle - it is almost impossible to escape the wide reach of large corporations like Disney, so small creators should take advantage of the tools that are given to society for "free." By utilizing these tools, specifically social media, such projects become wholly independent, meaning the creator has full production and distribution choices, as compared to big media deciding what is said and who says it in Hollywood. Telling stories through social media also allows independent creators to explore modern, internet-specific concepts such as virality. This alternative mode of storytelling is something unique to the tools of today's society, and in order to successfully utilize them, creators must understand how consumers interact with the Internet.

Revolutions in technology have permanently changed how people interact with one another, both online and off. The ever present nature of social media and constant access to the web has dictated the architecture of the modern Internet; people are always connected, always 'on,' and always communicating. This is especially true for today's youth, referred to as the digital natives, who have been online since birth (Gürel & Tığlı 37). This state of constant connectedness brings a number of new intricacies to society as a whole, but most noticeably, it has brought rise to the Age of Convergence - where online interactions are valued the same as physical. The Age of Convergence is primarily made of two interconnected parts: participatory culture and convergence culture.

The constant connectedness of today's society has brought rise to a new age of interaction known as participatory culture. At its core, participatory culture is the ease of sharing ideas and content with low barrier to entry and high engagement (Diker & Taşdelen 297). Individuals no longer obtain their information solely from a search engine. Rather, "we query our social networks, looking for trusted (or known) sources of information," and compare those findings with searches on less personalized websites (Alexander 141). This information is repeated and shared among more networks, causing both the information and the platform to grow in reach. There are three main categories denoting the different modes of participatory culture:

1. Affiliations: "The formal or informal membership of various platforms according to the interests of participating cultures"

2. Expressions: "Contributing to the common content. Members have the ability to change and design content through video, games and comments, with the level of potential interaction provided to them"

3. Circulations: "Networks that allow information to be shared based on the ability to provide synchronization and control over communicative actions among individuals" (Diker & Taşdelen 297).

These three modes often interact with one another, influencing how an idea is grown or shared. Due to these three properties of participatory culture, as well as the lack of temporal and spacial limitations on communication, communities are naturally growing from online social groups. Brands and creators can benefit from these groups, as members of these communities can promote "information about the brand, share their experiences, communicate with brands and other consumers, comment on the brand, and follow the brand's campaigns and products" (Diker & Taşdelen 299). With this statement, it is evident that brands can strongly benefit from society

and social media's growing participatory culture, as well as its built-in ideas of social querying. Furthermore, due to the amount of information a consumer obtains from their own social networks, fans of a brand are effective in making that brand a phenomenon of its own, such as posting a photo or video of their experience online (Diker & Taşdelen 298). Although fans can make a brand viral (whether that be a company, individual, or consumable media), the brand must still create content that is easily shared and enjoyed.

Participatory culture is causing brands and content creators alike to innovate in the way they appeal to their audiences. The audience, who was once a passive observer, is now an active consumer due to social media (Diker & Taşdelen 299). An average moviegoer can be described as a passive consumer, as they go to the theater, watch the film, and leave, never interacting with any of the characters or overall story. Active consumers, on the other hand, are invited to interact with the content - they are often asking questions, being directly addressed, and influencing future storylines or programs. In today's society, active consumers are the key to successful growth, and brands need to develop new strategies to entice consumers to keep coming back (Schiller 97). Based on these findings, there are three different categories of approaches a brand can take to their active consumers:

1. *Actively embrace networking.* Internally, arrange story content in multiple, interlinked items. Externally, point to other media, sources, and stories, and expect that the audience will do so on their own.

2. *Accept the networked environment.* Expect social media connections, but without devoting energies to solicit them.

3.   *Secede from networks.* Select a format that actively sets up a discrete boundary around

story content. As Barbara Ganley says, "If you're not thinking about social media for

digital storytelling, you're basically creating something that is analog" (Alexander 132).

