

The Structure of Transmedia Storytelling: A Case Study of 19 Reinos

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ABSTRACT

With technology and platforms for storytelling becoming more diverse, the potential for novel methods of storytelling has been expanded. The phenomenon known as transmedia storytelling involves telling a story across multiple media and has gained popularity both in terms of audience interest and research, especially given the wealth of methods for storytelling. The problem is that authors of transmedia potentially have little background knowledge about how to structure such stories, and how to best portray certain parts of the story to the audience using transmedia. This paper will analyse a transmedia story using a visual aid. This will help better understand the structure of the story, the specificity of media being used and how the platforms used, including the connections between them, reflect both narrative progression and also migratory cues which direct the audience. This can then be used as a basis for other transmedia story analyses. The visual representation was compared to the author's intentions of the story, with a clear connection between an intended 3-act structure and the final product. This raises further questions relating to narrative/platform progression duality and how connections between platforms can be used to facilitate this progression.

1. INTRODUCTION

Transmedia practice involves telling a story over multiple distinct media which employ different media techniques [5]. As technology advances, more platforms can be used for telling stories that are not only more pervasive (especially with Web technologies), but are potentially more satisfying to the audience. Over the past few years, content creators have been experimenting with emerging platforms and methods of storytelling, creating new types of entertainment which do not neatly fit into conventional definitions used in other fields.

There is a potential problem faced by authors of transmedia projects however, which involves limited understanding of the poetics, or media specificity, of both the parts of a transmedia story and the story as a whole. The principle of media specificity involves understanding the tools or affordances which that media allows, so that the media can be used effectively [2]. This also involves looking at the connections between the media and how narrative flows from one form to another in terms of story progression.

Up to this point, there have been very few visual analyses of transmedia stories. The advantage of mapping out these complex structures and connections is that it allows the identification of story structure and story progression, which can help authors identify standards, effective transmedia storytelling methods and how to apply conventional narrative structures to transmedia.

This short paper will analyse the transmedia story 19 Reinos, which ran in Spain and was based on the popular TV series Game of Thrones. It will do this by visually identifying the overall structure of the story, including what platforms were used and how narrative flow and migratory cues link them together.

2. BACKGROUND

The term transmedia as defined by the media theorist Henry Jenkins is the process of representing a fiction systematically across multiple delivery channels [5][6]. This same phenomenon often has different names and definitions depending on which field is defining it. In games study, they can be called Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), ubiquitous games [13] or any game that has one or more salient features that expands the game either spatially, temporally or socially [7]. In narratology, they are narratives which expand immersion by playing out in multiple public and private venues [14].

In recent years, transmedia storytelling practices have emerged more commonly and have been used to navigate human behavior to solve social problems [11], create more immersive museums [12], promote products and to promote locations [4]. The use of differing technologies and platforms has allowed content creators to unshackle themselves from a single platform, medium or method of storytelling, allowing stories which can satisfy a larger group of people by fueling their curiosity and fitting their lifestyle [9].

However, the full benefit of implementing transmedia practice could be argued to be not fully realised. This is partly due to authors perhaps not having a grasp of what media to use for specific parts of their narrative or experience, and also how these parts come together in the transfer of narrative between them, to become what Murray describes as one big platform [8].

Although current research develops some understanding of maintaining narrative consistency within a transmedia fiction

[1] and understanding of transmedia practice [3], there is arguably little knowledge on how different transmedia story structures change the narrative of a story or experience and vice versa. Ruppel has taken a formal approach to structuring transmedia stories using visualisations which allow for a deeper understanding of the structure of a transmedia story [10]. However, these types of study are limited and it is worth expanding this idea of visual representation, especially in a landscape where different platforms emerge from technology and the Web on a regular basis. Attempting to analyse and understand transmedia stories without a clear visual aid is not practical and in some cases almost impossible.

3. CASE STUDY

The example which was chosen as a case study was the transmedia story 19 Reinos [15] (19 Realms in English), which was based on the popular HBO series Game of Thrones (GoT), which in turn is based on a book called A Song of Ice and Fire by George RR Martin. The parts of the story which were told using technology were implemented using a transmedia authoring tool called Conducttr, which allows the monitoring of social media accounts and the sharing of variables between them to facilitate a flow of story. Data for the case study was acquired from various sources by the authors of 19 Reinos, including Conducttr case studies [15], a post mortem presentation [15] and a reflection by one of the authors [9].

There were two main authorial intentions behind the project. The first was to create excitement for the new season of GoT, and the second was to create a separate self-contained story which in part was formed by the audience themselves. This story was intended to follow a 3-act structure with a set-up, confrontation and resolution being embedded into the whole experience. In a post-mortem reflection, the authors also considered that for the weeks it was running, 19 Reinos was intended to be considered the primary focus of the Game of Thrones universe, with the TV series acting as ‘cut scenes’ between the action occurring in 19 Reinos [15].

