

CHAPTER 4

Transmedia storytelling: Brands, narratives and storyworlds

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4.1 Introduction

In January 2003, when Henry Jenkins published an article in *Technology Review* entitled *Transmedia storytelling: Moving characters from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling* nobody could have imagined that the concept of 'transmedia storytelling' would become one of the favourite keywords of media professionals and researchers in the first decade of the new century. What started as a very personal reflection inspired by Jenkins' passion for fan cultures ended up as one of the key business strategies in the contemporary culture industry and an entrenched research field.

This Chapter provides an overview of transmedia storytelling against the background of essential works for understanding its cultural dynamics, with an added focus on one particular aspect: the relationship between transmedia narratives and brands from the perspectives of semiotics and narratology. In recent years there has been much discussion about the links between brands and storytelling (e.g., Salmon 2007). In this Chapter we will delve into the area where branding overlaps with narrative, while keeping an eye on transmedia storytelling and fictional worlds. Global cultural artefacts like *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, *Batman*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Lost*, *24* and Walt Disney's characters will accompany us throughout the following pages.

4.2 Transmedia storytelling

4.2.1 The *Lost* incident

On 22 September 2004 the Oceanic Airlines 815 flight disappeared between Sydney and Los Angeles. While flying over an island in an uncertain location in the Pacific Ocean, the fuselage fell prey to ravaging mysterious forces that resulted in the plane's crash in an uncharted territory. The survivors soon discovered that they were on a very strange island, with hidden underground facilities and non-human beings moving through the woods. You do not need to be a *lostie* to know what we are talking about: *Lost*, one of the most representative transmedia productions in recent years. Although *Lost* was born as a TV series (six seasons, 2004-2010), it soon spread across multiple media and communication platforms. The ABC series generated a textual galaxy including blogs, comics, mobisodes, wiki webpages, augmented reality games (ARG), videogames and novels, while the fervent activity of millions of *losties* expanded the borders of this narrative world to new territories. Despite the fact that the TV series remained the tent-pole of this textual universe, the contributions of different media transformed *Lost* into an incredible transmedia puzzle (Pearson 2009; Scolari 2013a, 2013b).

The mobisodes that were produced from the TV series (*Lost Missing Pieces*) showed funny scenes and dramatic passages never seen on TV. Some even included elements of considerable relevance for understanding the enigmas of the mysterious island. The PC game turned the player into another survivor of the Flight 815 crash. Inside the game (carefully reproduced in 3D) it was possible to interact with the virtual version of the TV series' characters. The immersive capacity of the videogame genre enabled a unique achievement: the possibility to "live" in the storyworld and to interact with the inhabitants of its fictional universe. Almost all of the novels follow the same logic as the PC game; they tell the story of other survivors never seen on TV. Finally, while moving towards user-

generated content, we notice that *Lost* inspired all sorts of content, from parodies to alternative endings, recaps, synchronizations, machinima, and stop-motion reconstructions made with Lego and Playmobil toys. In the context of user-generated content it merits mentioning Carlos Azaustre's comic *Pardillos*. Although it was freely available online, this parody of *Lost* was successfully printed and commercially distributed in Spain. *Pardillos* confirms that the boundaries between commercial productions and user-generated content are often porous (Scolari 2013a, 2013b).

While some transmedia narratives originate from TV shows (e.g., *Lost*, *24*, *Star Trek*), others start from films (e.g., *Matrix*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*), literature (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*) or videogames (e.g., *Lara Croft*, *Super Mario Bros.*) and then expand to other media and platforms. The emergence of this narrative strategy, involving a logic of narrative migration from one medium to another with the active participation of fans, immediately caught the attention of media researchers.

4.2.2 The academic answer

How does Henry Jenkins define transmedia storytelling? First, Jenkins (2003, 2008) identifies a trend in the culture industry towards the creation of stories that span different media (cinema, TV, literature, etc.) and collaborative platforms (YouTube, fanfiction portals, blogs, etc.). As shown in the previous Section, the producers of *Lost* opted for a transmedia expansion that included, among other platforms, novels, video-games, mobisodes, and alternate reality games (ARG). According to Jenkins, in a transmedia narrative "each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins 2007: Paragraph no.3). Jenkins added a second element to this expansion through different media and platforms: consumers collaborate in the expansion of the story, for example, by remixing scenes, by creating a parody or by participating in a fan

wiki website like *Lostpedia*. In this way the consumer becomes a *prosumer*, a subject that actively participates in the narrative process by providing new texts that expand the transmedia narrative world.