Based on the core values of participatory culture, it is evident that if a small to medium sized

brand wants to succeed, they must accept and promote active customers. It is important to note

that an active consumer is more than just someone who clicks share on Facebook. According to

Schiller, these users "translate their interests in the stories and the franchise into a range of media

messages, from concordances and Wikipedia entries, fan fiction and fan videos to fan films,

'cosplay,' and game mods" (98-99). If a brand actively embraces networking, it would repost

these fan creations, and invite top fans to collaborate with them to create content for fans, made

by fans. This notion is not necessarily the case for big brands however - Disney, for example,

demonstrated that they secede from their networks when they halted all Baby Yoda stores on

Etsy (Gartenberg). This is in direct opposition to the values of participatory culture, as an

actively embracing company would share these products with their fanbase, especially because

there was a shortage of official versions. It is again important to note that the only reason Disney

can do this is because of their status as a worldwide corporation - if a small brand did this, they

would suffer large consequences.

This consumer-brand interaction is something the digital natives have come to expect. In

fact, the lack of interaction is much more notable than the inclusion. Due to these expectations,

along with this generation's constant active consumption of content, "boundaries between online

and offline worlds become unclear . . . there is no difference between the digital world and real

world anymore," meaning that consumers are unable to see the difference between them (Gürel & Tığlı 37). This sentiment, at its core, represents convergence culture.

Convergence culture and participatory culture work hand in hand to keep consumers attentive and entertained. While the ideology behind participatory culture is focused primarily on (but not limited to) the flow of interaction from consumer to brand, convergence is the opposite (brand to consumer). Convergence has changed the way society communicates and consumes media through the interconnectedness of physical and online life. According to Gürel & Tığlı, there are five dimensions of convergence:

1. Technologic convergence: digitalization and presentation of verbal, visual, or audial contents in different media platforms

2. Economic convergence: horizontal integration, which takes place through presenting different production categories under a single roof

3. Social convergence: information and communication technologies that consumers have enable them to realize more than one action at the same time

4. Cultural convergence: finds meaning by adding a new dimension to content creation and sharing

5. Global convergence: formed with the international flow of the content (36)

These different dimensions of convergence all promote the idea behind the melting of barriers between the real world and the digital, ignoring borders, timezones, languages, status, and so much more. In order for a story to be heard, it must be shared with convergence in mind, which allows for the "circulation of the narratives in different media tools [to] provide the active participation of the consumers and a cultural change in the consumers can occur" (Diker &

Taşdelen 301). The combination of media, participatory culture, and convergence has influenced brands and creators to create new forms of content for the age of the modern Internet aimed at locking a consumer's attention for as long as possible.

Content creators and brands alike are constantly innovating to attract and retain their consumers. That being said, there are three main models to follow when creating a narrative story for the Internet. These models are multimedia, cross-media, and transmedia; each model increases in levels of convergence and difficulty to achieve successfully.

When a brand is creating a multimedia narrative, they are combining graphics, pictures, video and sound to create content. This method of content creation is only minimally convergent because although multiple communication platforms are used, they are not communicating with one another, and thus, forming barriers between ideas (Gürel & Tığlı 43). It is important to note that a higher level of convergence does not always equate to 'good' or that a low level equates to 'bad' - these analyses are focused on this scenario only. The next model is cross media, which is more convergent than multimedia but less than transmedia. Cross media produces "an adaptation of the same story across different forms of media" (Derbaix et al. et al. 40). Cross media is unidirectional, meaning that a movie may adapt a book but the book has no interaction back with the movie, as they are two distinct narratives: that of the book, and that of the film (Schiller 99). Convergence occurs here, as the barrier between book and film (or any other element of media) begins to dissolve between the two mediums. However, there is still not much communication between the two elements, rather, it is a reinterpretation of already existing medium that remixes versus continues the story.

The most convergent, and thus the most focused on participatory culture, is the

transmedia model. This model will be discussed in great detail later in this paper, but

summarized briefly, transmedia storytelling "is presented on different channels with different

perspectives" (Diker & Taşdelen 293). While cross media is unidirectional, the elements of a

transmedia narrative are all linked to each other, telling and continuing different aspects of the

