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Transmedia (Storytelling?): A polyphonic critical review*

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Abstract

This article looks at some of the fundamental problems that feed into recent debate and research on transmedia narratives and/or transmedia storytelling. These issues have been approached as questions or challenges for all the disciplines involved in the discussions (comparative media studies, transmedia narratology, game studies, cultural studies and comparative literature): from the key elements of the potential novelty of transmedia storytelling or transmedia narratives, through to the new role of audiences, the declining influence of the narrative factor as it is overtaken by the building of storyworlds and transmedia characters; the influence of videogames, attention and comprehension deficit to the role of adaptation in TS; the “demediating” effect or the loss of media specificity in TS theory; the importance of collaborative creation and how to stimulate it for new (academic/business) research projects and teaching, in order to respond to the new industry dynamics and sociocultural habits. In interviews, made and conducted by Domingo Sánchez-Mesa, these issues, among others, have been put to three prominent figures in academic research and the creative professions in the area of new media: Espen Aarseth, Robert Pratten and Carlos A. Scolari. The three-way dialogue, that also has connections with other articles in this edition, has generated a polyphonic discourse that aims to produce a critical x-ray of our object of study.

Keywords

transmedia storytelling, transmedia narrative, adaptation, media specificity, videogames

*Transmedia (¿storytelling?): una revisión crítica y polifónica***Resumen**

Este artículo plantea algunos de los problemas fundamentales que sustentan el debate y la investigación recientes sobre las narrativas transmediales y/o el transmedia storytelling. Dichas cuestiones han sido planteadas, en tanto preguntas o retos para las disciplinas implicadas en este debate (estudios comparados de medios, narratología transmedial, game studies, estudios culturales y literatura comparada): desde las claves de la posible novedad del transmedia storytelling o de las narrativas transmediales, pasando por el nuevo papel de las audiencias, la pérdida de peso del factor narrativo en favor de la construcción de mundos (storyworlds) y personajes transmediales; la influencia de los videojuegos, el déficit de atención y comprensión al papel de las adaptaciones en el TS; el efecto «demediador» o de pérdida de especificidad mediática en la teoría del TS; la importancia de la creación colaborativa y su estímulo para nuevos proyectos de investigación (académico-empresariales) y docencia que respondan a estas nuevas dinámicas industriales y hábitos socioculturales. Dichas cuestiones, entre otras, se han articulado en entrevistas realizadas por Domingo Sánchez-Mesa a tres personalidades destacadas de la investigación académica y la creación profesional en el ámbito de los nuevos medios: Espen Aarseth, Robert Pratten y Carlos A. Scolari. El diálogo cruzado a tres bandas y conectado, a su vez, con otros textos de este volumen ha generado un discurso polifónico que pretende ajustarse a la radiografía crítica del propio objeto de estudio.

Palabras clave

transmedia storytelling, narrativa transmedial, adaptación, especificidad mediática, videojuegos

1. Introduction: a new (?) field of studies. On TS Mythologies.

More than a decade since the term was introduced (Jenkins, 2003), transmedia storytelling (TS)¹ has become a complex hub of communicative practices, business opportunities for the entertainment and cultural industries, an object of desire and illusion, both for producers and audiences or fan communities and, last but not least, a crossroads for the re-enactment of classical discussions in cultural and media studies (adaptation, narrativity, transfictionality, authorship, transmedialisation etc.). In summary, right at the peak of its popularity, both in professional and academic environments, TS appears to be a provoking conundrum that invites us to review our critical and conceptual research tools; a relevant object for discussion that illustrates some of the main features of what Pierre Lévy called “cyberculture” (Lévy, 1997).

As long as TS seems to pervade any media strategy for attracting audiences and business opportunities, thus also penetrating into academic research and curricula, we could believe that “everything should be transmedial”. Although Henry Jenkins had already observed that this would not be the case (2003), and Carlos Scolari reminds us that, from a narrative logic, TS is optional and that, as coincides with Robert Pratten there is no doubt that “any communicative initiative will have a transmedial nature”, as happened with ‘multimedia’ during the 2000s (CS).

