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Crossmedia Innovations

Texts, Markets, Institutions



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Transmedia space¹

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Introduction

The disciplines that have taken part in the explosion of research into transmedia range from linguistic and pedagogic to cultural, social and economic sciences, and to media and narrative studies. Accordingly, the conceptualizations of transmediality itself vary significantly. Transmedia in the broadest sense constitutes the communication of information across² more than one medium or sign system. The framework in which it has been studied most prominently is transmedia storytelling: communicating a story using the medium-specific devices and narrative potential of several media. Whether or not the sequence of reading or consuming the story should be predetermined for the reader; whether the project should be 'natively' transmedial or could be developed into such after initial success in a single medium; whether the reformation should be done by the initial or another (group of) author(s); whether or not adaptations and fan art qualify; whether it all started with *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, the *Bible* or the *Bhagavad Gita*, and innumerable other questions about the nature of transmedia are answered differently by different perspectives.

One of the reasons why studying transmedia is exciting albeit complicated is its apparent novelty, not only in the academic discourse but transmedia storytelling is itself emerging as a consistent communicative strategy. Practitioners struggle with theoreticians in defining the limits and scope of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, certain concurrent aspects in the discourse as a whole can be located, and one of them is explaining transmedial phenomena in spatial terms. In other words, cognitive spatiality is an implicit character of most of the descriptions of transmedia storytelling proposed so far.

We frequently meet terms and phrases such as 'universe' and 'world' (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; Long 2007; Scolari 2009; Evans 2011), 'environ-

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² Hence the parallel term 'crossmedia' (See for example Dena 2009, Jenkins 2011).

ment' (Dena 2009; Herman 2011), 'networked narrative environments' (Zapp 2004), 'platforms' (Jenkins 2003, 2006)³, 'sites' (as 'cross-sited narratives' in Ruppel 2009), 'outlets' (Evans 2008), '360 degree content' (Thompson 2006), 'traversing the transmedia landscape' (Lemke 2009; Perryman 2008), 'migratory cues' and 'story bridges' (Ruppel 2009), 'maps' (Long 2007) and several others suggesting both width, depth and the immersive nature of transmediality. Inseparable from the discourse are also prefixes – trans-, (a)cross- and inter-⁴ – that likewise suggest cognitively spatial relations. Consequently, stories which are 'so large that [they] cannot be contained within a single medium' (Jenkins 2006: 95) are either 'distributed' by author(s) or 'travel' by themselves, while audiences 'follow' them, and any given piece of narrative or storyline serves as a 'window'/'door'/'port al'/'gate'/'access point' for entering the whole. Jeff Gomez, one of the leading figures among the practitioners of transmedia storytelling, has also proposed 8 defining characteristics of transmedia product⁵, all of which implicitly involve aspects of spatiality. The above is first and foremost a heterogeneous field of metaphors which, at times, refer to the overarching story told and, at others, to the media of telling it⁶.

Recognizing the complexity of the notion of space, we still argue for it to offer a conceptual basis for researching both textual and medial aspects of transmediality. In addition, describing transmedia storytelling in spatial terms could facilitate the teaching of its underlying mechanisms. In what follows, we are seeking to contribute to the discussion in the field by first conceptualizing the textual aspects of transmedia narratives, which pertain to the narratological category of storyworlds as well as to spatial understanding of text, which is inherent in the field of the semiotics of culture. This is followed by the spatial aspects of media, which include influences of medium on mediation and meaning along with transfers between different forms of mediation. Space of medium as well as intermedia and transmedia space are operative notions for a deeper understanding of tex-

3 See also Bordwell (2009) *Now leaving from platform I*: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2009/08/19/now-leaving-from-platform-1/>.

4 "Transmedia storytelling can also be seen as what literary critic Julia Kristeva calls intertextuality writ large" (Long 2007: 10).

5 The widely discussed list of these characters can be found on the blog of the Producers Guild of America's New Media Council: http://pganmc.blogspot.com/2007_10_02_archive.html (Retrieved March 27, 2012).

6 The usage of spatial metaphors as cognitive tools is of course by no means exclusive to the domain of transmedia. For example, 'memory' and 'translation' both of which are very relevant for the current subject, are also concepts that have often been explained in spatial terms.

tual processes in cultural space. The latter are reflected upon in the third part of the chapter, in which steps towards a systematic analysis are also proposed.