story simultaneously. This is the most convergent model of the three, as all barriers between
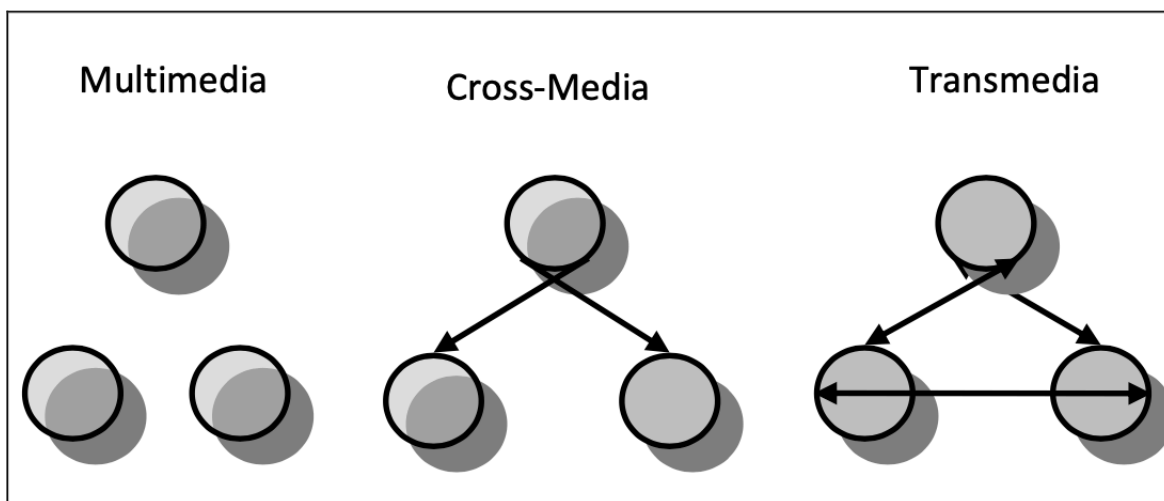
FIG 1. Different models of digital storytelling, increasing in convergence (Gürel & Tığlı)

different mediums are melted to tell a complete story. Because of this, the audience is expected

to be active, following trails of breadcrumbs from one media element to the other. This graphic,

created by Gürel & Tığlı serves as a visual aid for understanding the differences between these

different models.

With these differences in mind, the transmedia model seems to be the most viable (and

quite possibly the most difficult) way to obtain a consumer's extended and undivided attention.

Due to the nature of this paper and subsequent practical application, it is important to understand

the history of the model and break down all of its intricacies. Highly praised transmedia pioneer and author of *Convergence Culture* Henry Jenkins defines transmedia as follows:

> A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best - so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experiences as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry in the franchise as a whole (Jenkins 95-96).

This definition further proves the convergent properties of the transmedia model of telling stories, demonstrating that although each method of communication may have its own strengths or specific draws, the barriers between each element are small enough that a consumer can enjoy as much or as little of the narrative universe as they want to. To do this, however, requires "deliberate navigation strategies, requiring some level of human-computer interaction analysis," meaning that a transmedia creator must stay up to date with the changing trends and uses for different forms of digital and, in some cases, physical media (Alexander 137). The delivery of each new plot point, character, or even small detail must be specifically chosen to occur not only at a specific point in the narrative, but a medium as well. This is different than a traditional movie - in a film, the creators must determine when a character is introduced; while, in a transmedia narrative, the "where" and "how" must also be analyzed and established on top of the "when." Everything must have an intention, because too many dead ends or pointless subplots will distract and deter even the most interested audience members, and different media channels all portray different connotations for the content they are hosting. However, if all of this is done correctly, the audience will be hooked and continue follow, and share the story, encouraging growth and reach.

Although there are a number of elements of a transmedia narrative that are more complicated than a traditional film, there are also unique benefits that aid creators with limited reach and skeleton budgets. First, the multi-platform route of transmedia storytelling allows these creators to avoid practically unfilmable scenes - instead, these story elements can be presented through alternative mediums, such as through text. Second, these narratives can be released in short checkpoints versus through large edits and releases. This provides an extra layer of flexibility in creators, allowing them to make changes based on audience perception, provide narrative clues, and more. Finally, this model does not rely on big names or marketing to attract viewers. Rather, creators can use internet native tools, such as social networking & querying, mobility (such as making mobile friendly aspects), shareability & virality, and narrative transportation to their advantage. When a creator effectively enacts narrative transportation, "the transmedia experience is characterized by the stimulation of the individual's imagination, [and] his or her empathy (or even identification with the characters of the narrative)," inviting the consumer to connect elements of their life to the story, thinking about and sharing the contents of the story world more in their real life (Derbaix et al. et al. 47). This notion of narrative transportation is not limited to this method of storytelling, but its successful implementation is immensely more powerful though transmedia's easy shareable mediums. Due to the high audience retention rate of (successful) transmedia stories, many brands and content creators are turning to this model to attract a large following, even if it is difficult to set up.

