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Transmedia Narratives:
A Critical Reading and Possible Advancements

ABSTRACT

The transmedia narratives are an emerging phenomenon premised on a number of technological, economic and social changes. The concept is employed for image-related identity building, provoking interest in both academic research and practice. The present article outlines a structured interdisciplinary approach as a basis for a critical review of transmedia narratives which is essential in our understanding of their nature and possibilities.

Key words: transmedia narratives, storytelling, identity building, specifics

INTRODUCTION: PRECONDITIONS FOR THE EMERGENCE
OF THE TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE

The transmedia narrative is a powerful tool for building identity – brand, political or other. Nowadays, identity construction is much more than the use of visual tools as logos, graphics and pictures, positioning, establishing relations, integration of communications, etc. Building identity is a strategic and communication challenge stated in the dynamic context of democratization of technology, democratization of finance, and democratization of information, where globalization meets isolationism, followed by changes in the media landscape, social system, politics and lifestyle.

"Modern-day brands are promises, and every promise naturally sets a plot in motion: Will the promise be kept or broken?" [Budelmann, Kim, Wozniak 2010: 60]. Kevin Budelmann, Yang Kim and Curt Wozniak further investigate the role

which modern technology plays in the contemporary brand narratives, reaching the conclusion that it is the company's function to help its customers and employees shape their stories. This is partly a result of the engagement efforts between modern brands and their audiences. "Telling stories that feel personally significant (…) elicits the level of personal engagement that wins hearts and minds" [Simmons 2015: 37].

Many authors have stated that in order to achieve the above mentioned impact, a story should elicit emotions which result in audience identification [Freud 1985; Oatley 1995]. However, this is closely related to the difficult task of identity construction for the respective brand. Building identity is a strategic communication task aimed at creating clear and distinguishable public figures, ideologies, and brands. The identity is the state of the public image in the context of high information density of marketing and public communications. Building identity via storytelling is creating an experience as a logical extension of the cognitive models for exploring the world by stories which people develop in childhood. "Storytelling that constructs identity is not a simple matter – there may be doubling, time shifts, gaps, or all of the constituent and characteristic features of narrative (…). The process of narrative construction is relevant inasmuch as it makes the point that identity is narratively made (…)" [Whitebrook 2014: 5].

However, the narratives themselves are undergoing rapid changes. "Each advance in information and communications technology (ICT) has brought with it an increase in the sophistication of our storytelling" [von Stackelberg 2011: 1]. As a result of the changes in the media landscape, which can be conditionally referred to as "media convergence", the tools available to modern storytellers have increased exponentially in both variety and complexity over the last decade. Consequently, the competition among storytellers alternated as well and the demands towards field professionals have been elevated. "Once upon a time, companies that published newspapers, magazines, and books did very little else; their involvement with other media was slight" [Pool 2009]. This has all changed as the new media technologies enabled the same content to be distributed through many different channels [Jenkins 2006]. "Like every form that came before, technological »convergence art« will be the locus for decades of vigorous experimentation and discovery before its underlying language and grammar are well understood" [Davenport et al. 2000: 467].

The multiplatform narratives are an answer to the demands of today's audiences and their lifestyles [Bernardo 2011]. As a result, the integration of different media platforms in a narrative is inevitable, alongside an increased focus on engagement. As stated by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green: "a focus on engagement is central to the reconfiguration of audience power" [Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013: 117]. To achieve engagement, the contemporary communication can explore the full capacity of the professional toolkit. Transmedia narrative can be an effective and viable opportunity in this "toolkit", but still challenging to define, research and apply.

TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE

The term "transmedia narrative" cannot be situated in a static context due to a number of reasons, mainly the dynamic developments in the information and communications technology. It has proven immensely difficult to define. One of the reasons is the fact that academics and professionals alike cannot even agree on a single term to describe the phenomenon. Probably the most cited author in the field of transmedia storytelling is Jenkins who says that "[t]ransmedia storytelling is the art of world making" [Jenkins 2006]. He provides the following definition of the term: "Stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products" [Jenkins 2006].