This definition of transmedia storytelling, widely shared by practitioners and researchers alike, does not consider some crucial aspects that have been discussed extensively over the past decade. Should we consider *adaptations* (or intertextual translations) as part of transmedia strategies? Should every text have an autonomous life inside the transmedia universe? For example, the comprehension of some textual units may require the consumption of another text. As we already know, adaptations or intersemiotic translations (e.g., from book to cinema) usually do not extend the narrative world. Researchers like Long (2007) discarded the inclusion of adaptations in transmedia storytelling. Adapting a story and expanding it with new characters and situations are two different, albeit not mutually exclusive, options. Other researchers (e.g., Scolari 2013a) are more flexible and consider the possibility of including some adaptations within transmedia narratives. The debate, at least on the academic front, remains open. Recent studies are indicative of a wide range of possibilities. In the same narrative world we encounter fully autonomous texts inasmuch as texts that cannot be understood without the consumption of another part of the story. For example, most of *Lost's* mobisodes are almost incomprehensible to viewers who have not seen the TV series. However, novels that have been inspired from the series could be consumed separately.

The academic landscape of transmedia narratives is rich in debates. Research into this new kind of narrative has just begun and every week we experience the launch of new transmedia productions. Moreover, transmedia narratives constitute a unique research field that eschews the strict boundaries of traditional *monomedia* research (which focuses on single media, such as radio or TV), while opening them up to

interdisciplinary perspectives that range from semiotics to ethnography, economics, narratology and media ecology.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the relationship between transmedia storytelling and branding in Section 4.4, it is advisable to make a short detour into the relationships between brands and narratives.

4.3 Branding and narrative

A brand is perhaps the most perfect synthesis of the material and the symbolic worlds. If Marx had already detected the commodity fetishism process in the mid-19th century, and a few decades later branding was born to differentiate standardized products, we could say that at the beginning of the 21st century commodities have liquefied into a storytelling container that conveys them through a narrative world. The crossover between storytelling and branding is not precisely new; already in the 1990s semioticians like Jean-Marie Floch (2001) and Andrea Semprini (1993) had analysed brands from a structuralist semio-narrative perspective.

According to the above marketing semioticians, a brand always tells a story and conveys a series of values. Subjects are free to choose one story/brand or another; if a consumer does not accept the values proposed by the narrative of brand A, he or she may adhere to the values of brand B or C. If a consumer is in agreement with the story and adheres to the values of a particular brand, it can be said that a semiotic contract has been signed between the brand and the consumer.

Following this line of thought, we can imagine the entire market as a symbolic space where each company or institution tries to establish its own storytelling and values, in an attempt to persuade consumers into 'signing' the semiotic contract. If a company or brand seeks to position itself in this space by appealing to values like *freedom* and *rebellion*, its competitors need to articulate either different narratives based on the same values or different narratives based on different values, such as

sustainability and *saving*. Storytelling is a useful tool for defining one's own position in the symbolic market and retaining customers by offering a set of shared values. The political market, especially during election periods, is not too far from this vision based on narrative supply/demand. Each political actor proposes a story and expresses a set of values that distinguish them from the other candidates and parties. Until the 1950s advertising campaigns were product-centric; then, they became increasingly user-centric. Nowadays brands constitute a narrative-centric experience (Scolari 2008).

4.4 Branding and transmedia storytelling

The intersections between branding and transmedia storytelling are multiple and complex. In the following Sections we will map this territory, while identifying different strategies that are implemented in a landscape that is defined by strong media convergence. At the same time, the growing weight of social networks and collaborative practices is challenging the hegemony of broadcasting (Carlón and Scolari 2014).

Entertainment and corporate communications have intertwined for as long as there have been things to sell and stories to tell. Marketing has traditionally shown consumers what they want the consumer to see, but pervasive communications – the explosion of multi-directional communication channels – has made this model obsolete. The age of broadcasting is clearly dead and we are not just dealing with an audience, but an audience of audiences. This requires new techniques and processes. The solution lies in the substance of the corporate story world. (Berkson 2012: Paragraph no.1)

A new notion of storytelling within a larger context has emerged.