Due to the complicated nature of weaving a number of individual stories on different platforms into one coherent narrative, almost everything presented under the transmedia context must be strategically planned and mapped out. Jeff Gomez, director of Starlight Runner (a transmedia marketing company) compares the successful creation of a transmedia story to the

performance of an orchestra: although the listener hears one coherent piece of music, the orchestra is "composed of many instruments having different sounds. The instruments serve to the whole by performing music individually and they contribute to formation of the dominant sound" (Gürel & Tığlı 38-39). Just as any orchestra must practice to create a unified sound, a transmedia creator must determine the dates and times for which each new segment of the story will be introduced. These segments may include new rules to the story world, characters, clues, hidden messages, subbplots, new channels or platforms, and so much more (Gürel & Tığlı 52). To keep track of all of these elements of the narrative, storytellers can create a plan, known as a road map, to keep track of the overall flow of the story complete with branches marking subplots or additional story needs (Gürel & Tığlı 52-53). In order to create this transmedia roadmap, a creator should have a very general idea for that the overall plot of the story is, who the main characters may be, and some ideas for what mediums this store will be presented on. This will create the skeleton of the roadmap, and now, the creator will be able to begin populating their road map with the story's universe.

It is important to keep in mind that each of these main categories discussed (story universe, channels and distribution, storytelling strategy, and character design) all occur concurrently, and additions in one category may change the structure of the other and vice versa. That being said, the creation of a well-planned universe for the narrative is necessary for a successful transmedia experience. This universe is the most important pitch of the story, as a successful universe can support a large cast of characters and stories that interact with each other, promising profitability and continuing viewership over time (Jenkins 114). Even if there is no intention for spin-offs in this universe, a single transmedia experience should tell multiple small stories that piece together into the whole of the narrative (Derbaix, et al. 41). Each rule in the

universe must serve to tell one part of the story, provide a challenge or strength for a character, or invite a consume to explore more of the narrative as a whole. If too many rules are added to the universe of the story, it becomes bloated and confusing, a tangled mess of nonsensical barriers to understanding. Thus, a creator must think about their story, how to challenge or grow their characters, and build the universe around them.

The successful creation of a story universe is essential to a transmedia narrative because of the disseminated nature of the model. The core of a transmedia story is told across multiple outlets, digital, analog or anywhere in between. By creating a universe with straightforward and concise rules, a consumer can easily pick up on one medium where they left off on another. This coherency between platforms is not a suggestion - it is another essential feature needed for the the construction of a narrative of this caliber. If the rules of the universe are not synchronized between different platforms, the high levels of convergence toted by the transmedia model disappear. An unsynchronized universe brings the user out of the story world and causes them to question the reasoning behind events of the story. However, the time and effort needed to create a well-thought-out narrative universe pays off very well, as the combination of this with the proper spread of story points across multiple channels results in a "sense of exploration in the user" (Van Leeuwerden 18). The entire narrative story is spread across different platforms in a very unique way. Gürel & Tığlı explains how each channel interacts with each other:

> First, narratives address to a story by acting independently. At the same time, they are in relation and interaction with each other through textual connections. Second, narratives are transferred through different channels, and with the occasion of the dominance of channels in question different senses are appealed. In this sense, benefitting from channels that have different features leads to experience different dimensions of the story within a wide framework of senses. Therefore, both elements like the story world, characters and events; and, divergence of channels, which are the story media, play an effective role regarding the formation of transmedia world (45)

Essentially, each element has its own micro narrative which interacts with the overall transmedia macro narrative. Each of these micro narratives can serve as touchpoints for new audiences, encouraging them to explore more of the shared universe of the story. In order to reach the maximum amount of audience members, it is important for the creator to utilize a wide variety of channels that can reach different sets of consumers.

The choice of channels is up to the storyteller, but there seems to be a few common trends in many of the readings, as well as real life examples. Regardless of any templates or advice, the actual narrative of the story should determine what works and what does not work in terms of media dissemination. Although it is believed that the more channels a story is spread across, the higher the convergence and reach, it is important for the transmedia storyteller to not overestimate the amount of work they are able to achieve in their production timeline. Furthermore, a creator should never force a medium to the story for any reason. Rather, these mediums should come naturally - "each channel does the best and unique thing that it does" (Gürel & Tığlı 42). Important questions for the creator to think about include: What social media platforms would the characters use? Why? How would these characters interact with real world media platforms, and how would they impact the story universe?