That being so, it is time to review which of the new mythologies about TS deserve to be identified and deconstructed. Within the academic environment, Scolari observes the intersection of two myths: first, the belief that “TN do not bring anything new to the table and there is no challenge in studying them”; and second, that “TN are a disruptive unprecedented phenomenon”. In some way, Aarseth’s position would be mapped around the former approach: “TS is first and foremost a label, and labels should always be regarded with suspicion. In this particular case, there are four different suspicions to play out: ‘trans-’, ‘media’, ‘story’, and ‘telling’, and all come with their separate biases. As Niels Ole Finnemann pointed out almost two decades ago,² in the age of the internet and digital communication, ‘medium’ no longer means what it used to, since there is now only one, inhabited by countless content genres (email, video, newspapers, telephone etc.). I have a ‘smartphone’ in my pocket. It is all I need for all my ‘media’ needs. If that is so, then neither ‘media’ nor ‘transmedia’ are useful categories anymore. Switching to ‘cross-genre’ might not solve that

much, but it would be more precise. As for story- and -telling, I think it is a mistake to see these as the core of what is going on. It is not stories that are the common element in most of these transactions, but rather characters, worlds, icons and imagery. As Jesper Juul pointed out in 2001, the hardest element to transfer is often the story. And obviously, ‘-telling’ is not an analytical term but a metaphor, in almost every case. We could instead call it *cross- (or trans-) genre content placement*. And it is not a new thing” (EA).

In any case, TN push semiotics and narratology to delve deeply into problems dealt with at a monomedia level. As already stated, transmediality is not new (Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman, 2014; Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa, 2015). It is the scale that TN gain in the current media ecology that turns them into an all-encompassing strategy for any media product (CS). In the professional environment, Scolari perceives a kind of obsession in becoming transmedia, whereas “many narratives can survive perfectly well in one single medium and others loudly demand to become transmedial”.

On the production side, Robert Pratten is less concerned with these mythologies, instead focusing on engagement and the storytelling itself as the cornerstones of what transmedia is really about: “From a practical standpoint, I would say that (a) transmedia storytelling is much better at engagement and retention than it is at acquisition, and (b) for every platform you launch you need to deepen your storyworld. I, too, often see projects with too many characters on too many platforms with too little story. It seems as though some people think that just having lots of stuff going on will be enough, but it’s the storytelling that’s vital to providing the cohesion across the platforms” (RP).

At the academic instructional level, instead of granting a new ‘study field’ (Aarseth agrees on that), Scolari promotes the convenience of introducing a specific subject matter in the final year of any bachelor’s degree in communication studies: a transversal and integrated course on TS strategies that would supersede the obsolete field division at Spanish universities.

The relevant connection and feedback between industrial and corporate developments, on the one hand, and academic research, on the other, seems beyond doubt: “Universities and colleges have a lot of resources that could be focused on some very interesting transmedia problems” (RP), although it is also clear that there is a gap between what happens in Spain and in the US or UK landscapes. In addition to highlighting the Spanish case of *El Ministerio del Tiempo*, Scolari stresses the strength of TN experimentation and research in the Latin American environment.

1. For the sake of economy (TS) and (TN) will stand for transmedia storytelling and transmedia narratives, respectively. We will be using them basically as synonyms, although according to Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa, the notion of storytelling covers only a part of transmedial narrative and, on the other hand, both ‘storytelling’ and ‘narrative’ address basic notions such as adaptation and medium in quite different terms (2015, p. 300). Besides that (TS) is a more frequent denomination within the industry and marketing-oriented discourses, while (TN), a more familiar term for Spanish speaking academics, is preferred by narratologists and in some areas of cultural studies.

2. Finnemann (1999).

2. Accelerated changes or disappointing inertia?

The media environment, as Scolari defines it, is experiencing a period of accelerated changes: “The media ecosystem is going through an explosion of new media species. Each week a new technology, medium, platform, interface or even format is born”. As mobile devices enter a less vertiginous phase, the system’s centre moves “towards 3D immersive visualization devices, augmented reality and new virtual worlds created through algorithms. Even so, it is impossible to be certain about where media ecology evolves to: the *socio-technical network* (a concept introduced by Lévy two decades ago), is a complex system where any small change can produce a great scale earthquake” (CS).

Still, when questioned about the most important innovations in the transmedia landscape in the intervening period between the two editions of his referential book (2011 and 2015), Pratten talks about a certain inertia in the opening up of new perspectives: “Probably the main novelty has been the rise of mobile apps to support TV shows and AAA game releases. Otherwise, it’s kind of sad to say that although transmedia storytelling is more prevalent, it rarely pushes new boundaries”.