The empirical example discussed stems mostly from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*⁷ and its adaptations to cinema and to the interactive online reading environment Pottermore, which has been regarded as a pathway for a new generation to enter the extensive fandom of the wizard boy.

Space of text

Speaking about the space of text, we should perhaps first refer to the notion that one of the constitutive properties of texts is creating a world. This pertains to different types of texts⁸, and we also have Goodman's influential undertaking of describing worldmaking aspects of symbol usage in general. Yet, the process of creating a world is probably best observable in artistic texts, as: "[b]eing spatially limited, a work of art is a model of an infinite universe" (Lotman 1977 [1970]: 210). The world in or of artistic texts has been theorized by manifold authors under different terms (e.g. Pavel 1986; Ryan 1991; Doležel 1998; Werth 1999), most relevant of which are hereby 'storyworld' (Herman 2002, 2009) and 'artistic world' (Lotman 1977 [1970]). Needless to say, the two approaches bear differences as well as overlappings but both regard worldmaking as a fundamental condition of texts. That condition seems especially relevant in the context of transmedia storytelling, as it is first and foremost the world that provides coherence between subtexts, and facilitates recognition of the relations between the parts and the whole. That is why Geoffrey Long, who authors one of the earlier theses written on the subject, claims that crafting a transmedia narrative is not so much about crafting the story (that could be adapted to different media) as about crafting the world in which the story exists (Long 2007: 60). Storyworld thereby becomes a topological invariant of all the subtexts of the transmedia whole.

7 Very briefly, the story is about an orphan boy who lives with the conservative family of his aunt who seem to constitute all the negative characteristics of the so called Muggles (people without wizarding powers). Until one day, when Harry is old enough, the wizards contact him and he heads for the wizarding school called Hogwarts. The book retells his adventures at the school.

8 See for example Lotman's explication of the world of a telephone directory (1977 [1970]: 237).

Juri Lotman, the founder of Tartu-Moscow semiotic school⁹, developed a holistic understanding of culture which is based on the complementarity between two types of primary cultural languages – human language and the structural model of space (Lotman 1992). Meanwhile, in his framework of the semiotics of text (1977 [1970]), the world of narrative texts is established by artistic space, plot, and character(s) that are mutually inducing, frame, and artistic point of view. The spaces represented in artistic texts are not exhausted in a mimetic relationship with the space of the extratextual world, but bear a semiotic, meaning-generating function. In stories, the value systems tend to acquire spatial expressions as places, boundaries between places and articulation of space in general, also organizing the nonspatial characteristics of the artistic world (Ibid.: 220). For example, the street where Harry Potter's stepfamily lives is a quiet linear drive fringed with street lamps and well-kept front gardens, a decent and arguably dull place. In contrast, the first acquaintance with the world of wizards takes place in a 'small and dirty' pub The Leaky Cauldron which leads to Diagon Alley, a 'cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight' and which fascinated Harry to the point where he wished he'd had 'eight more eyes' to grasp everything around him. These two streets constitute a binary opposition which is adapted to the movie and to Pottermore in the form of visually monotonous repetitions versus curves 'behind' which the audience cannot see. These verbal and visual descriptions of the two places correspond well to the attitude towards the Muggles versus the wizards in general. This understanding of the modelling qualities of the representations of space echoes the Kantian claim that Goodman makes in the introductory pages of his book: "[...] conception without perception is merely *empty*, perception without conception is *blind* (totally *inoperative*)" (1978:6) (Italics original —M.S., PT.).

Another fundamental principle of worldmaking understood similarly by Lotman (2005 [1984]) and Goodman (1978: 6) is that any creation is recreation, all worlds must be preceded by previous ones. This is also reflected in the six possible strategies for worldmaking proposed by Goodman (Ibid.: 7–17): composition and decomposition; weighting; ordering; deletion and supplementation; deformation. In the world of Harry Potter we can recognize elements of fantasy literature, Bildungsroman, boarding school, detective and the ugly duckling type stories, moral fables and others. All these pre-existent genre worlds are incorporated herein as a recomposed, rehierarchized and reformed amalgamation.

