Once Upon a Time...
decentralized

by Chris Thomes
with Kate McCallum

There has been a lot of debate and head-scratching around what exactly transmedia is. But the fact is, while you can call it whatever you want, at its core, it describes a migration and evolution of mass-media storytelling from a single screen to, well, just about everywhere. According to Henry Jenkins, author of the seminal text, **Convergence Culture:** *Transmedia storytelling is storytelling by a number of decentralized authors who share and create content for distribution across multiple forms of media. Transmedia immerses an audience in a story's universe through a number of dispersed entry points, providing a comprehensive and coordinated experience of a complex story.*

In other words, and from a producer's perspective, it is the process by which an intellectual property is manifested across multiple platforms by multiple producers. It's not simply redistribution of a preliminary type of media (say, an episode of *Cheers*) across the Internet (say, via Hulu or YouTube). Rather, it's the practice of telling a story from various points of view, at different times, in different formats, the sum total of which comprises a world and its characters. New media formats, platforms and distribution methods are now allowing a story to be bigger, have more touch points with an audience and across longer periods of time, as well as generate more revenue.

Compelling Characters, a Great Story... and a *Calendar*!

Great characters and stories transcend platforms, distribution windows and media formats. In fact, some of the most effective strategies leverage multiple approaches. Straight video, such as YouTube-style content, is only one tool by which a producer can tell her tale. What are some of the other tools? There are a lot, and the list is ever-growing, but it includes social media platforms like Facebook and Vine, multi-channel networks like FullScreen and Machinima, video-on-demand services like Hulu and Amazon Prime, and even immersive experiences like augmented reality, role-play systems like LARPs (Live Action Role-Playing games) and special venue and dome-based video projection environments. The bottom line: Any platform that can reach an audience can be an effective part of a transmedia story.

But planning is everything.

Jill Atkinson, an activist/writer/blogger who advocates for social responsibility in business, proposes that there are eight defining characteristics of a transmedia production. One of them requires that "Cross-media rollout is planned early in the life of the franchise." Few do this better than the Walt Disney Company. They have been managing franchises for half a century and whether it's a ride at Disneyland, a DVD, a concert showcasing a TV show's soundtrack, or a virtual world fleshing out and extending an IP's narrative space, they plan *everything* out before triggering a story across multiple outlets.

While one can use a multitude of game development and interactive storytelling organizational tools to manage a cross-platform effort, it really all starts with a simple calendar. At Disney, they use a franchise calendar — the most basic tool in the world, but what it does so elegantly is map story elements and components to key business-driving events. From scripts and pilots, to airings and screenings, to events like Comic-Con, no stone is left unturned, and every department knows when they are up to bat.

So who orchestrates this whole enchilada? Most transmedia experts agree that a single vision must drive the story world and must be managed by one or a very few visionaries. This is the "creator," who might be an EP, a showrunner, a writer, a producer or director, etc. This is the person or small group of people who **own** the vision and are accountable for the world. From there, others coordinate, plan, and produce efforts accordingly and map deployments to business events that drive revenue and scale as necessary through product distribution.

Everyone Is Everywhere, So Be There Too

This type of advanced planning can be seen in full effect with *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a Web series adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. *Lizzie Bennet* utilized five different YouTube channels, two dozen in-story character Twitter accounts, and story events happening on a dozen other social platforms. It was quite a phenomenon, garnering more viewers than some network shows and doing so using multiple media, channels, platforms and other vehicles.

Unlike franchises like *Star Wars* or *The Matrix*, which feature multiple individual story elements spread across films, comic books, video games, etc., all playing out in a common story world, *Lizzie* takes a more integrated approach. Her single story is told over multiple types of media, but those elements do not stand alone and are interdependent on one another to reveal the true nature of the story. One piece of the story might be a YouTube video, another piece may be on a website and another piece may be hidden in a magazine

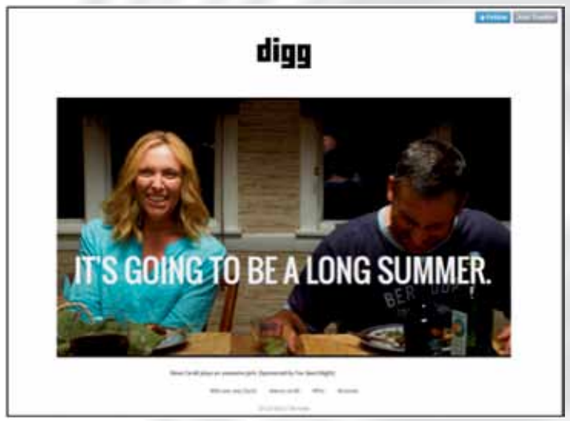
advertisement. It's a technique that relies on the audience to put all the pieces together to assemble the story, mimicking the way audiences consume information in our daily life — though email and social media, the radio and TV… everything everywhere.