The definition by Jenkins approaches transmedia storytelling restrictively from the point of view of franchise development which relates more to the business strategy than the communication aspects of the narrative itself. Another limitation is the focus on the usage of multiple media platforms rather than communication tools. As a result, it can limit the possibility for investigation of the identity construction and remains too abstract which makes it difficult for practical applications.

However, this term and definition alone do not exhaust all of the academic approaches towards multiplatform narratives as a phenomenon. The authors draw attention to the fact that they are "non-specific to individual media" [Herman, Jahn, Ryan 2004]. In this regard, separate parts of the narrative can be interpreted as pieces with "each media element in the story serving as a puzzle piece that when put together forms the bigger picture of the story" [Hovious 2016] where "each piece also contributes to a larger narrative (…) to create a communication experience instead of a message" [Rutledge 2011].

More than anything else, the idea of multiple media channels or platforms attracts the attention of the researchers [Hayes 2011; Miller 2014; Pratten 2015]. Marc Ruppel also defines transmedia narratives from this perspective as "stories told across multiple media platforms, or what I will refer to as »sites« of meaning (i.e. the codex novel, graphic novel, television, film, video games, audio recordings, the web and so on), that are used as instruments to enact a network binding locationally separate content into whole, coherent expressions" [Ruppel 2009]. Another path to explore multiplatform narratives focuses primarily on the distribution aspects of the phenomenon even referring to it as "very distributed storytelling" [Davenport et al. 2000] or "distributed narrative" [Walker 2004].

All of these definitions make significant contributions to the academic debate and outline transmedia storytelling as a broad concept of storytelling through multiple media channels. However, this limits their possibilities to clearly define the transmedia narrative and frame the phenomenon.

Reasonably, the practitioners' understanding of the "transmedia narrative" is closely related to the academic definitions. One of the dominant institutional defini-

tions is provided by the Producers Guild of America [2010]. The limitations, which their definition presents, concern the highly technical focus, the limitation in the type of media platforms and the focus of the transmedia narrative as a project or franchise which neglects the communication approach.

Going further, we aim to present a communication perspective towards the multichannel narrative. If we apply a structural approach of arranging the storytelling content, we can use the term "narrative". In this regard, narrative itself is the storytelling content, which exists as separate stories connected together in a single overarching story or functioning as independent frames of storytelling. Consequently, a transmedia narrative is a communication approach of storytelling through different communication channels, either simultaneously or asynchronously.

SPECIFICS OF TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE

Following the idea of the transmedia narrative as a communication approach we can assume that it is designed to achieve communication aims, including (but not limited to) identity building and the process itself can be explored as a form of interaction with a particular impact. Taking into account the predominant view of the multiplatform approach as a key aspect in the academic research on the subject, we can generalize this concept with the term "transmediality" as a main characteristic of transmedia narratives. We have to state that the channels employed by transmedia are not limited to traditional and new media but include a wider range of communication and performance tools (e.g. interpersonal interaction). Additionally, a distinction can be made between monomodal or single-channel communication (e.g. a book) and multimodal or multi-channel communication (e.g. a film which engages both vision and hearing), each of them suitable for a different context and narrative approach.

Employing the term "narrative" is based on the idea that the story of the transmedia narrative is supposed to have a strict internal structure. As a result, we can interpret the narratives in two main structural approaches: (1) based on Vladimir Propp's theory and (2) based on Joseph Campbell's model. Propp's theory refers to the classical folktales trough structured functional elements in which each step executes a certain function [Propp 1968]. Joseph Campbell interprets the narrative as a monomyth through the hero's journey [Campbell 2008]. Generally, the narrative is "a sequence of events for struggle and suffering through which the good win against the bad and restore the balance" [Kaftandjiev 2008]. The conflict moves the narrative scheme forward [Kaftandjiev 2007]. A different perspective can be found in the causal connections within the story, with Barthes defining it as "a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*" [Barthes 1977]. A similar approach is employed by Trabasso who offers a *fabula* model, defining causal relationships between six types of elements: goal, action, event, outcome, perception and internal elements [cited in Hoek, Theune,

Linssen 2014: 10], as well as the "*fabula* layer" concept [Swartjes, Theune 2006]. Most importantly, the "narratives must interpret the classical narrative scheme in compliance to their needs and the customers they target" [Markova 2016].

