

# A New Hope: Negotiating the Integration of Transmedia Storytelling and Literacy Instruction

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**K**evin Ballestrini (fourth author), an educator at Norwich Free Academy in southeastern Connecticut, teaches Latin and Greek language, as well as mythology, ancient cultures, and literature. He describes his students and the content as fairly typical with respect to literacy and language instruction. The challenge is that his students do not always fully engage with the content in great depth or with great interest. As a result, he tries to connect classroom pedagogy with contemporary popular culture to improve learners' engagement, achievement, and passion for the subject matter.

Reflecting after class one day, Kevin prodded the Darth Vader bobblehead perched at the edge of his desk. The new Star Wars movie had recently opened, and he and his students had several conversations about the characters and plot over the last few weeks. While growing up, Kevin enjoyed the Star Wars

universe. Despite the fact that his students were too young to remember seeing the prequels at the theater, he knows they understand the saga as part of a widespread cultural phenomenon. They have all experienced some permutation of its iconic heroes and villains through a vast network of stories built across media streams through film, video games, graphic novels, soundtracks, and cartoons (e.g., *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, *Star Wars Rebels*). They also experience the narrative through a seemingly endless string of merchandise that extends from the toothpaste and cereal they enjoy in the morning to the sheets they use to tuck themselves in at night.

Smiling, Kevin considers how he might weave those cultural connections and the larger narrative into his classroom instruction. He knows how his students' eyes light up whenever he connects instruction to other aspects of storytelling using multiple media sources and popular culture. This often runs counter to initiatives driven by common state and national standards and departmentwide curricula, which tend to vacillate between didactic lecture and group work rather than anything revolutionary. He would prefer to enable collaboration and hands-on activities by connecting in- and out-of-school content. He is confronted by the challenge of blending student learning objectives and transmedia storytelling in a system that mainly values top-down, data-driven decision making over teacher creativity and pedagogical agency.



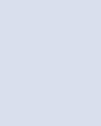
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## "The Phantom Menace": A Challenge of Wise Integration

Like Kevin, many teachers seek to combine technology, pedagogy, content knowledge, and learning theory (i.e., TPACK) in their courses (Koehler & Mishra, 2009), but the adoption of novel, technology-rich activities can seem so overwhelming that it fails even before it begins. Relatively few educators have

sufficient experience with digital texts and tools (e.g., games, animation, blogs, wikis) that can be used to independently explore their utilization as instructional tools. The most substantial challenge impeding the exploration and adoption of new digital tools and literacies is seldom a lack of individual teacher creativity or will. Rather, it is the complexity involved in introducing contemporary, technology-enabled instruction in traditional educational spaces where achievement outcomes are more deeply valued than both teacher creativity and the learning process itself.

We offer this column as a foundation for examining the affordances and possibilities for merging transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2010) with literacy instruction in light of the system-level challenges outlined above. Rather than defining a singular, optimal approach, we referenced pop culture and the mythology of the Star Wars narrative to connect a current element of global culture with the bigger educational picture. Additionally, although gaming is identified as one specific possibility for embedding transmedia storytelling into instruction (Wohlwend & Lewis, 2011), we conclude with guidance on integrating popular culture and transmedia narratives into instruction. It is our hope that this will unite a large, diverse audience of educators around a shared strategy born a long time ago “in a galaxy far, far away.”

### **“The Force Awakens”: Transmedia Storytelling**

In our opening case, Kevin found himself wondering how to weave elements of a particular narrative occurring across multiple media sources (i.e., Star Wars) into his instruction. This process, called transmedia storytelling, occurs when integral elements of a particular narrative are dispersed across multiple delivery channels using multiple media for the purpose of creating an integrated and coordinated storytelling experience (Jenkins, 2010; Kinder, 1991). Crucially, transmedia storytelling differs from crossmedia in that crossmedia tell the same story across multiple delivery channels rather than synthesizing different aspects of the same story across multiple delivery

*Transmedia storytelling “has the potential to break the fourth wall between reader and writer.”*

channels (Ohler, 2013). Channels can include, but are not limited to, websites, apps, television, movies, games, graphic novels, books, and social media tools. These media streams feature digital, print, or real-world content that is created, curated, and distributed by “official” sources, which dictate the narrative’s canon, or unofficial channels maintained by the fans.