An increasing and almost permanent mobility also emerges as a recent feature of social media and digital communication. Smartphones become the incarnation of the convergence culture myth of the “black box” (Jenkins, 2006), an all-encompassing technology that opens the gate to any medium. In *Getting Started in TS 2*, Pratten talked about mobile phones as a “window to imagination” (2015, p. 155) and now he praises these devices as an efficient tool for getting to know the audience better and customising the experience, but it is not without its problems: “The biggest practical issue with mobiles is still not being able to guarantee accessibility. We tend to use browser-based web apps and a lot of phone functionality is now available through the browser, which is fantastic” (RP).

On his behalf, Scolari localises mobile devices at the centre of the “socio-technical network”, where a number of intersections and hybridisations take place. Being more specific about the spectacular phenomenon of *Pokemon Go*, Scolari identifies its success “with an interface where ludic logic, geolocalization systems, augmented reality and a very popular narrative world which appealed to users’ nostalgia came together”. This unprecedented, successful ‘concept’ of *Pokemon Go* is also the key for Aarseth: “not unlike the way *MineCraft* builds on *Lego*”. Of course, mobisodes or games for mobile phones – Scolari continues – were already strategies used by TV series such as *24*, but the centrality of these extensions of our body (in McLuhan terms) is unavoidable for any future transmedia strategy. Nevertheless, as for virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies (Google Glass, Oculus Rift, Magic Lens, Samsung Gear VR, etc.) Scolari thinks we are in some sort of “Lumière phase”: “We have the devices

but learning to generate content is very much needed. It is only now that storytellers or journalist are approaching these devices and starting to explore their narrative potential. Once they have mastered these creatures, it will be more likely that we will find them as part of transmedial textual complexes”. In any case, his prediction is certainly striking: “It is highly probable that centenary experiences such as ‘going to the movies’ or more recent ones like playing *Counter-Strike* on your PC become obsolete in less than a generation” (CS).

3. Empowering audiences

In Robert Pratten’s *Getting Started in TS 2* there is a clear move from the *production* side (“what is TS?”) to the *consumption* side (“why TS?”), while TS is envisioned as “taking the audience on an emotional journey that goes from moment-to-moment”, with the conclusion that: “Only with transmedia storytelling can we place the audience at the centre of what we do” (Pratten, 2015, p. 2). Likewise, the multi-platform element in TS seems to be displaced in favour of “synergy between the content and a focus on an emotional, participatory experience for the audience” (Pratten, 2015, p. 3). Pratten talks about a ‘philosophy of design’: “Placing the audience at the centre means fitting experiences around their existing behaviours – their pacing, their location, their personalised content. This is what transmedia storytelling does. So if we’re going to build responsive environments that wrap the audience in an experience where you can’t feel the edges – that’s what transmedia storytelling does” (RP).

According to M. L. Ryan (in this same volume), most of the guide books on TS address the audience as ‘fans’. Should we understand ‘readers’, ‘spectators’ or ‘players’ as fans all the time? Can we expect the critical or aesthetic interest of ‘traditional’ audiences to be found in fan communities? Actually, according to Aarseth: “*fan* mixes critical and uncritical, and does not work as a singular category of responding consumers. It is OK not to be a fan”. It seems obvious to both Pratten and Scolari that fans are a “good target because they’ll be the early adopters – and you need those to give the experience credibility (i.e. social justification for others to join) and help spread the word” (RP). This is precisely why consolidating adequate formulas is so needed in order to carry that creativity and participation through legal strategies, such as Creative Commons licences, which facilitate the re-appropriation and circulation of fan content (Scolari, 2013). Besides, as Pratten adds, “all experiences should be layered so that non-fans can enjoy them too. Very few commercial experiences target only fans because, typically, the client wants as many people as possible to play, and that means going beyond fans”. The solution, according to Scolari, could be a more nuanced classification of TS audiences: consumers (watching a *Batman* film), fans (consumers of any product about *Batman*) and prosumers (fans who create and share new content about *Batman*).

4. From transmedia storytelling (TS) to transmedia world-building (TW) and transmedia characters (TC)?

As the category of “worldness” gains ground in reflections on TS production and *recreation*, many theorists and producers share a growing perception that the ‘story’ gradually falls apart, meaning that TS appears to be less related to ‘narrative structures’ and more to ‘characters’, ‘world-building’ or the migration of cross-media licences (Aarseth, 2006). Ryan coined the term “transmedial narrative worlds” (Ryan and Thon, 2014) and she stresses here how this shift encourages us to question whether it is more about Transmedia World-building and less about transmedia storytelling. Indeed, we witness this move within this ‘narrative paradigm’ where ‘story’ seems to lose (or rather expand?) part of its meaning and turn into what is called the *mothership* of a storyworld, i.e. the central hub of the places, time, actions, characters and values that characterised that world.