The structure of the transmedia narrative itself is linked together by what we can refer to as "hitches". They serve a dual purpose – to fulfill the audience's inner motivation to reach the next platform in order to acquire the next element of the story content, and to accomplish the creators' vision of navigating their consumers through the employed platforms. The hitches in the transmedia narratives can be considered as belonging to two categories – formal and substantive. The formal hitches refer to technical connections between the content materials like hypertext, hyperlinking, etc. The substantive hitches carry a semantic meaning and work on a story level, employing the concept of narrative itself, intertextuality and wider context.

The efficiency of the transmedia narrative and its impact are closely related to the way it is structured or to its syntagmas. Syntagmas are combinations which presented together in an organized order achieve a meaningful structure [Martin, Ringham 2000]. In regard to the transmedia narrative, the main syntagmas relate to the notions of time and space. Bob Hodge and David Tripp present 4 basic concepts in this regard: synchronic (existing in the same time), diachronic (different time), syntopic (existing in the same space) and diatopic (different space) [Hodge, Tripp 1986]. These can be combined in 4 pairs of time and space positioning. Subsequently, the narrative can be developed simultaneously, granting the audience access to the entire narrative instantly or successively – presenting different content elements over a period of time. The same concept can be applied regarding the communication space with the syntopic being a characteristic of some elements (e.g. live events) and the diatopic of others employing mediated forms of communication. "[C]onsidering the complexity of the communicative process – both simultaneous and asynchronous – which are used today by transmedia producers, the most useful kinds of representation (…) stem from different theories concerning the »shape of universe«" [Giovagnoli 2011].

The universe where the narrative is set is an essential element in the storytelling process. It can be defined as "a textual environment in print, film, online or other medium (often multiple media) with defined discursive borders" [Flanagan, Livingstone, McKenny 2016]. Whether we approach the idea of the transmedia narrative as an experience [Davidson 2011] or as a form of building a world which in turn creates a user experience [Jenkins 2006], the story world and the experience are closely related to the user in the center of the construct. Users experience the story universe by interacting with it. They navigate their encounter with the narrative. As a result, the concept of "interactivity" is an integral part of the modern transmedia narrative. Miller's linguistic approach towards defining the term is based on its separate elements – "inter", implying a two-way exchange and "active" which refers to the concept of involvement and engagement [Miller 2014]. However, as Carrie Heeter points out: "Interactivity is an overused, underdefined concept. Everything a human does to or with another human can be called an interaction. Human interactions that

use media are mediated human interactions. Everything a human does to or with a computer is a human-computer interaction" [Heeter 2000].

Subsequently, when referring to the concept of interactivity in transmedia narratives, we must note that it is mostly related with the technologically mediated form of interaction which allows personalization and customization of the user experience. Moreover, "[t]echnologies and platforms are not approached independently from each other but instead within a context of expectations and values created from experience with other media forms" [Evans 2011: 176]. As Matthew Lombard and Jennifer Snyder-Duch state: "[c]entral to the possibilities for new effective personalized (...) experiences is the ability of new technologies to allow for interactivity" [Lombard, Snyder-Duch 2001]. In terms of narrative construct, the structural approach suggested by Propp, Campbell and Kaftandjiev is applicable for content with lower degree of interactivity and customization (e.g. film, information, text, etc.), and the more interactive experiences (e.g. video games) require a *fabula* or layer effusion that allows the users to construct the *sjuzhet*.

In this regard, we can assume that some of the narrative elements could follow the formula of the classical structural narrative approach while others can be flexible. One of the essential elements is the character of the hero as an engine moving the narrative forward, as presented in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [Campbell 2008]. A closely related concept is the idea of focalization of the narrative or the various means of regulating, selecting, and channeling narrative information, particularly of seeing events from somebody's point of view [Genette 1980, 1988]. From focalization perspective, we can apply a specific approach to the main characters, including the narrator of the transmedia narrative, and distinguish them in three categories: classical narrative characters (protagonist/antagonist), user-centered focalization (with the user as the hero) and abstract-centered focalization (where an abstract phenomenon – an idea; a brand, a moral or social norm, or another – is at the center of the story focalization).

