Assassin’s Creed and Transmedia Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

Although, the term itself was coined more than ten years ago by Henry Jenkins, transmedia storytelling still needs to be researched as the terminology has proven to be multi-interpretable. Transmedia storytelling involving computer games is even less-well researched. This article will look into both issues. First it will take a critical look at transmedia storytelling to show the difference between it and other terms such as convergence, cross-media storytelling and radical intertextuality. Next, the article will look at the role of games in transmedia storytelling, focusing on the Assassin’s Creed Desmond Saga to determine if games can be used as a narrative element in transmedia storytelling or if games are only a more active way to take part in the storyworld.

KEYWORDS

Additive Comprehension, Assassin’s Creed, Confluence, Convergence Culture, Cross-media Storytelling, Franchise, Radical Intertextuality, Storyworld, Transmedia Practice, Transmedia Storytelling

INTRODUCTION

As theorists and practitioners have noticed, in the past decade a new type of narrative has emerged, one that is multimedial, non-linear, game-like, participatory, and immersive as Frank Rose states in his book The Art of Immersion (2011). Rose’s term for this new type of storytelling is “deep media” (2011, p. 3). In The Art of Immersion, Rose discusses the diverse aspects of deep media using recent examples such as the Alternate Reality Campaign Why So Serious? that preceded the 2008 Batman movie The Dark Knight; the fan twitter accounts for the popular TV-series Mad Men (2007 – 2015), which forced the television company to set up their own official accounts; as well as the often cited TV-series Lost (2004 – 2010). These examples are typically recognized as instances of “transmedia storytelling,” a term popularized by Henry Jenkins in 2003. According to Jenkins, in its ideal form each medium in transmedia storytelling “does what it does best-so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play” (2003).

What Jenkin’s definition seems to suggest is that games occupy a separate position in transmedia storytelling. Whereas the story is expanded in the more traditional narrative media such as novels, comics, television, and films, games are not used to “expand” the narrative, but can be used to immerse the player in the story world. In his book, Rose also examines some games such as Myst (1983), Grand Theft Auto III (2001) and IV (2004), Black & White (2001), and the Fable series (2004, 2008, 2010). Whereas media texts are always part of a larger transmedia narrative in the other examples Rose gives, games are treated as special cases, separate from other media texts. Even when it is clear that a game is part of a larger narrative, such as the game Enter the Matrix (2003) which connects the first film The Matrix (1999) with both the second film The Matrix Reloaded (2003) as well as
with the animated film *The Final Flight of the Osiris* (2003), its story is still considered secondary, thus confirming the deviant status of games.2

The aim of this paper is to address the status of video games as part of transmedia storytelling. To do this, I will first explore transmedia storytelling itself, as it is still a multi-interpretable term. Using theories by Henry Jenkins and Christy Dena, among others, I will discuss the elements that distinguish transmedia storytelling from other types of multiple media narratives, such as franchises and cross-media storytelling.3 Then, I will examine the so-called Desmond Saga, a set of media texts that are part of the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise (2007 – present). Using close reading and textual analysis methodologies, I will examine these media texts in relation to each other, and in relation to the overall narrative and the narrative’s storyworld, to understand whether games just present a narrative’s storyworld as a playable experience as Jenkins suggests, or if they can be an indispensable part of the transmedia narrative.

**From Franchising to Convergence and Co-Creation.**

Before publishing his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* in 2006, Henry Jenkins discussed his ideas on franchises, convergence, and transmedia storytelling in the articles ‘Transmedia Storytelling’ (2003) and ‘Welcome to Convergence Culture’ (2005). In the first article, Jenkins defines convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media channels” (2003, para. 3). In the second article Jenkins is more explicit about what convergence really entails:

*By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, the search for new structures of media financing which fell at the interstices between old and new media, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes, depending on who’s speaking and what they think they are talking about.* *(Jenkins, 2005, p. 2)*

At the beginning of the 21st Century, the media industry had already realized that sharing assets, such as expensive sequences of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery), across media (for instance in both the film and the licensed game) could lower production costs considerably. As Jenkins, talking about Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings*, explains:

*This system allowed them [the Electronic Arts production team who produced games for the franchise] to import thousands of “assets” from the film production into the game, ensuring an unprecedented degree of fidelity to the details of Tolkien’s world. At the same time, working closely with Jackson and the other filmmakers gave Young [Neil Young head of Electronic Arts’ *The Lord of the Rings* franchise] greater latitude to explore other dimensions of that world that would not appear on screen.* *(Jenkins, 2006, p. 107)*

These media companies were therefore already taking the first steps on the convergence path, sharing content across media platforms and cooperating with other companies or just branching out into different media. However, what they had not yet grasped was that their franchises would also benefit from not only sharing assets, but from sharing the narrative as well. Until then, franchise holders such as Sony and Electronic Arts had focused on financially lucrative marketing deals, which were hierarchical and competitive rather than co-creative, so that the talents of the individual media sections had to compete instead of benefitting from each other’s particular talents as Young did. As Jenkins explains, this leads to substandard narratives:
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