4.4.1 Product placement

The relationship between brands and narrative worlds used to be expressed in product placement. In this sense, the transmedia narrative universes are no exception. For example, *24* forged a transmedia narrative world covering TV episodes, videogames, comics, novels, games, mobisodes, webisodes and all kinds of merchandising. Jack Bauer, the character played by Kiefer Sutherland, uses Nokia smartphones, Ford and Hyundai cars, Apple computers, in his fight against international terrorism. This presence of brands in the story was stronger in some media (TV) than in others (comics) (Scolari 2009, 2013a).

Other productions like *Lost* failed to exploit the full potential of product placement due to the peculiarities of the narrative world. The only products on the mysterious island have been introduced by the Dharma Initiative since the 1960s. Characters only consume Dharma beers, Dharma cereals and Dharma peanut butter. What strategy did ABC apply while seeking to introduce 'real' brands into the storyworld? During the alternate reality game *Lost Experience* the TV episodes were interrupted by fake commercials from the Hanso Foundation – the institution that finances the Dharma Initiative – sponsored by Coca Cola, Sprite, Jeep, Chrysler, Verizon Wireless and Monster.com (The Monica 2006; Pearson 2009). In this way the brands were able to participate in the narrative world of *Lost* in a double space of symbolic contamination (real world / fictional world, island / rest of the world).

Many researchers agree that product placement has lost its effectiveness over the years, and that its overuse could result in diminishing returns (Grainge 2008: 34-35). Movies like *The Truman Show* (Weir 1998) overtly criticized the abuse of product-placement, forcing companies like Starbucks to double the bet and create a parody of product placement like in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Roach 1999). By becoming excessively visible, traditional brands could overshadow the narrative context in which they circulate and become what they

do not want to be: a mini-spot that interrupts the fiction.

4.4.2 Reverse product placement

As José Martí Parreño explained in *Funny Marketing* (2010), reverse product placement creates real goods to match those seen in fictional worlds. For example, Homer Simpson's *Duff* beer has left the screen and is now on the shelves of supermarkets and wine shops around the world. When a product leaves the media space it automatically becomes an extension of the narrative world and joins other components often grouped under the category of merchandising. From a broad narratological perspective, such as the one proposed by Gray in *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (2010), we can consider reverse product placement as a commercial form of paratextuality. In other words, a bottle of Duff beer that a consumer buys in a supermarket should not be excluded while mapping the territory of a transmedia narrative world. Drinking Duff beer is also a way of entering and participating in the narrative world of *The Simpsons*.

4.4.3 Merchandising and transmedia production

Media researchers and narratologists are usually oblivious to merchandising. This kind of textual production – let us not forget that beers and toys are also texts – has always been regarded as something alien to the world of media and, subsequently, never seriously scrutinized in a scholarly fashion. “Merchandising is a marketing issue, let’s leave it to business people” seems to be a common place among media scholars. However, the explosion of user-generated textual productions and the increasing weight of transmedia business strategies have contributed to a shift of interest in favor of merchandising. Nowadays, the inclusion of a long tail of merchandising pieces in analyses of intertextuality is not at all surprising, as practised by researchers such as Gray (2010).

What is the relationship between merchandising and

narrative? First, as shown by *Star Wars* and Walt Disney's universe, these 'marginal' products are part of the narrative world and, consequently, may also be analysed from a semiotic and narratological perspective. In addition, as already indicated, more and more fans use merchandising items such as Lego or Playmobil toys to produce new contents and spread them over the web. What was born in the narrative – a toy inspired by Indiana Jones or Batman – eventually returns to the narrative. From this perspective, the different pieces that are marketed under the umbrella of merchandising – from toys to games, costumes, posters and, obviously, the Duff beer – are texts that are part of the transmedia narrative world.

