Transmedia: A Merger of Story, Technology and Marketing

by Kate McCallum
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Transmedia has become a big buzzword in the industry over the last few years. Some people prefer to describe transmedia as cross-platform or multi-platform storytelling, interactive or participatory media. Other terms associated with transmedia are convergence, deep or immersive media, experience design, story franchises, world building, integrated media and 360. In some circles the term transmedia is a real hot button so while the verdict is still out, transmedia is here to stay. As an arts, media and/or entertainment professional dedicated to success and staying ahead of the game, it’s important for you to know what these emerging strategies mean and how to apply them to your own creative process.

In April 2010, the Producers Guild of America created the new category of producer called a “Transmedia Producer” recognizing those who manage and adapt entertainment properties that span multiple platforms. The PGA defines a project or franchise as being “transmedia” if it consists of three or more fictional storylines that exist simultaneously on film, TV, broadband, print, disc, etc. A transmedia producer credit will be given to the person responsible for a significant portion of a project’s long-term planning, development, production and/or maintenance of narrative continuity across multiple platforms.

At the heart of this emerging system is the idea that storytellers can now create additional experiences that deepen the audiences’ experience when a story and the story world is extended and unfolded through a variety of media and digital media platforms, venues and/or experiences. This creates a richer experience for consumers and fans to participate more meaningfully in that world.

As the digital and social media experience continues to evolve, today’s audience no longer just consumes media passively but they desire media and story experiences that are social, participatory and available to them on a number of devices and screens.

Fans are especially interested in transmedia experiences that allow them to not only explore their favorite stories and programs in ways

Transmedia Producer  
As defined by the Producers Guild of America

A Transmedia Narrative project or franchise must consist of three (or more) narrative storylines existing within the same fictional universe on any of the following platforms: Film, Televising, Short Film, Broadband, Publishing, Comics, Animation, Mobile, Special Venues, DVD/Blu-ray/CD-ROM, Narrative Commercial and Marketing rollouts, and other technologies that may or may not currently exist. These narrative extensions are NOT the same as repurposing material from one platform to be cut or repurposed to different platforms.

A Transmedia Producer credit is given to the person(s) responsible for a significant portion of a project’s long-term planning, development, production, and/or maintenance of narrative continuity across multiple platforms, and creation of original storylines for new platforms. Transmedia producers also create and implement interactive endeavors to unite the audience of the property with the canonical narrative and this element should be considered as valid qualification for credit as long as they are related directly to the narrative presentation of a project.

Transmedia Producers may originate with a project or be brought in at any time during the long-term rollout of a project in order to analyze, create or facilitate the life of that project and may be responsible for all or only part of the content of the project. Transmedia Producers may also be hired by or partner with companies or entities, which develop software and other technologies and who wish to showcase these inventions with compelling, immersive, multi-platform content.

To qualify for this credit, a Transmedia Producer may or may not be publicly credited as part of a larger institution or company, but a titled employee of said institution must be able to confirm that the individual was an integral part of the production team for the project.

For more information, please see: http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc_nm
that take them deeper into the story world and characters’ lives, but also provide them opportunities for participation in the creation of additional content related to the story in new media formats. They may also engage in newly emerging activities related to the story world as in an Alternative Reality Game (ARG) or a Live Action Role Play game (LARP). These experiences allow users to share their passion for stories with others, which creates a sense of community with common interests.

Transmedia design continues to become more and more popular as more and more producers and production companies are adding it to their offerings. Conferences dedicated to transmedia and transmedia meet-up groups are emerging and panels dedicated to transmedia are now featured at most prominent entertainment industry events and festivals. Companies such as Blacklight, Fourth Wall, 42 Entertainment, Alchemy, Bridge Arts Media and others have made transmedia services their specialty and creators who have skill sets in producing a variety of content platforms are being valued more and more for their diverse abilities.

It’s not that this strategy is new, in fact one of the greatest examples of transmedia is early Disney. Walt designed Disneyland so that fans of Disney Studio animation, features and TV shows could visit and immerse themselves in a Disney world where their favorite characters come to life.

