

# Guest Editorial Preface

## Special Issue on Transmedia and Games

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This special issue of IJGCMS brings together recent scholarship on the relationship between transmedia and game experiences. The intersection of these phenomena sparks many questions about design, participation, narrative, production, and engagement. For instance, how do fans play across platforms, and participate with, and even alter, a transmedia world? How do game characters, mechanics, goals, or other game play elements get influenced by or influence the overall transmedia experience or one's experience in other platforms?

Approaching these types of questions is no easy task, particularly as defining, contextualizing, designing, and implementing the term “transmedia” itself has had a storied past. The phrase “transmedia” was first used in relation to “transmedia intertextuality,” which was described by Marsha Kinder (1991). Transmedia means “across media,” (Jenkins, 2011) and it has been applied to a number of different phenomena, such as storytelling, playing, writing, branding, learning, selling, creating, and thinking across media. Jenkins's book, *Convergence Culture* (2006) has popularized the term (Gillan, 2013), but its use and relation to other terms has often been debated.

In my course, “Storytelling across Media,” we have spent hours attempting to parse all of the different overlapping terms. There's transmedia, cross-platform, cross-media, and interactive storytelling, as well as an adaptation, franchise, and extension. There's also convergence, co-creation, additive comprehension, and even radical intertextuality. These terms take on different meanings in different contexts, have been used divergently by academics and practitioners, and continue to evolve in usage over time.

For example, the term “transmedia storytelling” as used by Henry Jenkins refers to “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (2011). One of the primary characteristics of transmedia storytelling is the use of multiple platforms (e.g., television, film, books, web, games, apps) (Dena, 2009) to create a rich narrative experience. A story, which is told across these platforms, interlocks and interlaces—if you remove one platform, you do not just remove one story element or one character, but you remove a portion of the overall experience. Jenkins explains that, “Each outing, however, is also self-contained as to be enjoyed without having to delve through all the texts contributing to the world” (Martens, 2015, citing Jenkins, 2006).

Likewise, Long's definition (2007) also focuses on how each media text contributes to the whole story world (Rish, 2014), and he emphasizes the narrative “*cohesion* and *canon*” elements of transmedia storytelling (Dena, 2009). Scholars and creators, such as Phillips, describe differences between East and West coast practices of transmedia storytelling (Phillips, 2012; Jenkins, 2012), as well as distinctions how industries beyond the United States practice transmedia creation (Jenkins, 2012). Moreover, Mittell explains how Jenkins distinguishes between balanced transmedia (experiences with

no primary medium) versus unbalanced transmedia (experiences with a clear core text or medium, such as with *Assassin's Creed's* games) (Mittell, 2015).

Christy Dena argues that Jenkins's use of the term transmedia storytelling does not consider authorship; in her approach, she focuses less on the end product and more on the *practice* aspect of transmedia creation (Veugen, 2015). Dena uses the term polymorphic fiction to describe how each platform provides different types of interactions and has different affordances, and this affects the overall experience of the storyworld (2010). For instance, the audience's interactions with a book, videogame, website, or other platform, affects meaning-making in a storyworld (Dena, 2010; Rish, 2014). Jenkins has continued to expand on and clarify his definition over the past decade (2011; Veugen, 2015).

Likewise, over the past ten years, we have seen an explosion in the examination of transmedia phenomena. Storytellers, scholars, and designers have considered the process of creating transmedia worlds, properties, stories, and games and its best practices (Phillips, 2012; Dena, 2009). Others have considered the marketing, advertising, and business aspects of transmedia development and implementation (Rose, 2013). We are still very much in the beginning stages of understanding the limits, potential, implications and possibilities of transmedia design, research, and play. Researchers have identified, for example, educational benefits to transmedia creation (Rish, 2014), transmedia storytelling (Rodrigues & Bidarra, 2014; Kalogeras, 2013), and transmedia play (Herr-Stephenson, Alper, Reilly & Jenkins, 2013), as well as the use of transmedia for social change or civic engagement (Cheong and Gong, 2010) and health messaging/public service messaging (Sangalang, Angeline, Jessie M. Quintero Johnson, and Kate E. Ciancio, 2013). Determining what is transmedia has also been tricky—are alternate reality games, which by definition are experienced across media, transmedia games? Are LARPs (live-action role-playing games) transmedia experiences? The label transmedia has been applied to a number of different types of media properties—*Doctor Who* (Perryman, 2008), *Glee* (Stork, 2014), *Peter Pan* (Meyers, 2014), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Beddows, 2012), *Lost* (Smith, 2009), *Sherlock Holmes* (Stein & Busse, 2012), and in this issue, *The Walking Dead* (Ecenbarger, 2015), and *Assassin's Creed* (Veugen, 2015; Martens, 2015). Some researchers focus more on industries and development practices, such as Johnston and Philips in this issue, while others focus more on the user and audience, such as Martens in this issue, or on the transmedia text, such as Veugen and Ecenbarger in this issue.

Connie Veugen takes on *Assassin's Creed* in “Assassin's Creed and Transmedia Storytelling.” She first introduces the complexities of defining transmedia storytelling, using theoretical frameworks and terminology from Christy Dena and Henry Jenkins. Veugen focuses on the “Desmond Saga,” a set of multiple media texts in the *Assassin's Creed* universe relating the story of Desmond Miles, which is told through games, videos, books, graphic novels and a comic book. Veugen evaluates whether this is actually an example of transmedia storytelling.

Sjors Martens also takes on the universe of *Assassin's Creed* in “Struggle for the Universe: Maneuvering the Narrative World of Assassin's Creed.” Martens specifically investigates *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* to show how player engagement is expanded from that of an individual game to that of the broader narrative universe. Martens considers the strategies taken to provide a satisfying single installment of the narrative that also provides incentives for further exploration of the *Assassin's Creed* world. He creates a possible framework for explaining the relationship between installment and world.

In “Comic Books, Video Games, and Transmedia Storytelling: A Case Study of the *Walking Dead*,” Charlie Ecenbarger navigates the narrative and aesthetic overlaps between the comic book and game formulations of *The Walking Dead*. He argues that there is a *Walking Dead* universe that is triggered in the game by the use of visual motifs, styles, and typography that is similar to that of the comic book, as well as three characters that overlap the two platforms, and parallels between storyline lines and relationships. Ecenbarger provides a framework for considering this by looking at Kristeva's concept of intertextuality, Gray's usage of the term paratext, and Jenkins's use of transmedia storytelling.

Keith Johnston's and Tom Phillips' "A 'Step into the Abyss'? Transmedia in the U.K. Games and Television Industries" focuses on the state of production in the United Kingdom. More specifically, to create a transmedia projects, creators from heretofore distinct, siloed fields (such as television and games) suddenly need to find ways to work together productively. Rather than solely considering the success or effectiveness of projects, the authors use ethnographic and interview methods and evaluate how television and game industry participants discuss and deliberate practices. Their analysis reveals the current barriers and obstacles to productive collaborations and the creation of transmedia projects in the U.K., as well as what needs to be remedied to overcome these challenges.

Finally, this special issue contains a review of a new book by David Simkins, *The Arts of LARP*, which explores live action role-playing games. The review is written by Lee Sheldon, and the critique sheds light on the challenges of designing games that traverse the imaginary and physical worlds.

A common thread throughout this issue is that it is evident we still have a long way to go in terms of defining and investigating this field. We invite you to consider how these works open up new questions about the intersection of games and transmedia experiences, practices, storytelling, participation, and creation.

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