4.4.4 From brand as narrative to narrative as brand

According to Jeff Gomez, one of the most recognized transmedia producers in the US, in today's fragmented digital frontier

(...) stakeholders must design their properties to play uniquely and compellingly on different media platforms, so the point of entry into the brand or story world can come from almost any direction through any medium. By creating a consistent and ever-growing canon and maintaining brand integrity, you will reinforce your relationship with your audience, building lasting brand loyalty, and a potentially evergreen franchise. The best way to accomplish this is the technique of transmedia storytelling. (Gomez 2012: Paragraph no.20)

If in the traditional approach brands appeared in fiction under the form of product placement, we are now witnessing a radically different phenomenon where *fiction becomes the brand*. As Jenkins explains in *Convergence Culture* (2006), narrative worlds like *Indiana Jones'* or *Harry Potter's* should be considered brands. In this context, it may be claimed that the ultimate goal of market-oriented transmedia strategies is to build a *narrative*

brand-world, while installing in the social imaginary a set of characters, geographies, values and situations that could be expressed in different media/platforms and exploited in different ways.

4.5 Narrative brand-worlds

4.5.1 Brand Hollywood

Hollywood has always been intensely involved in the world of consumers. With the passing of decades it has turned into an *advertising medium* (Wasko 1994). Since the first *Star Wars*¹ experiences in the late 1970s the audio-visual sector's business strategies became ever more refined and widespread. At the same time, large corporations have been convinced of the need to develop competitively appealing storytelling strategies. Brands ceased to be simply logos or manuals for managing visual identity and became stories expressed in multiple media and platforms. Moreover, in the 1990s the TV and film industries underwent extensive restructuring through a massive wave of mergers and acquisitions in the face of great financial pressure (Grainge 2008: 31). In the 2000s everything seemed to be ready for the great cultural convergence and the emergence of transmedia storytelling.

4.5.2 From Disney to Star Wars

The strategy of the Disney Company is exemplary as regards the relationships between branding, entertainment and transmedia narrative worlds. Born in the 1930s as a cartoon factory, in the 1950s it was transformed into an entertainment machine that integrated a string of leisure markets, while connecting filmmaking with TV, tourism, theme parks and merchandising, all

1 According to the *24/7 Wall St.* financial portal, in 2014 the total *Star Wars* franchise revenue was over \$30 billion (<http://247wallst.com/special-report/2012/02/10/the-force-star-wars-franchise-worth-over-30-billion-and-growing/>).

of them under one single narrative umbrella. This integration process was expressed at all levels. For example, ABC's Walt Disney TV show was organized into four sections – *Fantasyland*, *Adventureland*, *Frontierland* and *Tomorrowland* – just like Disney's amusement parks. According to Anderson (1994) these TV productions generated a centrifugal movement that led consumers beyond the immediate textual experience. "People wanted more of Disney's shows, products and experiences" (Anderson 1994: 155). In order to effectively accommodate the increasingly versatile consumer demand, the company adopted a diversification strategy by creating new spaces for expressing the brand, like Disney Stores, Disney Channel, Disneyland, Disney Theatrical Productions, Disney Cruise Lines, etc. According to Michael Eisner (CEO of the company between 1984-2005), they considered themselves as "an operating company, operating the Disney brand all over the world, maintaining it, improving it, promoting it and advertising it with taste" (cit. by Grainge 2008: 50).

Disney's philosophy of *total merchandising* is the source of the current narrative brand-worlds that we encounter in the works of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and J.J. Abrams. In the last two decades Hollywood has invested heavily in family entertainment through franchises like *Star Wars*, *Shrek*, *Toy Story*, *Harry Potter* and *Indiana Jones*, creating narrative worlds with a strong corporate cultural component. The revival of digital animation, thanks to companies like Pixar and DreamWorks, has also contributed to this process.

Licensing – a system that establishes agreements between narrative brand-world right-owners and a network of licensees who can market it – is one of the pillars of this system. The experience of *Star Wars* should be considered a milestone in the development of this strategy. In 1975 Universal turned down a script that was presented by a young director called George Lucas. They considered his science fiction imperial saga a silly idea. After contacting many studios, 20th Century Fox finally

decided to go for Lucas and offered him \$11 million. When the director negotiated his contract with Fox, all gasped: he was not looking for cash. George Lucas wanted control over the narrative world. He kept for himself the right to the final cut of the movie, 40% of the box-office net profits, the right to the creation of future sequels and all the rights on merchandising. Fox managers were convinced they were making a great business deal. We should contextualize their decision.