And all that takes some serious planning. Jay Bushman, transmedia producer at Fourth Wall Studios and *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, has stated in his discussion with Marama Whyte at Hypable, "Everything starts in the writer's room. We break the stories for each arc, and decide what belongs on camera and what doesn't. For major story beats, I'll look at what ends up in the episodes and try to find ways that transmedia can complement the action, show viewers what's going on from a different perspective of characters who aren't on camera at that point, or ways to bridge episodes together."

So while the core of *Lizzie* was video supported on multiple platforms, not every transmedia production relies on video, or frankly, even includes it at all.

20 Frames Are Worth a Thousand Words

Another example of non-traditional transmedia storytelling is the creative marketing around Fox Searchlight's *The Way, Way Back*. A compelling faux GIF experience was launched on digg/Tumblr. A GIF (image format) is simply a sequence of repeating video frames that automatically play in a Web browser. This has proven to be an easily sharable means of revealing character and story using a trending approach without full video production. Although, in the Fox example cited, content was drawn from the movie, one could conceive of unique and specific moments even before a movie or TV was made, or long after it screened or aired. This content could be "shot" and released virally over social media on sites like Tumblr, and serve as an alternate way to expose storylines, showcase a character's traits, or simply tease moments/content to come. They are bite-size, viral, and powerful.



And while 20 frames in a GIF is one of the shortest amounts of time in which to tell a story, the resuscitation of an IP by companies like Netflix adds a whole new meaning to transmedia.

Timelessness — Life Beyond Cancellation

With distributors like Netflix now making a claim in the content development space, properties like *Arrested Development*, once doomed for standard TV season life, are now getting second chances and transcending typical content distribution timelines. Not only do Netflix and Hulu represent another platform from traditional cable TV, but the binge rollout of all episodes, and the creative, multiplatform marketing on Twitter and Facebook, combined with the noise on a multitude of fans sites, created a true transmedia fabric that got everyone's attention. The approach transcends what people typically expect of content rollouts. Shows can now come back between cancellations on different networks, be formatted for binge viewing and even point toward feature films, short-form Web series, whatever one can imagine. People want the characters they love and the more of it they get, the better.

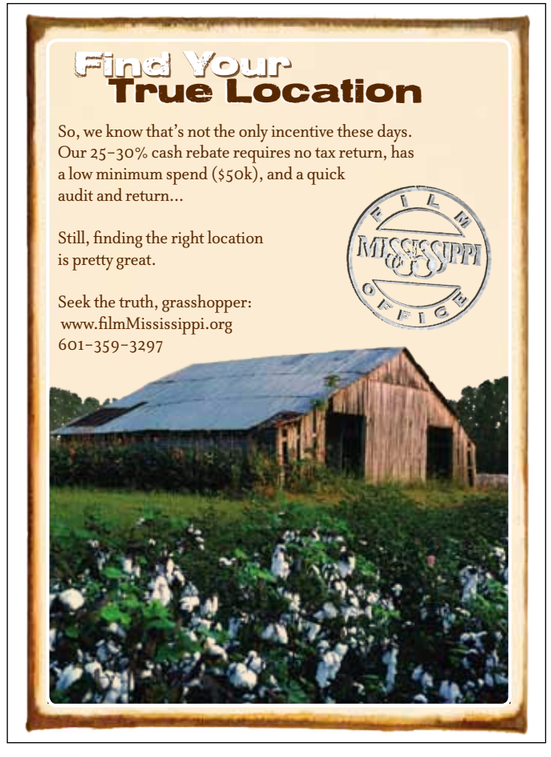
Breaking the Fourth Wall with No ROI

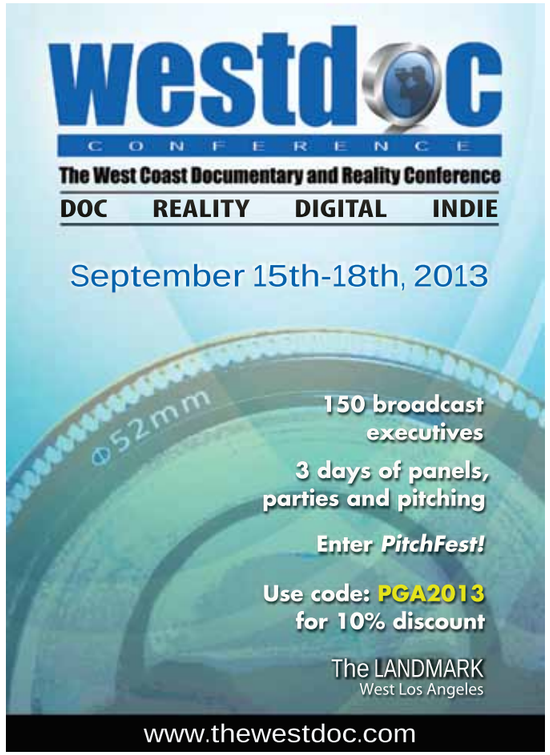
Fourth Wall Studios really pushed the envelope transmedia experience with their RIDES platform. In fact, they won an Emmy® for *Dirty Work*, one of their transmedia productions. Their "RIDES" are narrative, multi-screen entertainment experiences that allow players to discover an unfolding story delivered via browser, email, cell phone and other connected devices. Compelling, yes, but monetizable? Maybe. It's still very early in the stages of transmedia, especially in areas where the innovation is expected to return a profit and not merely serve as creative marketing for another media type. Fourth Wall Studios quickly laid off dozens of workers right after winning their Emmy, proof that even award-worthy material can sometimes wind up a loss leader. Until there is scale behind something, the revenue numbers just won't add up.