In a very influential article, Klastrup and Pajares Tosca already defined *transmedial storyworlds* as “abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms” (2004). Sharing this image of “worldness” is what characterises a TW in which the core features would be a mythos (“the backstory of all backstories”), a topos (what is to be expected from the physics of the navigation of the world) and an ethos (the codex of behaviour and moral values of the world).³ When the meaning of ‘story’ is contemplated in a referential game theory such as Espen Aarseth’s ludo-narratological template, story basically refers to an articulation of events, “kernels” and “satellites” (Aarseth, 2012, p. 131), and plays a subsidiary role in cross-media franchises, in favour of characters and worldbuilding: “story is the cheapest element, as long as nothing unauthorized happens to the characters”.

Quoting Mark J. P. Wolf’s *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012), Pratten concurs that storyworlds do not fully depend on stories, whereas stories need storyworlds (“the fabric of details that makes a story believable”) in order to take place. Furthermore, “worlds extend beyond the stories that occur in them, inviting speculation and exploration through imaginative means” (RP). In spite of that, Pratten still confers on stories a main role when it comes to the experience, as happens when working “on open-ended wargames (so-called *matrix games*) where players can just invent their story and argue why what they say is true and should be allowed to take the story in that direction – with the adjudication coming from other players and the gamesmaster” (RP).

Finally, although Scolari’s early semio-narratological emphasis was clearly on textuality and narrative: “narrative is the basic structure-creating device for meaning production” (2009, p. 591), he now confirms his preference for ‘transmedia storyworlds’ rather

than ‘transmedia narratives’ that still evoke a certain linearity which is absent in the *world* metaphor. In this way, for Scolari, George Lucas becomes a “storytelling architect”, and audiences and prosumers can be better understood as “co-builders” of a territory, a universe that can be as large as the Star Wars or Harry Potter sagas.

In this issue, Nieves Rosendo states that some transmedial narratives place more emphasis on transmedial characters than on transmedial storyworlds. Henry Jenkins has already recognised that both characters and worlds are the keystones for “the movement of content across media” (2003), and Espen Aarseth recalls that this has been so “since the days of Weizenbaum’s Eliza in the sixties”, then “Pac-Man, Super Mario, Lara Croft, and before that, the all-important character sheets in Dungeons & Dragons. You can have character without narrative. But narrative without character? The same goes for world” (EA). Indeed, characters are one of the main resources for design producers to engage the audience. In the words of Pratten: “characters are the glue that engages audiences between video episodes, between TV seasons and between platforms” (Pratten, 2015, p. 114). Pratten establishes a highly symptomatic comparison between the way characters function in gaming, but when we asked him if he believed that characters in TS are ‘only’ or ‘mainly’ comprehensible in terms of performance and gamers’ experience, he was clear enough: “No, not all – they still need to be relatable and have ‘real lives’. Audiences still need to empathise with them”.

5. The influence of the ludic paradigm

Games are becoming one privileged medium (genre?) for developing ‘storyworlds’, allowing a successful combination of sit-back and sit-forward participation in virtual worlds. If we think of the role of the Star Wars Lego video games in that universe, or about the Lara Croft or Halo franchises, or even of late-hour experiments, such as *Quantum Break* (Remedy Ent., 2016), we will surely grasp that it may be a TN model hanging over from the video games industry. Of course, there is once again an economic and business rationale for this growing transmedialisation of video games universes. As Robert Pratten points out: “Game designers know that they need to tell their story through audience activity and they know that autonomy is a huge intrinsic motivator for the audience. So if you want to allow the audience freedom to explore, you need to invest in a storyworld”. Moreover, “AAA games are now very expensive to make so producers will want to develop a commercial platform that can be exploited for as long as possible. And that’s the storyworld – a world with enough untold stories that can be told in some DLC [downloadable content] or book or something else at a later date” (RP).

