Struggle for the Universe: Maneuvering the Narrative World of Assassin’s Creed

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ABSTRACT

The Assassin’s Creed franchise mainly consists of video games but has over the years created a narrative universe spanning different media. Seeing how the traversal from the individual installment Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag into the narrative universe of Assassin’s Creed changes player engagement with the franchise allows one to understand audience interaction with different media products in a transmedia and convergent culture. Seen as a performed possible world, the individual installment is shown, through a three part gameplay analysis, to function as an unfinished commodity. This implies striking a balance between an individually satisfying experience and a plot-hole ridden incentive for further activity. When the individual installment incites traversal into a narrative universe, the player can construct the universe from installments through a hyperdiegetic, intermedia, or crossmedia engagement, depending on the reliance on medium specificity. Ultimately, this article provides a model for audience interaction in the transmedia age.

KEYWORDS
Crossmediality, Forensic Fans, Intermediality, Narrative Universe, Ostension, Possible World Theory, Transmedia Storytelling, Unfinished Commodity

INTRODUCTION

In an era where blockbuster games thrive on what David Nieborg (2011) described as “franchising, the serialization of discrete game titles,” narrative closure seems all but a given (p. 39). This was illustrated when Ash Ismail, game director for the triple-A game Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag (Ubisoft, 2013) said in an interview with Eurogamer that “we have an idea of where the end is, (…) we’ve given ourselves room to fit more in this arc. But there is an end” (“There is an End,” 2013). This caused confusion when in 2014 the franchise’s narrative lead, Darby McDevitt claimed in an interview with Eurogamer that “we don’t want to definitively end the universe [emphasis added], but we can have storylines that have endings” (McDevitt, 2014).

This confusion about endings illustrates a change in strategy in narrative design described by Henry Jenkins (2006) as “transmedia storytelling,” on which this article will reflect. Transmedia storytelling means that “artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 116). Each outing relating to these environments is also self-contained as to be enjoyed without having to delve through all the texts contributing to the environment (Jenkins, 2006). Part of the goal of these individual texts is to entertain the consumer, but also to allow immersion in a larger narrative world or universe as to ensure consumer loyalty (Jenkins, 2006). Immersion takes place in a universe more so than in a story world. The latter implies a coherent entity while the installments are less than clearly linked, more
like planets grouped together through imaginary links. The systems of media products containing a transmedia story will therefore be dubbed narrative universes. The immersive possibilities of the universes imply that it should be possible for a player, viewer, reader, or user to traverse from one text into the larger universe. Despite many scholars looking at the political economy of transmedia storytelling and its empowering of participatory culture, the possible maneuvers of the user within the individual texts themselves remains under-researched. Therefore this article will assess how the traversal from the individual installment _Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag_ (ACIV) into the narrative universe constructed in the _Assassin’s Creed_ (Ubisoft, 2007) (AC) franchise changes player engagement with it. By tracing this traversal from one text into a larger universe, the complex interplay between producers, audiences, and the text can be traced, allowing the construction of a theoretical model that aids in understanding the forms of engagement with this new narrative strategy.

**Case: Assassin’s Creed**

The AC franchise is a prime example of a narrative universe, which counts as the object of research in this article. This franchise revolves around the Animus technology, owned by the fictional Abstergo Corporation. The Animus allows a present-day participant to embody the lives of his/her ancestors. However, Abstergo, is a façade for a hidden society, originally started by the Knights Templars, who use this technology to find out where Pieces of Eden are hidden. Pieces of Eden are mind controlling artifacts left behind by advanced prehistoric civilizations. The Templars intend to use the Pieces’ powers to create a peaceful society in their image. This endeavor is constantly thwarted by the cult of the Assassins who believe in the sanctity of free will. Every installment, often in a different medium, lets the player explore the historical world of an ancestor, such as the pirate infested 18th century Caribbean in _ACIV_. In this installment, down on his luck pirate Edward Kenway comes into possession of an item coveted both by Assassins and Templars. Edward is more interested in the monetary score and travels around the Caribbean in search for the highest bidder. As he encounters Templars, Assassins, and famous pirates, Edward is confronted with the consequences of his selfish actions and the outcomes should the Templars take control of his findings. Therefore, Edward sides with the Assassins and sets out to safeguard the Caribbean.

As the latest installment at the time of writing (2014), ACIV is best suited to study the passage from a singular text to a narrative world. As the fourth main installment in the franchise, ACIV contains a large amount of backstory that defines the universe and can be referred to. Furthermore, the developers of ACIV explicitly refer to universe building in their design considerations, justifying decisions to kill off characters by referring to the limiting the scope of the universe (“Why Desmond has to end,” 2012). As such, ACIV can be trusted to provide ample of insight into narrative universes.

**Methodology**

To access audience engagement in a narrative universe in order to turn it into a model, a method is required. When looking at the playful interaction of users in the narrative universes of _Lost_ (Lieber, Abrams & Lindelof, 2004) and _Portal_ (Valve, 2007), television scholar Jason Mittell (2012) considers storytelling and play “mutually reinforcing and potentially coordinated aspects of a transmedia franchise” (p. 11). Since ACIV and the game-oriented AC franchise rely heavily on storytelling, play-focused methodologies constitute a way to trace the reinforcing and coordination of the novel narrative strategies. Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton (2006) created such a method. They describe a systematic method for “qualitative, critical analysis of games as broadly figured ‘texts’” (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006, introduction section, para. 9) with clear categories on how to analyze games. Unlike other play methodologies, theirs looks at in-game elements explicitly and their relationship to larger
Moral Development through Social Narratives and Game Design
Lance Vikaros and Darnel Degand (2010). *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play* (pp. 197-215).
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