The transmedia story invited participants to imagine that Spain was part of the fictional land of Westeros (a continent in GoT), and that it had been split up into 19 realms. A live event, which communicated this concept to 300 fans who were invited by the authors, included a performance of a fictitious character, Edwyck. This performance primed the audience for the rest of the story. The audience were then given parchment which lead them from the performance to the digital world, where the rest of the story would unfold. A website was set up as a main hub, which would allow these participants and anyone else interested to create their own fictitious GoT character with full descriptions and backstory, living in the world of 19 Reinos. Participants could also buy weapons and armor for their character, in preparation for later. At the time when the first episode of the new season of GoT aired, a Web series featuring Edwyck was released, which ran until the halfway point of the new season. The Web series included a story about Edwyck

living in the 19 Reinos world, with him giving the audience advice about how to live in such a land. This help, although not mandatory to know, would later inform participants when every Monday night during the second half of the new season, they would fight each other on Twitter in MMORPG style combat using certain keywords and commands (such as kill, seduce, betray etc.). During the rest of the week, participants could create communities on Facebook with fellow realm members, and plan their strategy for the following Monday, whilst also expanding their character's backstory and creating quests for each other. After the TV series finale, the winner of the Twitter battle became ‘King’ at the second live event, where many people attended to watch the coronation of the King of 19 Reinos. This then concluded the story.

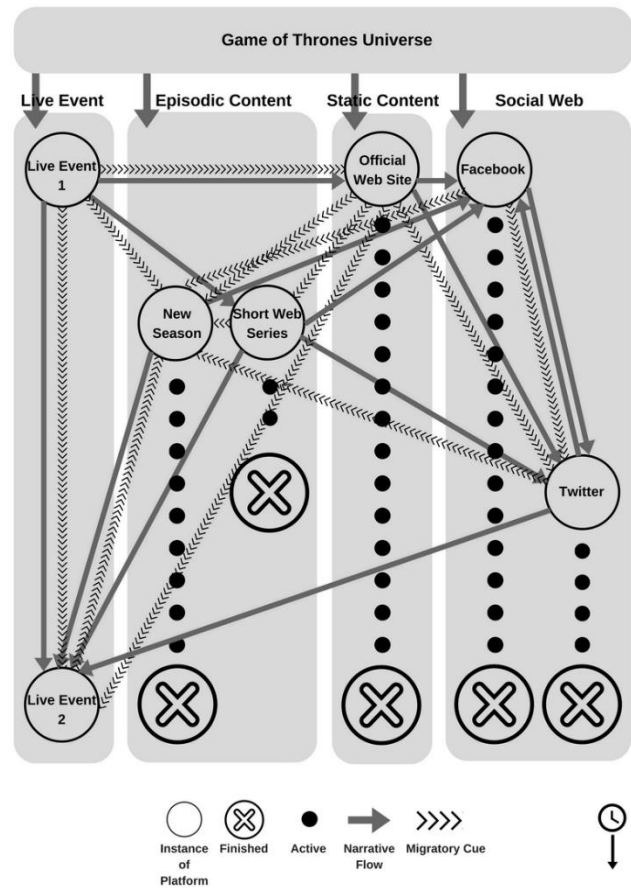


Figure 1: A visual representation of 19 Reinos

Figure 1 shows the structure of 19 Reinos, the different platforms and media employed and the intended flow of both narrative and audience migrations.

When creating visual representations of transmedia stories, it must be noted that subjectivity can become a factor when grouping different platforms together. For example, there are two separate columns for static content and social Web, whereas other analysts may include these as one. The figure is concerned

with authorial intentions rather than audience experience patterns.

The columns represent the platforms or way in which the story is told. The way in which you experience story told in a live performance is different to the way in which you experience a story told on your television. One big difference being that live performances cannot be paused or rewound, whereas typically TV can. How you use a website (typically on your own, at a time of convenience and with no interaction with others), is different to the way you interact with social media. Although the latter can be on a website, the dynamics change due to the high level of social interaction (you have to make an effort to connect with people), and timing conditions (as with the Twitter wars in 19 Reinos). In some parts of the story, these types of distinctions made can become blurred and it is important to keep in mind that as an audience member, you may for example watch a Web series on your television, rather than the perhaps intended viewing on a website whilst sat at your computer.

Inside these columns are types of media or instances of the platform. They hold a piece of the narrative in a particular form. Considering Facebook and Twitter, although they are both considered social media platforms, and involve narrative being received from communication with others, the information is represented differently and each have their own requirements, functionalities and user interfaces for social networking. Twitter uses 140 character tweets, whereas Facebook allows large chunks of text, with comments and more detailed discussions being commonplace.