The use and creation of transmedia stories has the potential to break the fourth wall between the reader and the writer by speaking to the reader directly, ignoring the traditional narrative barriers between the fictional world and the real world (Teske & Horstman, 2012). In this activity, educators have the opportunity to reconceptualize what literacy and learning could and should look like in and out of school (Alper & Herr-Stephenson, 2013; Fleming, 2013). It provides opportunities for students to create their own stories that expand the lore and mythology of the overarching narrative (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) and challenges them to resolve a variety of open, nonlinear problems (Phillips, 2012; Roccanti & Garland, 2015). These narratives also contain socio-cultural elements and therefore have the opportunity to connect to readers on different levels.

As a well-known transmedia narrative, Star Wars demonstrates how telling, or the act of sharing nuanced plots, themes, character development, morals, metaphors, and lessons (Young, Slota, Travis, & Choi, 2015), can promote rich teaching and learning through teacher and student collaboration (Beach, 2012; Slota & Young, 2014). Whereas a first-person narrative book can inform our understanding of Anakin Skywalker’s character development, the Jedi martial arts (e.g., lightsaber dueling) might be taught through a motion-controlled video game on a console, such as Nintendo’s Wii. Likewise, we might learn about space combat through a portrayal on an IMAX theater screen, the cataloguing of lesser heroes might be chronicled in graphic novels, and themed cookbooks might detail the culture and cuisine of distant planets. Each medium contributes a unique perspective on the Star Wars universe by supporting unique interactions with a unique portion of the narrative space. For more information and guidance about transmedia storytelling, visit O’Byrne’s blog post ([wiobyrne.com/transmedia-storytelling](http://wiobyrne.com/transmedia-storytelling)).

When transmedia stories are paired with new media, learners may build critical media literacy skills that emerge from direct interaction rather than passive consumption (Jenkins, 2006; Kellner & Share, 2007; Roccanti & Garland, 2015). For

educators, there are multiple ways to accomplish this, but in Kevin's case, the most straightforward option was to use role-playing games enacted in the live classroom in addition to course texts. Through game-based instruction, he routinely had students role-play as ancient Romans to have them experience the cultural and language challenges that real citizens would have faced two millennia ago (Slota, Ballestrini, & Pearsall, 2013). The pairing of game-based instruction and student learning objectives afforded collaborative opportunities to discover and share through a combination of real-world and Web-based tools. To explore these learning opportunities, visit the learning and gaming page of The Pericles Group ([www.practomime.com/index.php](http://www.practomime.com/index.php)). These activities provided Kevin with a continuous, embedded, formative assessment tool capable of providing in-the-moment feedback about student critical thinking, language use, and problem solving. He wanted to identify ways to connect transmedia storytelling with his earlier work in game-based learning to engage students in new ways of studying media and participating in media production within classrooms (Rish, 2014).

Although not all of his students immediately connect with transmedia storytelling and game-based playful learning, even the most resistant to traditional instruction have become avid adopters. Furthermore, even students who did not initially connect with the activities or narratives have the opportunity to engage in inquiry beyond anything that could have been achieved through didactic lecture (Maton, 2010; Slota et al., 2013). Transmedia storytelling includes some portions of the narrative that are inherently incomplete because the story is told across multiple modes and channels by different authors (Rish, 2015). Students and educators must work to document their learning through inquiry, discussion, and analysis in multiple channels and modes (e.g., graphic novels, short videos, choose-your-own-adventure-style minigames). An example of this would include students telling stories by drawing pictures, narrating plots, and enacting character movements through puppet shows. More sophisticated examples would include having students create stop-motion animation, video remixes, or video games to tell their version of the story. This documentation of the learning process as opposed to focusing on product can occur across the Star Wars universe as learners deconstruct themes of heroism and villainy, right and wrong, good and evil. In this work, educators and students are thinking

more broadly about how we can identify and nurture tomorrow's transmedia storytellers in lieu of assigning five-paragraph essays and other traditional "telling" formats.