In the 1970s science fiction was not a profitable genre. Neither the sequels nor the merchandising appeared to hold great business potential. Whereas toys inspired by TV cartoons were popular among young consumers, Hollywood science-fiction characters were not a sizeable source of revenue. Safeguarding the rights to *Star Wars*' merchandising was one of the best bets George Lucas ever made.

Was George Lucas a marketing, merchandising and transmedia narrative visionary? Not at all. He just did not want Fox to ruin his movie, while maintaining control over the narrative world and impeding its debasement with low quality productions (Sansweet 1992). *Star Wars - A new hope* was released on 25 May 1977 in 43 theatres. The rest is history for the culture industry and popular culture. *Star Wars* demonstrated that films have lost their weight as discrete commodities and have become a platform for a new type of branding, expressed through multiple audio-visual media (film, TV, VHS, DVD), transmedia experiences (novels, videogames, books) and consumer goods (toys, drinks, fast food).

4.5.3 Batman in the Matrix

The merger between Warner Communications and Time in July 1989 was a clear sign of the on-going processes in the new media ecology. Turner Broadcasting Systems (1996) and America Online (2000) joined the alliance, giving birth to a conglomerate with extensive control over content production and distribution. From TV to theme parks, music, books and magazines, sports

teams and new media, everything seemed to converge towards an integrated whole. As regards audio-visual production, the declining cinema profits highlighted the exigency for further strengthening the links between different markets and the media. Productions like *Batman* (1989) carved paths that would soon be trodden by other characters and fictional worlds, like *The Matrix* and *Harry Potter*.

Batman was the product that tested the waters for an effective integration of a large number of non-media acquisitions in cosmetics, restaurants and sports by Warner in the mid-1980s. If the film directed by Tim Burton generated \$ 250 million in the US alone, the total earnings exceeded \$ 1,000 million under any concept. The horizontal and vertical integration of the media industry allowed for the expression of this total entertainment philosophy and confirmed that it was possible to recover old characters and relaunch them under the new branding logic.

The old cartoons became prized possessions in Hollywood. Any character from the Looney Tunes series, like *Bugs Bunny* or *Duffy Duck*, could be the source of the next blockbuster. The film *Space Jam* (1996) suggested another interesting crossover, in this case between the audio-visual conglomerate and the sports industry. In this context, Warner soon followed in the footsteps of Disney and opened in the early 1990s their own theme parks and Warner Stores in order to exploit its cultural heritage.

The Matrix is one of the most discussed and studied works of the transmedia universe (Dawson 2003; Clover 2004; Lawrence 2004; Gillis 2005; Diocaretz and Herbrechter 2006; Jenkins 2006; Grainge 2008). The contradiction is manifest: the movie that denounced capitalist society's alienation embodied the paradigm of narrative brand-worlds. The transmedia expansions – digital animations (*The Animatrix* 2003), comics (*The Matrix Comics* 1999-2004 [online version], 2003-2004 [print version]), videogames (*Enter the Matrix* 2003), online multiplayer gaming experiences (*The Matrix On-line* 2004) and hundreds of

merchandising goods – offered an integrated, coherent and interrelated narrative world that facilitated the consumer's immersion into the Matrix experience. Somehow *The Matrix* was Hollywood's answer to the growing challenge of videogame companies, whose profits have been increasing year on year. Thanks to the creation of a new aesthetic – from bullet-time to black-leather clothes – and the ability to generate an expandable narrative world and its philosophical ambitions, *The Matrix* confirmed the deep affinity between branding and transmedia storytelling. The green version of the Warner Bros. logo that is projected during *The Matrix* initial credits was more than an aesthetic game; it was the graphic representation of the ultimate coupling between a corporation and a narrative brand-world.

4.5.4 Harry Potter versus Sauron

The transmedia planning of *The Lord of the Rings* took place against the background of the following audience segmentation: 25% of J.R.R. Tolkien hardcore fans, 50% of people who had heard about the books but never read them, and 25% of viewers who had never heard of Frodo, Gollum and Minas Tirith. If a work like *Harry Potter* was aimed at a family audience, *The Lord of the Rings* was targeted to a wider audience, among whom were adolescents and young adults (mostly male). The narrative challenge was impressive: the fictional world had to satisfy the hardcore fans who would scrutinize the film adaptations frame by frame, and at the same time it had to adapt a teenager novel into a series of films for all ages (Grainge 2008: 136).