3. For a comprehensive review of transmedia storyworld theories, see Rosendo (2015).

Looking back into games history will help us to verify the previous hypothesis. According to Tom Dowd *et al.* (*Shadowrun*, FASA) role-play games have constituted, since the canonical Dungeons & Dragons (TSR, 1974), a clear precedent or simply a natural testing ground for narrative extensions in world-building (2013, p. 187). Tones of books (*sourcebooks*) were produced for expanding or complementing those f2f role-playing games. Espen Aarseth's similar invitation to look into the past of (video) games allows us to check "how the MIT-hackers (Russell and others) were inspired by E. E. 'Doc' Smith's *Lensman* series (cf. Levy 1984, p. 59) and before that, computer games were typically adaptations of chess, Othello, tennis or similar. Not to mention how *Kriegsspiel* (Prussian war game) led to D & D which in turn led to computer RPGs" (EA). Ultimately, connecting with the previous observation about TC, "the most effective way of creating ludo-narrative content is to invest in character creation, by making the characters rich, deep and interesting" (Aarseth 2012, p. 132).

When asked about the hypothetical loss of pertinence of the "narratology of discourse" tradition in this context (Bakhtin, Genette, Ricoeur, Gaudreault), Espen Aarseth thinks that: "It is not irrelevant for game studies, but it probably needs to be relocated". As "metachronotopes", machines that generate (following Einstein's definition) a "space-time continuum", Aarseth locates "the physical production of play discourse in consumption and on the receiver's end, whereas with narrative discourse it takes place at the sender's end. The game developer is a designer of a meta-discourse, and the player together with the meta-discourse is the producer of the discourse. Play discourse is not narrative discourse, but can lead to it when the player relates it after or during play. Then there is hybrid discourse, where predetermined narrative is locked in and presented during play. Sometimes this hybridity is successful, sometimes not, just like art in general. For a theorist, what matters is simply to describe what goes on, and here classic narratology is useful, but not sufficient". The value of this clarification for a theory on transmedial narratives as distributed, 'multi-platform', process-orientated and participatory experiences is raised here to be explored and discussed.

6. Adaptation: the *black hole* in TS

Adaptation as a strategy for content transfer and audience engagement in fictional worlds has raised some interesting controversy in TS discourse. While Jeff Gomez (2011)⁴ or Christy Dena (2009) left

adaptation to one side, Jenkins, (2011); Scolari (2013) and Ryan (in this same volume) have credited it as being part of TS creativity. However, no specific attention is given to adaptation in Pratten's GS2. When asked about his ideas regarding adaptation, the British producer justifies his lack of interest in the fact that adaptation may act as a short-cut to slide back into experiences and, in this regard, he maintains that "I find other courses of action more rewarding than basically copying a story that's already been told" (RP).

In spite of this precaution, as we recently argued (Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa, 2015) adaptation actually functions as one cornerstone for TS as with any kind of transmedialisation process. Espen Aarseth confirms this assertion, placing adaptation "at the heart" of any cross-genre franchise as well as indicating that perhaps the term has simply become outdated, being "displaced by cross-media storytelling" (EA). In their *Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon and O'Flynn have already broadened the concept to take account not only of video game worlds ("heterocosms") but also of franchise storytelling and fan recreations of transmedial worlds as a "strategy of participation" (2015).

Anyhow, the overlaps between adaptation and TS are shown in many of the paradigmatic cases in recent years (BBC's *Sherlock*, HBO's *Game of Thrones*, Lionsgate's *The Hunger Games*, and so on) and "fan-generated adaptations further complicate the spectrum" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn, 2015 p. 187). Furthermore, adaptation helps us to perceive the difference between cross-media and transmedia. Scolari, who has already tackled this distinction (Ibrus and Scolari, 2012) indicates the milestone set by the inclusion of the figure of the "transmedia producer" by the Producers Guild of America,⁵ probably related to the need to avoid conflicts with the screenwriters' union. His position is conclusive: "we can't analyse Harry Potter's narrative world and exclude the movies just because they are adaptations of the books! A narrative world includes adaptations, expansions and... compressions! Also trailers, sneak-peeks and recapitulations (often made by fans) are part of the TN world and, accordingly, we can't rule them out of our research".

As Jan Baetens reminds us in these same pages, transmediality is more a process than an event, and therefore seriality should be considered as an important category in TS. Even if new 'all-at-once' video on-demand (VOD) schemes, like Netflix, affect the 'traditional' notion of 'seriality', the role of mobisodes and webisodes shows the prevalence of this category, providing the engagement needed to satisfy fan audiences.⁶

4. J. Gómez (2011). "Talking with the man who assembled the 'Halo Bible' for Microsoft". An interview with Kevin W. Smith. *The Official Xbox Magazine*, 12/05/2011 [Accessed: 24/11/2016] <<https://archive.today/Jcs1b>>.