With all of this being said, there are two basic but essential, mediums that the story should be told on, ranging in flexibility. By utilizing one ultra flexible and one less flexible medium, the story creators can simultaneously publish content strictly planned out on their roadmap (typically with higher production value and more time to produce, leaving the content inflexible) on a medium like YouTube, with another, highly flexible medium, such as Twitter, that allows instantaneous hints, clues, explanations, and directions without much work other typing a few words. By pairing both of these, transmedia creators can direct (or deceive) their audiences

while holding a consistent level of production and character. The only real rule required when choosing and posting on different channels is that they "must not fall out of coordination with the rules and regulations set in the meta-narrative (core message) of the story world. Every media platform can give fresh, new viewpoints on the events in the story world," but these viewpoints must make logical sense (Van Leeuwerden 23). Now that the channels and universe have been introduced, it is possible to explore the different methods of narrative distribution.

The unique properties of the transmedia structure allow for a number of different ways to distribute the narrative throughout the universe and the channels. The main methods of distribution for the narrative are over space (which has already been explored through the use of multiple channels) and over time (Van Leeuwerden). A transmedia story can be told both linearly and non-linearly, with unique benefits to each. A linear method allows the creator to have more control over the experience of the audience members, and may attract more surface-level consumers (Van Leeuwerden 26). However, a nonlinear story allows for more consumer creativity, and the creator can adjust timelines however they wish at any point in time (Derbaix et al. 41, Van Leeuwerden 26). It is important to note that "the audience is often smart enough to discover the chronology in the narrative events, so if a user started in the middle of all of these narrative events, they will be inclined to discover the origins of the narrative events they started in," so concerns about storyline confusion lack backing (Van Leeuwerden 31). Regardless of the ordering of events, the storyteller also needs to think about the ordering of the release of information, purposefully creating missing points, both specially and temporally (Van Leeuwerden 27), This, again, is a complicated balance between mystery and straightforwardness, as too much commitment towards any one direction may discourage consumers from returning to the narrative. The most important notion behind these points is they must have some sort of

answer to them, whether it be specifically explained in the story or through a set of hints inviting the most apt viewers to make conclusions (Gürel & Tığlı 40). There is a built-in safety mechanism in this method of storytelling if the audience is led too far astray: the ultra flexible medium discussed earlier. For example, if the audience is struggling to find clues about a specific action, character, or event, the storytellers could (as the character in question) hint at where the clue might be by saying: "I have been doing research after (event happened) and I can't stop thinking about the (area related to the clue) in (the video with the clue)." By directing their audience in the right way, more and more of the story will be unlocked and unleash a waterfall of revelations. All of the various methodologies introduced are essential to crafting the universe and structure of the transmedia narrative, but no story is complete without a cast of characters.

Any successful story needs its own cast of characters that come out changed at the end of everything. Interestingly enough, most articles and readings about transmedia storytelling omitted creation and use of characters because, quite frankly, they are core to any story and have not changed much over time. However, there are some intricacies behind the introduction of characters and the construction of audience relationships to them specific to transmedia storytelling. Because a transmedia story is spread across the narrative universe, a character introduced on one channel does not need to be introduced on another (Jenkins 120). There are two reasons for this, depending on the type of consumer. First, if the consumer is a fan, they already know the characters and plot because they are following all elements of the story on the different platforms. A reintroduction of a character on different platforms may result in boredom of that class of audience members, causing them to lose interest and devote their time and energy to another topic. The other class of consumer, the newcomer or casual fan, may initially be confused by the new character suddenly interacting with the rest of the cast. This confusion will

result in some sort of quest for knowledge, encouraging them to find the other platforms on which the story is told and learn more. However, if the character is reintroduced on the current platform the fan is on, they are not incentivized to go hunting for answers on the other channels. Therefore, regardless of the level consumer, reintroducing character is not beneficial to the audience or the storyteller.