9 For an overview of the history of the school, please see Chernov 1988 and Grzybek 1998.

Understanding transmedia projects in terms of worldmaking instead of storytelling is justified by the scope of its applicability to both artistic and nonartistic as well as to narrative and nonnarrative texts. This allows firmer incorporation of the subtexts of games as the game theorists often neglect the narrative theoretic approaches, claiming that the latter do not suffice in understanding the complex nature of ludic events (see for example Aarseth 2006; Thon 2009). Gameplaying might not be storytelling but it is definitely worldmaking. A game-conscious approach to transmedia worlds is presented by Klastrup and Tosca (2004) who outline the categories of mythos, *topos* and *ethos* that should ensure the coherence between the medium-specific subtexts of the transmedia world. *Ethos*, the codex of behaviour, takes on an interesting shade in Pottermore. The four houses of Hogwarts School are described rather schematically in the first book and the screen version: Gryffindor being the house of the main heroes, Harry and friends, Slytherin inhabited by Harry's insidious antipathies, and the other two very seldom mentioned altogether. In Pottermore, however, all the users get to be sorted into one of the four houses and playful competition between them is one of the central motifs of the environment. This brought along the need to complement the three houses which compete against Harry Potter's house (which always wins the house cup when Harry is at school in the books) with additional positive characteristics, which at the same time would not contradict those provided in the book and the film. The ultimate goal being a working competition between the houses without the back being turned on the values of camaraderie and readiness to save the world from evil – so central to the ethos of the previous versions of the story.

Herman's definition of storyworlds as mental models for understanding the discourse (2002: 5) could – despite the term – be extended to media that is not strictly narrative but is included in a transmedia storytelling system via meta- and intertextual links. It is the cognitive structure of mental maps that constitutes a necessary link in the dialogue between a text and a cognate mind. Such mental maps are dynamic in nature, being frequently updated along the process of decoding a text or a system of texts. Therefore, their function is not merely mapping the relations between all the represented existents, or living and non-living objects included in the discourse, but once again, meaning-generation. What matters is equally what is represented and the understanding of what might (alternatively) be there as well, and what might yet occur as a result of what is actually represented (Herman 2002: 14). Discerning between what is impossible and what is possible albeit actually non-represented in the given world is the

basis for understanding the world, acquired in the communicative process between the reader and the text.

Another central term for analyzing artistic worlds, is 'point of view', the notion of perspectival mediation as opposed to the supposed aperspectivism of extratextual reality. Characters, narrator, author, artistic world as a whole, and even genre could be regarded as bearing distinctive points of view. The term encompasses both a physical position from where events are perceived and the subjective meaning-generation by the bearer of the point of view, ending up with a selective and hierarchized account of events. An amount of literature is dedicated to discerning between the terms of 'point of view', the more recent 'focalization', and 'gaze' that entered the narratological discourse through feminist film criticism (see Herman et al., 2005). What matters here is the idea of multilayered perspectives of any artistic text and the potential that transmedia texts hold for explicating the diversity as each subtext could mediate a different dominating perspective.

So far, it has gone without saying that any text is already by definition included in the space of a network of texts (Barthes 2001 [1967]: 146; Foucault 2002 [1969]: 25–26). Still, it would be operative to turn to the notions of inter- and transtextual space. Transtextuality is a Genettean term designating 'all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts' (1997 [1982]: 1). The notion includes the subcategories that the author has termed inter-, para-, meta-, archi- and hyper- (or hypo-) textuality. Genette's *Palimpsests* (1997 [1982]) concentrates on hypertextuality, which in his framework includes various instances of amplification, reduction (condensation) and substitution – operations that are particularly relevant for analyzing the poetics of transmedia worlds. All these forms of textual practices call for relational reading. Simultaneous awareness of two texts and the relationship between them renders the reading experience as a communicative event much richer. This means that both texts are meaningfully transformed in the process – not only is the understanding of the later text facilitated by the knowledge about the previous one, but also the rereading of the previous text will be affected by the awareness of the later one. In this case the question might be raised as to whether the categories of before and after are relevant at all, as the two texts rather form a nonlinear mental whole. This is made explicit with the case of Pottermore where the reader is given a chance of rereading the original text with multimodal transformations and additions that Rowling has 'been hoarding for years'¹⁰. Also, the readers can upload their own visualizations of the literary text

¹⁰ See the author's video announcement on the opening page of Pottermore.

into the environment, and one can recognize how the cinematic representations are influencing the subjective visualizations of the verbal text¹¹.