RE·BATE[1]
(rē,bāt,) *noun*
San Francisco could rebate up to $600,000 per TV Episode or Feature Film.
VISIT: FilmSF.org or CALL: 415.554.6241
SAN FRANCISCO FILM COMMISSION

- NEC NC800C DLP CINEMA 2K PROJECTOR
- LARGE FORMAT SCREEN AND DOLBY 7.1 SOUND WITH DOLBY CP650 PROCESSOR
- DOLBY DSS200 DCP SERVER
- FORMATS INCLUDE SONY SRW-5100-HDCAM, HDSR, 3D, APPLE MACBOOK PRO, SONY BLU-RAY, DCP
- 2 KINOTON 35MM FILM PROJECTORS
- XPAND 3D SYSTEM
- AMX TOUCH SCREEN SYSTEM
- 20 EXECUTIVE LEATHER SEATS (WE CAN ADD UP TO 5 MORE)
- LUXURIOUS LOBBY & PATIO
- CONVENIENT FREE PARKING

The Screening Room
www.dickclarkproductionstheater.com
dick clark productions
310.255.4699
Lantana Center
2900 West Olympic Blvd.,
Santa Monica, CA 90404





To that point, many buzz-worthy transmedia efforts have manifested as movie, TV or video game marketing projects.

A Game of Senses Through Unclear Waters

Transmedia can mean so many things to different people that the lines begin to blur between pure "story producing" and clever and creative marketing. While we'd never argue that marketing can't entertain, when it comes to protecting the PGA transmedia credit and the producers who work hard to earn it, certain lines have to be drawn. Instated as a new media credit four years ago, the title of "transmedia producer" planted a flag in ground that's still shifting under our feet. As a result, the definition continually must be revisited, sometimes annually, as digital disruption alters the entertainment landscape and what the PGA acknowledges as an officially recognized producing credit.

Commonly, transmedia campaigns are funded by marketing dollars, and developed in support of marketing another form of media, such as a motion picture or television show. And while overseeing a marketing campaign isn't going to qualify anyone for PGA membership, the techniques used by such campaigns are worth studying for the depth that they might one day add to original storytelling. A compelling analogue might be the rapid stylistic evolution of music videos in the 1980s and early '90s; while no one would mistake a three-minute video for a feature film, a careful and clear-eyed look at the format and its techniques would have told you a great deal about where feature film and television were headed over the coming decades.

It was, in fact, inventive transmedia marketing that supported the launch of one of the most successful and spectacular shows on television — HBO's *Game of Thrones*. To help with awareness during the launch, transmedia agency Campfire needed to create a marketing campaign that would be rich enough to satisfy fans of the well-regarded book series but simple enough to enjoy without any knowledge of the story. So they created a campaign that spoke to different audiences on different levels, generating a groundswell of initial support for the series. They brought the world of Westeros to life through a series of interactive experiences based around the five senses, even sending physical props and materials to influencers, who then shared their experience with their fans and followers.

The question of whether this kind of content represents creative marketing or Guild membership-level "story entertainment" is a complex one. Producers who claim such productions on their resumes when applying for Guild membership are closely scrutinized, with their role as "producer" carefully vetted. The PGA isn't about to open its ranks to marketing executives who simply green-light the funds for such a campaign. But truly producing the story component of the content is what distinguishes PGA eligibility and credibility as a transmedia producer.

Protecting PGA Credibility

Transmedia experiences strive to transcend the way audiences consume story. From the senses, to metaphoric objects in the physical world, to new formats and radically time-shifted viewing windows, transmedia has radically refactored storytelling. Experiential and authentic, these new approaches are getting audiences' attention, motivating their discussions and influencing their lives like never before.

That said, the challenge before our Guild is to work to differentiate marketing efforts from pure transmedia storytelling. As the newest guests at the entertainment industry party, new media producers have a unique respect for the credibility that comes with Producers Guild membership. By maintaining clarity around those guidelines, we strive to maintain the integrity of the Guild, its constitutional guidelines, and the distinction of its membership. This is in no way to diminish the incredible transmedia work done on behalf of brands. But the essential question is whether or not the resulting content is storytelling in and of itself? Or is it simply promoting a brand and is not itself the story?

As time passes and disruption continues to blend media types, forge new platforms and new ways of telling stories, the job of vetting the credit and new members in this space isn't going to get any easier. Nonetheless, the New Media Council will continue to refine its credit definitions to keep up with the times and appropriately represent members of the producing team. In the final analysis, the PGA is there to serve the storytellers and the creators of intellectual property. But the nature of those pursuits — like the world of entertainment itself — is changing like never before.