5. "PGA Board of Directors Approves Addition of Transmedia Producer to Guild's Producers Code of Credit" (Tuesday 6 April 2010) <<http://www.producersguild.org/news/39637/PGA-Board-of-Directors-Approves-Addition-of-Transmedia-Producer-to-Guilds-Producers-Code-of-Credits.htm>>

6. See Rosendo on the BBC's *Sherlock* in this same volume.

7. Content is king of TS GoT

“Experience is more important than content.” This statement by TS producer Robert Pratten doesn’t exclude a *caveat*: “You don’t always need a lot of content but it must be the right content. Audience acquisition is a big deal and I think new transmedia authors overwhelm their audiences with too much content – or rather too much detail – too early. For me, ‘content’ is an atom of communication – an SMS, a tweet, a movie, a poster. We can create amazing experiences but, typically, there’s going to be one or more items of content that communicate for us” (RP).

If TS is basically about migration of content across media borders and fictional worlds, now understood as ‘storyworlds’ or ‘transmedial worlds’, in turn the nucleus of narrativity, whereas “the abstract type of content that all stories share” (Ryan and Thon, 2014, p. 3), the concept and theory on TS risk to confirm the “dematerialisation” operated by dominant discourses on digital and convergence cultures, where not only content but rather media are “peeled” away to minimise any resistance to content crossing between different media (Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa, 2015). This dematerialising process raises the question of medium specificity, shrewdly discussed by Jan Baetens in this volume. Outside any essentialist ontology, medium specificity gets increasingly blurred both in the theoretical discussion and in transmedia production practice. The fact that, as Scolari reminds us, Jenkins had already observed that “in the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best” (2003) has not prevented TS theory from frequent oblivion about this material difference.

8. TS is mostly, but not all, about business

The most widespread image of TS is that of Hollywood franchising strategies continuing the optimisation of licences into digital cultures. But not everything is ‘about the money’ in TS. As Scolari warns us: “TS have an economic dimension but it doesn’t end there. There are non-profit transmedia projects orientated towards social and political transformation. The fact that the concept was born in the US doesn’t imply that its meaning is reduced to a Hollywood reading of it”.

Pratten points to artistic (*Lowlifes*, *City of conspiracy*) and socially orientated TS projects (*Breakdowns* and *3H*) to underline

the importance of a good business model where “marketing doesn’t need to feel like marketing” and can be integrated as “part of the experience that is intended to be adopted earlier than the other parts”. And this can be “particularly important for indie authors without major financial backing because they need the groundswell of opinion” (RP).

Besides the emergence of new hybrid interactive digital fictions labelled as transmedia, like the internationally acclaimed *Collapsus* (L. Weiler, 2010)⁷ or the very complex *Plot 28* (J. Hernández y A. Serra, 2009),⁸ the predominance of i-doc as a leading non-fiction format for TS must be highlighted. While the genre grows quickly in Spain (*Las sin sombrero*, Lab RTVE, 2015; *Hacia una primavera rosa*, M. de la Torre, 2014),⁹ the most important Hispanic developments are taking place in Latin America. Some projects picked out by Scolari are the Argentinian *Proyecto Walsh* and *Malvinas30* by Álvaro Liuzzi;¹⁰ *Calles Perdidas* and *Mujeres en Venta* by Fernando Irigaray and his team from the Universidad Nacional de Rosario;¹¹ the Peruvian project *Quipu*, a fascinating initiative to record the testimonies of women victims of a massive sterilisation programme,¹² and the Colombian *enModoP* on the historical recent armistice.¹³

As proof of the social dimension of TS, in addition to the illuminating incursion of S. Pajares regarding transmedial museum experience in this volume, we must mention how the ongoing development of Conducttr¹⁴ at Transmedia Storyteller Ltd¹⁵ (the first software of its kind for creating and managing interactive transmedia narratives) is focusing on immersive training environments as they perceive that “there is a huge amount of interest in storytelling and in transmedia storytelling from places outside of entertainment.” Working mainly based on scenarios, Pratten’s team considers “participatory transmedia experiences to be very beneficial to learners and operational analysts” as they allow learners “to role-play or rehearse for experiences that would be rare or difficult in their usual day job”.