The black dots represent that medium being active, with time going from top to bottom. These black dots then connect to the finished nodes which illustrate that no more content is being generated by that medium.

The solid arrows represent the flow of narrative. This includes both author created and user-created narrative. For example, the narrative on Twitter includes battles between different houses, the alliances and the particulars of the battles (how someone died). The reasoning behind the battle (the backstory), was generated from communities and user generated quests made on Facebook, which may have been based on the Web series. The official website, where weapons could be browsed and bought added to the fictitious characters' (audience characters') story and facilitated the battle, giving the Twitter players a basis for more user generated content. Another example is the link between Live Event 1 and the Web series, which featured the same character in both, with the story of Edwyck's life progressing on.

The dashed arrows show migratory cues. Migratory cues, a term adopted from [10], are points in the narrative where a reference is made to another medium, in an attempt to migrate the interests and focus of the audience member to that part of the story. In 19 Reinos, they were both explicitly inserted by the

author (Live Event 1 links the audience to the Web series and the Web series to the TV show), and created by the audience (user generated Facebook quests would point people to Twitter to perform certain actions). Users would also naturally talk about the new season on social media and make reference to the show, which would then act as a migratory cue to others participating or viewing the posts. Arguably the same can be said about the Web series, however the popularity disparity between the Web series and the TV show is apparent, and less people would be inclined to make a reference to the Web series so explicitly to warrant it being called a migratory cue [15].

4. ANALYSIS

Looking at this structure, it is clear that the main intention behind the story was to create as much excitement and publicity for the new season as possible, with the new season receiving the maximum amount of migratory cues. However, with the second authorial intention in mind, it seems as though the structure reflects the intended experience. The flow of narrative shows that a lot of narrative was created and expanded by the audience, which was then partly used as a basis for the ending. This is further backed up with a 3-act structure employed, with the first live event being the set-up, the battles being the confrontation, and the second live event being the resolution. This model also allows for the point of the view that the TV show was simply cut-scenes to the 3-act 19 Reinos story. If the intention of 19 Reinos was simply to get more viewers for the show, then the effort of conducting the second live event as the resolution would not have been needed.

In terms of media specificity, the choices behind why these platforms were used is clear in some cases but unclear in others. Firstly, the first live event could have just been the web series of Edwyck, which would not have limited the audience to 300 in the beginning. For those who were not initially invited, the set-up phase of the story was missed, and could have impacted the way they responded to the rest of the story. That being said, the authors did recognise that Edwyck, his character and backstory, could be transferred over to video quite easily. This makes for a better choice than a blog for example, which for a character in a medieval time setting would make little sense. This aspect of the story has to be distinguished from the audience participation and the way in which they interact with 19 Reinos with their fictitious characters. For one, the audience had no choice but to use technology to 'control' their characters, but Edwyck did not need to because he was his character. It seems as though the intent was that the social platform be used as a layer on top of the imagined world, where Facebook would be imagined as a town square, the static website as a fort and Twitter as the battlefield [15].

The structure of this story raises some interesting questions about transmedia practice and authorial intentions compared with actual outcome. More specifically, the most interesting research questions that are raised include:

1) *How are transitions from one medium to another used to represent narrative transitions?* Act 1 in 19 Reinos was represented as the first live event, the website and the Facebook community discussions which then transitioned into act 2 which took the form of episodic content and Twitter battles, with the resolution taking the form of the final live event. Investigations into the different methods of this medium/narrative transition duality will provide a better understanding of which platform combinations are good for a particular part of the story.

2) *What is the nature of migratory cues and how is the story progression influenced by them?* Migratory cues were used heavily in 19 Reinos to direct the audience to the TV show. How would these cues have to be set up in a story not revolving around a source universe or medium? How can the author set up these migratory cues to allow for their intended telling of the story?

3) *How do you apply different story structures to transmedia stories?* In 19 Reinos, the 3-act structure was chosen as a basis for the story, whereas some transmedia stories are clue or puzzle based. How do other transmedia stories apply conventional story structures and do they achieve what they want? What new, never before seen structures does transmedia allow?

4) *Are the audience stuck with the authors intended structure?* What does the structure of the story mean for the audience? What happens if the audience join halfway through the story, will the story make sense to them? Is there a way to return to act 1 if they missed it? If not, can they fill in the blanks?

5. CONCLUSION

Transmedia practice is becoming increasingly prevalent in the creative arts in the dissemination of stories. The more understanding there is about the structures and processes of transmedia, the increased room for innovative and engaging stories and experiences there will be.

Visual representation of transmedia stories allows for immediate identification of the story as a whole and how the pieces come together, and allows interesting discussions to be had about its structure. This short paper has used 19 Reinos as a case study, and applied a visual representation to it which identified further questions in the area of transmedia as a whole.

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