The other important feature of transmedia characters is that they must be consistent across all channels. Gürel & Tığlı explain, "Every character, in line with his effect on the whole of story, continues its interaction with other elements of story" (45). Thus, the cross platform interactions of each character must stay true to their core values, otherwise it will break the character and the universe. Everything - the story, the channels, the universe, the characters - affects each other, and they must all be designed concurrently or the complete convergence present in the narrative will disappear. The final entity that is core to a successful transmedia story is the fans, and their level of input on the world of the story.

One of the most unique properties of transmedia storytelling is the incision of fans in the storyline. At the most basic level, fans can interact with their favorite characters whenever and however they want. Furthermore, this fan-to-character interaction is "canon," meaning that it is officially a part of the greater story as a whole. Transmedia storytelling is primarily concerned with being as convergent as possible, and a fan being able to canonically interact with their favorite characters further dissolves the barrier between the real and the story world. Transmedia stories can take this notion as far as the creators want to. It can be as simple as the act of a fan tweeting at a character and the character responding, or as expansive as requiring fans to work together to unlock pieces of the story - a core feature of a subset of transmedia storytelling known as alternate reality gaming (Meifert-Menhard 160, Alexander 165). There is one golden

rule that creators must follow when interacting with fans, no matter the depth of the interaction: the creators must work behind the scenes as much as possible, and by doing so, the audience will have full focus on the world of the story, ingraining it into the real world as much as possible (Alexander 165). With all of these elements in mind, it is now possible to analyze some popular examples of transmedia storytelling in the past and the present.

One of the earliest (and possibly most effective) instances of transmedia storytelling is actually the story of Jesus. During this historical period, most of the population was illiterate - and yet, the story of Jesus, which originated in a book, still spread. Because of this reason, and the widespread adoption of Christianity at the time, it is evident that the story of Jesus is more than just what is displayed on the pages of the Bible. This model of transmedia storytelling was cultural, as Jesus was present in all different social levels, places, and representations. Jenkins explains, "each representation (a stained-glass window, a tapestry, a psalm, a sermon, a live performance) assumed that you already knew the character and his story from someplace else" (119). Thus, his story was told, repeated, and is still expanded upon to this day.

A more modern example of transmedia storytelling is the marketing campaign and extended story universe of 1999's *The Blair Witch Project*. It is widely agreed upon among transmedia theorists that this groundbreaking film marked the start of the modern transmedia movement. This film, made with an extremely modest budget of $60,000, has grossed close to $250,000,000 and continues to be discussed for its groundbreaking use of the found footage style of filmmaking ("The Blair Witch Project"). But, the reason for much of the film's success is often overlooked. Of course, there was realism in the style of the film, inviting viewers to question whether the events laid out were real or fake. However, to quote Jenkins, "To think of *The Blair Witch Project* as a film was to miss the bigger picture. *The Blair Witch Project* had created a fan

following on the Web more than a year before it hit any theaters" (101). The heart of this transmedia marketing strategy was the official website of the film, which painted a picture of the "historical" background of the Blair Witch, information on the "missing" students (the three lead actors of the film) and other materials such as b-roll and behind the scenes photos all trying to sell the realism of the film (Stewart). The mythos of the film spread to people's home television sets when a psuedodocumentary that investigated the Blair Witch aired on the Sci Fi channel (Jenkins 103), and even to Cannes when the marketing team spread missing persons fliers around the festival (Stewart). With all of this buzz, the official website for the film had over 20 million views before the film was even released to theaters (Stewart). When asked about the legendary campaign behind the film, the creators explained, "What we learned from *Blair Witch* is that if you give people enough stuff to explore, they will explore," and when people find exciting information, they will share it with their friends, and their friend's friends and so on (Jenkins 103). This film flawlessly ticked all of the boxes of a successful transmedia campaign - it created a universe that could easily be expanded and explored, made up of individual elements that were able to tell a story on their own without needing other pieces of the narrative to hold them up.

Now, in terms of this paper, *The Blair Witch Project* may still seen as an example of a "big budget" transmedia project. The only reason it is used over smaller projects, however, is because of the large amount of academic research behind the marketing strategies used to make the film. There are hundreds of other smaller transmedia stories available online, such as Poppy (YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Music), Daisy Brown (YouTube, Twitter), Marble Hornets (YouTube, Twitter), and Lil Miquela (Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Music) - just to name a few. Transmedia storytelling can be found on any platform, if internet users know where to look.