For many years, the mainstream studios were the keepers and creators of content due to the fact that the technology and costs to create content was prohibitive for most individual artists/creators. With the advent of digital technology and the democratization of media, now anyone with passion, talent, persistence and a great idea can begin to manifest actual IP (intellectual property) in the transmedia space.

So, there are two ways to look at the application of transmedia strategy design: from the big corporate media company’s perspective to the individual artist and creator. Both parties have tremendous opportunities and benefits associated with applying transmedia strategy design to their business development efforts.

From a development perspective of an agnostic IP, be it a story or a brand, think in terms of applying transmedia as a way to strategically design and explore your story world or brand/experience.

I have found that because there are so many new platforms and experiences now available to creators, a helpful approach to transmedia design strategy is to think about it visually.

Imagine a bicycle wheel.
The hub of the wheel is where the core agnostic story/story world/brand (your IP) is anchored and the spokes of the wheel represent platforms or experiences that that core IP can be expressed through. The wheel itself presents the whole system experience of a transmedia experience. Then taking it a step further, as the wheel turns, the spokes disappear.

In my role as a future trends tracker of arts, media and entertainment for a global futurist think tank, we have identified over 48 different arts and media genres, formats and/or experiences one can consider in evolving a transmedia experience and there are new technologies emerging at a very rapid rate.

“Technology is the servant of imagination.”

So if each of these 48+ experiences become opportunities for a story or brand to be expressed through, the excitement and creative opportunities for companies and individual creators is endless. While not all stories are organically suited for such expansive reach, some are and it is exhilarating to think about what opportunities one can design around these worlds.

A producer, production company and or studio can review their existing content and libraries to mine for new experiences such as Paramount Studios did last year with the re-release of the movie Grease complete with subtitles. Sing-Alongs of the movie were happening on a grassroots level and Paramount took advantage of the trends. The re-released version offered audiences a more immersive, communal experience and the opportunity to engage deeper with the movie by encouraging attendees to dress up, a la “50’s Grease style”, and then sing along with the characters. This re-release was a big success at the box office and provided satisfaction for fans.

Re-releases of existing films such as Star Wars in 3D and or Blue Ray format is another example of an aspect of cross platform strategy that has more to do with taking advantage of emerging technical formats, yet this too can be considered in the transmedia strategy design process as yet another way to achieve additional ROI from core properties.

The real excitement that transmedia strategy design offers individual artists is freedom of expression and creative control. Content creators can ground passion stories (their IP) into accessible platforms. Stories that they may not have been able to sell into the mainstream entertainment marketplace, or that were too costly to invest in at first, such as a feature film, documentary or TV series can live in other media platforms or experiences first. For example, a screenwriter can repurpose a story into a novel that can then be optioned for a feature film, game, television project or other media property. A filmmaker can create an online web series which has the potential to be optioned and repurposed as a primetime broadcast or cable series. An artist can create a graphic novel that becomes a feature film and a musician can create a musical that becomes a television series. It’s all about collaborating to create and develop an intellectual property in ways that are accessible and affordable in a strategic roll out from the agnostic IP of origin into a variety of digital platforms available to a fan base or audience that can grow.

From transglobal, to transgenerational, to transmedia... with the world becoming more globalized, transmedia storytelling can also be likened to a “globalization” of media and entertainment. Producers should consider how they can move their stories into a global market as well. A franchise that is successful nationally can also become successful internationally.

In Creatasphere’s last must-read white paper on DAM: Digital Asset Management, one can see that a good business plan for companies desiring to stay on the cutting-edge is to create a solid DAM program that compliments a transmedia strategy application. It’s time for these powerful two aspects of the creative and production process to collaborate as we move into a more and more exciting creative future.

About Kate McCallum
Kate McCallum is an experienced transmedia producer, consultant, writer, project coordinator and development specialist with diverse experience ranging from 20 years in the mainstream studios at Universal and Paramount in the production and development of primetime television series and feature films to producing music, live events and social media content. Kate founded Bridge Arts Media, LLC in 2005 and is currently producing a variety of arts and media content including 360 fulldome immersive experiences with Vortex Immersion Media. For more information about her work: bridgeartsmedia.com, c3visionlab.org, and vorteximmersion.com.

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