An important consequence of the transtextual nature of texts pertains to the aspect which Lotman termed the 'frame' or the 'boundary' of text, the element that ensures the integrity of text's composition, its cause and goal (Lotman 1977 [1970]: 214). In the case of transmedia text, it becomes less clear where the text begins and ends. The subtexts of transmedia wholes might function as autonomous wholes themselves, possessing all the characteristics of a whole text yet belonging to a higher level whole via specific relations. Not only does our experience of Pottermore begin already with marketing-oriented pretexts, such as the video introduction by Rowling, but also the experience itself depends on constant dialogue with the memory of the books and the movies. Meanwhile, the dialogue is facilitated also by a certain isomorphism between a part and the whole as it is possible to discern an invariant or a core that is repeated in all of the subtexts.

In the Tartu-Moscow school's *Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures* it is stressed that one and the same message can function as a text, as a part of a text or as a set of texts (Ivanov et al., 1998 [1973]). Thus, Pottermore is a text that can be divided into subtexts (e.g., episode of the Diagon Alley as a holistic unit, an autonomous whole) and at the same time it is a part of the set of all Harry Potter texts. Meanwhile, in the memory of the reader who is familiar with the novels, the movies, Pottermore and other subtexts, it is practically impossible to distinguish which aspects of the mental whole originate in which particular subtext. In the reader's memory the discrete (verbal-linear) and the continuous (iconic-spatial) languages are complementary and intermingle as there are no pure examples of each of them and this becomes especially clear in the narrative domain. Reading a verbal text creates mental visual images and looking at a visual image, a verbal description is processed in the mind.

We can thus speak of reader's communication with the text and simultaneous metacommunication of the text with other texts. When the reader reaches Diagon Alley, the shopping street of the wizard world, in the Pottermore, s/he not only communicates with what is depicted on the screen, but there is also the metacommunicative process of knowing where and what is going to happen according to the story (e.g., most importantly, s/he has to find the shop for magic wands, where wands choose their owners and

¹¹ This seems to be particularly so with the appearance of the characters and somewhat less with the locations.

not vice versa.). All in all, the strict bounding of a text in culture becomes impossible due to the constant dynamics of the point of view of the relations between part and whole and the complementarity of the discrete and continuous languages. Transmedia texts make these principles of textual dynamics particularly explicit in culture.

Space of media

We move on to extratextual space which implies the relations between a text and its transformations into other media. The central question here is the influence of media on mediation and meaning. From a Goodmanian viewpoint we could infer that the role of media is paramount as '[we] are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or worlds' (1978: 3). Although this statement is not confined to media, it unifies the meaning and its medium into an inseparable whole. Lotman, on the other hand, has approached the question of transferring meaning from one sign system to another, or more specifically, the switches between discrete (e.g. novel) and continuous (e.g. picture) languages. While defining the relationship between such languages as nontranslatability, he regards the transfers as possible, but not without alterations in meaning (i.e. Lotman 2001 [1990]: 36–38). The outcome of such translation process is nonexact but consequently also nontrivial. This means that different versions of one text (or text part) exist and that such variations of a text in culture constitute the path of meaningful growth for the textual whole. The questions of the modelling influence of media are perhaps most conveniently addressed in the comparative perspective, i.e. in the context of adaptation or, in Jakobson's (1966 [1959]: 233) terms, 'intersemiotic translation'.

This translation process, 'interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems' (Ibid.), is the building principle of all transmedia texts, no matter whether they are transmedial at birth, extended to be transmedial after initial success or regarded as transmedial *post factum* in the cultural memory. When one storyworld is mediated in different sign systems, every given system models it within its modal affordances (Kress 2010: 27), and thus unavoidably accents certain aspects of the world while suppressing others. The alterations of the storyworld are first recognizable on the level of form. It appears that there are no semantic equivalences even between the signifiers of different human languages, let alone between those of discrete and continuous languages. In the latter case '[t]

he equivalent to the discrete and precisely demarcated semantic unit of one text is, in the other, a kind of semantic blur with indistinct boundaries and gradual shadings into other meanings' (Lotman 2001 [1990]: 37). Where the book describes 'a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight' we do not get any information about the colour, the size and the shape of the cobblestones, while the visual description cannot conceal these qualities, which also start contributing to the atmosphere and could in some instances ultimately alter the meaning of the text.