This paper explored today's media landscape, examined what it means to be living in the age of convergence, and discussed why the transmedia model is the best approach for 21st century storytellers who cannot afford the standard route of film production. This solution works for many independent creators, but, like everything else, it has flaws as well. First, there may be an issue of spreading a narrative too thin over too many platforms. This is definitely a possibility for this model of storytelling, and it all comes down to the narrative being used. Some narratives are much better fit for this model than others, and creators must keep this in mind when determining how they want to tell their story. Another potential flaw of the model is not being able to reach an audience, or only reaching an audience on a certain platform but not others. The latter half of this problem has a relatively straightforward solution - characters must canonically mention other platforms as much as possible, essentially shoving it down their audience members' throats. However, the solution becomes much less apparent when the project is not reaching any audience at all. This is a problem that plagues all creators, even big budget films. The only real answer to this issue is to continue pushing content, exploring marketing or virality options until one sticks. Finally, the last counterargument emphasizes that if this works for independent creators, it will work big media as well, and they will steal it. This notion is already true; there was a reason why a Marvel film was discussed at the beginning of this paper. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is arguably the largest and most successful instance of transmedia storytelling today, and it shows no signs of stopping. Big media commodifies anything that works, and that is simply a way of the industry. Transmedia storytelling is not limited to any brand, rather, it is simply a method of distribution that, more times than not, works for anyone. Rather than thinking of this aspect as a negative, smaller transmedia creators can use it as a proof of concept and learn from big media's successes and mistakes.

Throughout this process, I have explored the options I have for my own personal project. Based on this research, there are a couple of key factors essential to the creation of a successful web series. The first factor in this is convergence, and how it plays a role in participatory culture. It is essential, as a creator, to make the project I am working on as convergent as possible in order to both create the best experience for the audience as well as retain and draw new consumers. The importance of convergence points to a specific method of storytelling: the transmedia model. This model is another important factor in the creation of a successful web project. The features of a transmedia story have already been emphasized: universe, distribution, narrative, characters, and fan interaction - but it is also important to examine how the project will successfully fill these requirements for success. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of this project has become more theoretical than practical, but I am excited to see where my research and experience will take me. My project will will fill these requirements in these ways:

Universe: Create depth for characters, especially the main character. He should already have social media accounts being used before the main events of the story. Have news accounts, specific to the world of the story reporting issues and events close to him. Think about how information will be transferred and shared between different people and entities

Distribution: This story will primarily be told over YouTube and Twitter, as explored in this paper (one ultra flexible medium and one rigid, preplanned medium). Secondary characters will have Twitters, primary character will have YouTube vlogging channel and Twitter.

Narrative: The narrative will be distributed both spatially and temporally. Spatially, the overall story will be told over multiple channels, with each channel having its own

specific, channel-centric narrative that links in with other channels narratives as well. Temporally, however, will be unique to this narrative due to one of the central characters, the HOLO. The HOLO will have some sort of highlight recording feature where a first person stream of the actions it took will be uploaded to YouTube. It will turn out that the uploading of the HOLO streams will not be very reliable, so near the climax sections of the story, recordings that hearken back to past events will be uploaded, displaying reasoning for why and what happened in the past.

Characters: The main characters of this project will each have their own accounts on different platforms, so they can interact with each other at any time of the plot. Furthermore, because they each have their own platforms, the only reintroductions of the characters must be strategic and central to the story, versus providing more context for the viewers (the main context will just refer back to their own platforms).

Fan Interaction: Finally, fan interaction has been the hardest for me to wrap my head around in terms of preplanning. After researching ARGs (another more intensive for of transmedia storytelling including hidden clues and puzzles), I have decided that although I do not want to specifically create a full fledged ARG (due to time and cost, as well as overall load of work with already creating a transmedia webseries), I do want to incorporate some elements. The idea of fan interaction becoming canon is very fascinating to me, so I want to figure out ways for possible consumers of the project to work with the characters, creating greater convergence.

By strategically planning this project, I believe that I will be able to make something that encapsulates each of these values. Furthermore, my limited amount of time and budget will force me to come up with creative solutions to problems unique to the storyline I have created. To

view the final product of the application of this research, head to the "UNIVERSE" section of the

Hard Light landing page, or <u>click here</u>.

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