9. A step forward in immersive storytelling, the accession of VR and AR technologies

Alternate reality games (ARGs), with *classics* such as *The Beast* (for Spielberg’s AI, 2001) or the story around *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), stand as a kind of interactive experience that epitomises

7. Visit: <<http://www.lanceweiler.com/portfolio/collapsus/>>.

8. Visit: <<http://www.plot28.com>>.

9. Visit: <<http://www.laprimaverarosa.com>>; <<http://www.rtve.es/lasinsombrero/es>>

10. Visit: <<http://proyectowalsh.com.ar>>; <<http://www.malvinastreinta.com.ar>>.

11. Visit: <<http://www.documedia.com.ar/callesperdidas/>>; <<http://www.documedia.com.ar/mujeres/universotransmedia.html>>.

12. Visit: <<http://blog.quipu-project.com>>.

13. Visit: <<http://www.enmodop.com/node/146>>.

14. Visit: <<http://www.conducttr.com>>.

15. Visit: <<http://www.tstoryteller.com/transmedia-storytelling>>.

the idea of an integrated complex transmedia format described by Pratten (2015, p. 16). Another step further, Alternative Reality – depicted in D. Fincher's *The Game* (1997) – is based more on human imagination than on the high-tech *trompe l'oeil* of VR: “It is about human experience in the broadest possible sense because the goal is to achieve an active belief in a parallel world that's interwoven with our everyday world. Nobody's fooled; rather they're given permission to believe” (Pratten, 2015, p. 199).

Alternative Reality, and what Pratten defines as “Mixed Reality” (the combination of Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and Alternative Reality) relies heavily on **performance** that, in turn, “has two vital roles: (a) commercial – it helps spread the enthusiasm and buzz and (b) emotional – audiences get a much deeper connection to the world by being able to develop it, shape it, play in it. And both of these go hand-in-hand because the more someone loves the world, the more they'll spread the word and image, video etc.” (RP).¹⁶ That being said, are more powerful formats and technologies for immersion and pervasiveness influencing the erasure of the traditional dichotomy of fictional and non-fictional storytelling? In this respect, Pratten replies in the negative: “In fact, the drive for non-fiction transmedia experiences is very strong because authors with a message want audiences to totally understand what it's like to be in someone else's shoes: so you don't just watch a documentary about refugees, you can live the life of a refugee” (RP).

As far as immersion and pervasiveness in TS are concerned, also connecting with VR's impact on games, Aarseth thinks that these concepts don't work well as critical-theoretical categories, nor as entertainment models.¹⁷ To begin with, pervasiveness has a practical problem: “People don't want an entertainment experience which demands their attention any time, anywhere. That is called surveillance, and is no fun. It is the panopticon prison, and it will not work as a successful entertainment paradigm” (EA).

What would be the impact of a new generation of VR experiences on TS? In contrast to 3D technology that, according to Pratten, “adds nothing to the enjoyment of a movie or a game (although some are truly mind-blowing and memorable), VR is totally immersive”. Nevertheless “in the context of transmedia storytelling, VR – and augmented reality – are just another screen-based platform. It still needs to be justified and used for specific things that suit it best and there are still choices to be made about whether to run on expensive high-end VR equipment or on lower end Google Cardboard” (RP).

The contrast with Espen Aarseth's prediction is striking: “This wave of VR as a mass-market entertainment phenomenon will fail again, not only in games but in general, like it always has, ever since the first stereo photographs at the dawn of photography, and

all through stereo-vision media history since. Face-huggers ruin our social affordances in the living room – we want to see the people we play with. They are a solution without a problem, and for games they will never succeed without a killer app. But the edge of gaming is about control and speed, neither of which you want to risk your neck as the interface for” (EA).

10. Collaborative creation and crowdsourcing at the production site. Is there anything to be learned by academic research culture?

A lot has been said about authorship versus participation and collaboration between creators and audiences (Alberich and Roig, 2010), but no less critical for TS is collaboration among different profiles of creators (writers, designers, computer programmers and animators, actors, production managers, community managers, film makers, editors etc.). In this respect, Rob Wittig offers an original theoretical model in this issue and, based on a recent Iberoamerican corpus, J. Alberich and F. Gómez observe that there are strong bonds and a growing hybridisation between ‘collaborative filmmaking’ projects and TS. Crowdsourcing, according to Pratten, although not being a prerequisite for a transmedia project does help to “outweigh the problems” (2015, p. 167) and confirms the importance of collaboration, especially for indie projects.

A parallel development of collective and authentic transdisciplinary academic research should be expected, beyond the necessary reorientation of goals raised by transmedia narratology (Ryan and Thon, 2014). At the UPF, Carlos A. Scolari coordinates two projects (one national, another European) on Transmedial Literacy (2015-2018, EU 2020) mapping young people's informal learning strategies (*video games, social networks, collaborative platforms, etc.*) to unify school education and young people's hyper-technological everyday lives.