Of course, game-based learning provides just one opportunity to guide pedagogical decisions. Furthermore, the Star Wars narrative is only one from popular culture that can be connected to instruction. Educators with a passion for a particular medium and subject can connect the two through an iterative design process (Angeli & Valanides, 2005; Cerbin & Kopp, 2006) guided by student learning objectives, much in the same way a lesson or course is designed for a traditional classroom environment. Regardless of the narrative or media selected by the teacher, guidance on lesson development and technology integration is provided by the TPACK model (Koehler & Mishra, 2009) and focused on universal design for learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002). For more information and guidance about using digital texts and tools to implement transmedia storytelling into instruction, visit O'Byrne's blog post ([wiobyrne.com/implementing-transmedia-storytelling](http://wiobyrne.com/implementing-transmedia-storytelling)).

## "The Empire Strikes Back": A Path to Success

Becoming a master of transmedia storytelling and integration is not necessarily easy, but experimentation with rich narratives and characters for play, making, and remixing is the first step that educators can take to help students develop deep literary understanding (O'Byrne, 2014a, 2014b; Wohlwend, 2015). Whether that involves an existing transmedia story or creating one from scratch (Roccanti & Garland, 2015), connecting course content with the target narrative to overcome system-level challenges can be broken down into the following steps:

1. *Recognize opportunities to embed content and channels from rich transmedia narratives into classroom instruction:* Use different parts of a story to connect the strengths of the narrative and extend the experience for the reader.
2. *Provide a simple, seamless point of connection for your readers:* Use one website or interface to make it easy for readers to consume and synthesize across texts and channels without having to move among multiple sites and spaces.
3. *Group learners to promote discussion as they synthesize and connect elements across*

**FIGURE 1** Six Things Every Story Needs



Note. From "6 Things Every Story Needs" by B.M. Mathers, 2016, retrieved from [bryannmathers.com/6-things-every-story-needs](http://bryannmathers.com/6-things-every-story-needs). Copyright 2016 by Bryan M. Mathers. Reprinted with permission.

*transmedia streams:* Allow students to discuss, connect, and reflect on how these narratives—even those that are not explicitly educational—connect and can breathe life into their own “telling.”

4. *Allow response, re-creation, and remixing of content from the transmedia stream:* Encourage students to identify how they can become authors of their own transmedia stories and extend narratives that are aligned with the course learning objectives.
5. *Focus on the narrative, not the technology:* Avoid being overwhelmed with digital tools by working in whichever channel or format you are most familiar with.

By focusing on student learning objectives that directly align with the task students are performing, they will be prepared to problem solve and critically analyze relevant course content. Finally, the last point allows educators to focus on aspects of good storytelling (see Figure 1) as opposed to concerns about technology access and aptitude.

## "Return of the Jedi": Bringing Out Your Inner Innovator

As you consider the concepts, definitions, and recommendations offered in this column, remember that transmedia storytelling is not limited to large film

studios with connections across multiple industries. Learners from pre-school up through higher education are capable of weaving together transmedia stories by drawing pictures, narrating plots, reproducing songs or sounds, and enacting characters through puppet shows. The reason teachers typically fail to think about learning this way is because educational institutions put a premium on the written word as an optimal vehicle for so-called “good” storytelling. Though navigating top-down curricular and achievement initiatives can be complex, such complexities can be reduced if teachers leverage their available resources—paper or digital—to tap students’ transmedia thinking at the intersection of technology, pedagogy, content knowledge, and learning theory. This, we believe, is the best way to ensure our instruction will improve in years to come and guarantee that the learning process can conclude with a playful “happily ever after.”

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