In addition to establishing a dynamic equivalence of form between given texts, a wider cultural perspective has to be taken into account. Any translation entails adaptation to both a given text, and also to a given system. This means that the presuppositions about text types, genres, possible subject matters as well as the hierarchical relations between different media, have to be regarded. For example, adding an online gaming feature to a TV series project is usually done with the aim of drawing the attention of audiences that otherwise would not watch the series, but if this is done without sufficient knowledge of the cultural expectations, it probably has a counter effect. Translating the written world of Harry Potter into Pottermore is especially interesting as the poetic system of interactive reading environments of this kind are not yet a developed subsystem. Pottermore encompasses elements of illustrated books, (computer) gameplaying, navigable virtual environments, online fan art communities and others (see Figure 1.1). All of these subsystems bear a memory of their own while entering into new types of meaning-generating networks. Although one can read the verbal text from the book in the virtual environment, the literary text is thereby surrounded and influenced by visual images, sounds¹², the possibility of switching between different represented spaces and pages with additional encyclopaedic information about the storyworld. All of these significantly transform the linear logic of the book.

Collecting together all the typological variations of a given text, it is possible to designate the invariant gist of all of them and the medium-specific variations of each (see Herman 2004, 2011). Such a mental whole is located in the memory of the reader and this is important because it is precisely the memory of the reader where the coherent transmedia text is formed (or is not formed in case of obstacles or errors). Such a point of view demonstrates that strict discrimination between intentionally built transmedia worlds and transmedial systems of texts formed in the memory of

¹² The sounds were not part of the beta version of the site but were added to the open version in response to the request of the beta users.

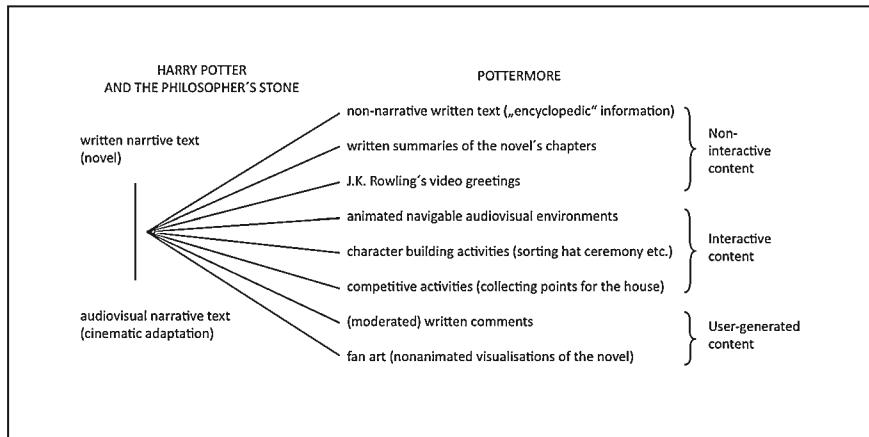


Figure 1.1. *Pottermore* subsystems

the reader (be it a single person or a culture as a whole), is not as essential as has often been stressed, because the underlying mechanism of them is the same. This is also a basis for including adaptations of a text in the realm of transmedia. The invariants and variations can be located both on the object level (i.e. the representations of the character of Harry) as well as on the metalevel. For example, Wolf has indicated metalepsis (2005), framing (2006), description (2007) and other narrative categories as transmedial. The novel, the cinematic adaptation and Pottermore, all mediate descriptions of the wizard world but do so with their medium-specific means that could be compared. Thus, systematic enquiries into transmedia texts should reveal new knowledge to us about the given narrative and the ways that the given media affect its meanings, but also about narrativity and medium-specificity more generally.

Some central questions about new types of media are addressed by Bolter and Grusin (2000), who define medium as 'that which remediates' (Ibid.: 19). Thus, it is claimed that new media (in fact all media, but most prevalently digital media) is not essentially new and its functioning principle is not mediation in some fundamentally new way but re-mediation¹³. This pertains to form as much as to content and to the ways the reader communicates with the text. Sometimes new media remediate old in inexplicit ways and at other times, such as in the case of Pottermore, explicitly. This

¹³ Compare with Goodman's and Lotman's view on textual creation as recreation referred to above.