From the perspective of a digital humanities approach (see Vilaríño and Pajares in this same issue), we must consider the sophisticated techniques and technologies for big data analysis and “cultural analytics” at our disposal (Moretti, 2013). In this respect Scolari notes that “it's entirely feasible to make a quantitative analysis of the more than 700,000 stories that Harry Potter fans have shared on Fanfiction.net. This crossroads between big data and narrative is relatively new and is open to experimentation (and discussion). I believe that researchers in this field, including Moretti and Manovich, are conscious that the utility of this method is not always evident. It is

16. Performance is at the bottom of M. A. Grande's and M. J. Sánchez's discussion here on the possibilities of transmedia theatre.

17. For a critique of the inoperative ambiguity of “immersion”, Aarseth direct us to G. Calleja's book (2011) *In-Game. From Immersion to Incorporation*, MIT Press, 2011.

as though we do not know which questions we should answer with these answering generator machines. However, this junction between the quantitative and the qualitative continues to be fascinating”.

Lastly, as for Espen Aarseth's new big project at ITU, *Making Sense of Games* (European Research Council Advanced Grant), the aim is to be trans-generic as well as transdisciplinary, since the comparative study of games is simply unavoidable as every game has its own genre (if not, it is simply another version of the same game).

11. Conclusions

- TS and/or TN represent a challenge to media and cultural studies. There is no consensus about the level of “novelty” that these practices, products and experiences convey. A critical review of both extremes of the spectrum is needed (both ‘there is nothing new about TS’ and ‘TS means a new communicative paradigm’).
- The narrative dimension of TS is in crisis (change). Either we accept that stories are not central to these productions (Aarseth, Scolari), or we expand and revise media narratology to take account of these new roles and principles for stories in transmedia worlds and via transmedia characters (Ryan, Aarseth, Rosendo). This does not mean we should forget the importance of good writing and storytelling for TS production (Pratten).
- There is much for TS and TN theory to import and learn from ludology and game studies (Sánchez-Mesa). The processual nature of TN experience; the location of discourse on the side of the user; games as metachronotopes; the sit-forward and ergodic component of video games or the nuclear role of performativity: these are just a few arguments for this statement. Despite this, we believe that media comparative theory and transmedia narratology will successfully provide insights without the need for game studies to take over.
- Adaptation deserves a deeper and broader reflection as regards TS and TW design and recreation. It not only stands as a major strategy for cross-media franchises and trans-genre storytelling, but it may also illuminate the process of transmedialisation in new interactive digital media (Hutcheon and O’Flynn), both on historical (Aarseth, Scolari) and theoretical grounds (Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa), together with transfictionality (Ryan, Rosendo).
- Mobile devices, mainly smartphones, become central to the *socio-technical network* (Scolari via Lévy) as the materialisation of the “black box” convergence culture’s myth (Jenkins, 2006), and as a “window to imagination” and a powerful device for the personalisation of experiences (Pratten).
- The new wave of immediate and future explosion of VR as a transmedial technology is assessed in very different ways: from great expectations (Scolari) and professional production design interest (Pratten), to historicist radical scepticism (Aarseth). In

spite of the dematerialisation effect on which dominant discourses and theories on TS operate, medium specificity and resistance to transmedialisation still matter. Thus transmediality can be thought in terms of “*customisation* of an idea, a work, a format, a genre etc., according to the properties of each medium” (Baetens) or, in Ryan’s words: “some media are better than others depending on the type of narrative material and on the effect you want to achieve” or, lastly, as Scolari puts it: “every producer must know what kind of content of a story each medium semiotics is more capable of telling in order to make the right selection at any time”.

- Taking the example of collaborative creation related to TS in the professional environment (Wittig, Alberich and Gómez), there is an urgent need to expand and reinforce the bonds between industrial projects and academic research. As Pratten says: “For the academics, I would like to see more work switched away from entertainment and towards immersive scenario modelling. There’s a lot of work to be done on the practicalities of writing and managing responsive storyworlds that has nothing to do with AI-generated narratives (a too frequent topic that always results in disappointment) and everything to do with adaptive worlds”.

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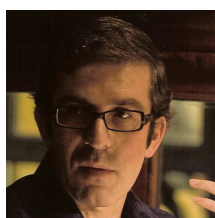
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