In order to meet the expectations of different audiences, the New Line team produced various formats, from trailers to spots, spoilers, interviews, screensavers, making-of videos, etc. The online broadcast of the trailers served to build and strengthen a community of users around the narrative universe that Peter Jackson was creating in New Zealand. New Line constantly monitored the fans' web activity with view to checking the evolution of this segment's relationship with the film

narrative. Furthermore, instead of bombing the market with merchandising from the first day, the producers developed an incremental strategy with the aim of avoiding excessive commercial exploitation. Values such as loyalty (to the literary universe of J.R.R. Tolkien) and independence (despite the large financial investment behind *The Lord of the Rings* it was presented as an indie production) were at the centre of this strategy. *The Lord of the Rings* integrated a massive diffusion blockbuster strategy with niche activities targeting specific consumer groups. The narrative brand-world was expressed at various levels and was addressed to different segments. While numerous corporate mergers took place in the 1990s, very often each production company continued to work as an independent economic unit and narrative actor. As Grainger put it, "the decentralized nature of some corporations like Time Warner led to competition rather than cooperation between its different divisions" (Grainger 2008: 10).

Harry Potter was perhaps one of the first planned brand narratives, managed by the different divisions of Warner Bros. Just like with *The Lord of the Rings*, the producers of *Harry Potter* decided to avoid over-saturating the market with merchandising, while preserving a set of literary values. Once again, the web became a privileged space for sharing contents and engaging fans, although this did not prevent legal conflicts when fans produced their own *Harry Potter* stories (Jenkins 2006). These tensions between the owners of a narrative brand-world and its consumers are inevitable in a media ecology that is going through a profound reconfiguration process. Fans also consider themselves to be 'owners' of the narrative brand-world and do not hesitate to tell new stories and expand the transmedia universe. In this context, the traditional broadcasting and copyright practices must be adapted to the exigencies of an environment that is dominated by social networks, peer-to-peer exchanges and Creative Commons licenses. What attitude should a creator adopt when users manipulate his/her characters with

impunity? From the perspective of transmedia storytelling we believe it is counterproductive to stigmatize or persecute this type of textual (post) production. Whenever an amateur author shares a *Harry Potter* story in Fanfiction.net, or when a new parody of *Star Wars* comes to YouTube, the symbolic (and therefore economic) value of that specific narrative brand-world increases.

4.6 Conclusions

We are currently experiencing an extraordinary moment in the evolution of the media ecology. Every day new 'media species' emerge; old species must struggle for space and must adapt if they want to survive. The media, their languages and their narratives tend to recombine, leading to new multimodal stories. In this context, media researchers are urged to put aside monomedia approaches and to establish transmedia research strategies.

While narratologists and semioticians have theorized fictional worlds for decades (Eco 1979; Pavel 1989), the experience of living and participating in a narrative brand-world is relatively recent and emerges from the confluence of two processes: 1) the convergence of marketing, branding and storytelling strategies, and 2) the transformation of narratives and characters into brands. If traditional advertising was product-centric, and in the second half of the twentieth century adopted a user-centric approach, today we are witnessing the prevalence of narrative-centric transmedia experiences. As noted in Section 4, the relationship between brands and fiction has been reversed: if in traditional product placement the brand appeared inside the fiction, now the fiction is the brand. In parallel with this process, the large media corporations have become sensitive to the symbolic value of their stories and characters, which now take the form of narrative brand-worlds. Although transmedia

narratives existed long before *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*², in the last two decades their development has become professionalized and transformed into a strategic issue for media conglomerates. Large corporations have risen to the challenge of designing transmedia narratives, of articulating their distribution across multiple media, of managing their exploitation in all possible manners, and of enabling collaborative spaces so that fans can join the great narrative feast. Transmedia storytelling is here to stay, and we are already completely enmeshed in it.

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2 For a first approach to transmedia storytelling in the first half of the 20th century see Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman (2014).

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