One of the specific elements of the transmedia narrative relates to the concept of gaming: "games are building new kinds of relations with their audiences" [Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013: 46]. Games are perceived to be interactive and the immersive experiences they provide are associated with a positive value. However, "taking a more nuanced approach to the concept of interactivity begins to complicate this binary of value, which posits games as »interactive« and therefore »good« and watching television as »passive« and therefore »bad«" [Evans 2011: 95]. Other researchers in this field claim that the increase in personalization of mass messages positions the mass communication closer to the feeling for interpersonal interaction [Kalyanaraman, Sundar 2006]. A fundamental difference should be noted between the terms "personalization" and "customization", whereas the personalization of digital content refers to content adaptation on the basis of already acquired information about the consumer (e.g. sex, age, etc.), and the customization refers to content adaptation by the user on the basis of available options.

In this regard, Jenkins outlines "a consumer trend toward mass customization and personalization" [Jenkins 2006] and Robert Pratten notes that "engagement with each successive media heightens the audience' understanding, enjoyment and affection for the story (...) while enjoyment from all the media should be greater than the sum of the parts" [Pratten 2015], and this "sum" does not follow a mathematical precision. As a result, there is no "right" or "wrong" approach in the field of transmedia narratives. Communicators should seek the balance between the engagement and passiveness of the audience, or referring to Călin Gurău's experiment – to keep the audience between interest and motivation and plan the communication, avoiding audience's frustration and boredom [Gurău 2008].

The main idea behind the interactive approach in a transmedia narrative is to engage the audience and provide an experience. Likewise, visuality, as a passive perception, has the potential to engage the audience and provide an experience. Similar positions have been expressed by Arthur A. Berger who claims that people believe in and experience what they see [Berger 1998] and Alison Griffiths, who outlines the concept of "immersion" as a way to evoke experience, and among the examples she cites are the planetarium and the IMAX film [Griffiths 2008: 2].

CONCLUSIONS: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Practically, transmedia narratives are illustrated by different examples in the academic literature. The *Matrix* franchise including 3 films, 7 books, 3 related games, animation series and comics is one of the most-cited cases in terms of an audiovisual project with narrative elements extending onto other platforms. There are numerous other examples in this direction like *Pokémon*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and others. However, the transmedia approach is not limited to the fields of art and entertainment. It is just as applicable as a marketing communication with the idea of brand narrative and the multichannel approach. Many global brands use transmedia narratives distributed via video content, social media campaigns, advert games, traditional advertising and PR tools. Some of these brands are Nivea with the Nivea tales campaign – a series of children books with stories about a little boy, a little girl, a rabbit and a fairy hitched with in-product communication, web-based flash games, etc.; Triumph with the "Find the one" campaign – series of video content in the form of short films, social media and PR. A representative example of transmedia narrative is the campaign of Chipotle Mexican Grill – the Mexican fast-food chain launched a short film affiliated with a mobile game application, a website, extended behind the scenes coverage and others. Last but not least, transmedia narratives can be employed to develop a personal brand or even to frame social causes and political agendas.

The transmedia narratives face a number of limitations in their practical applications, the major one being their inability to work to achieve a short-term communication impact. Another challenge is the amount of financial and operational

resources which their production, distribution and sustaining require. In this regard, the transmedia narrative can be perceived as a strategy more than a communication tool. This is the main similarity between identity building and the transmedia narratives – they are constructed over time and are not "one-day wonders". This is precisely the advantage in employing transmedia narratives in identity building.

The present work does not exhaust the whole range of research in transmedia narratives. It presents a broad theoretical background and outlines possible directions for further empirical research on the phenomenon. The article offers a structured interdisciplinary approach for academic research and practical applications of transmedia narratives.

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