

PLAY CHAPTER: VIDEO GAMES AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT

Although multi-media franchises have long been common in the entertainment industry, the past two years have seen a renaissance of transmedia storytelling as authors such as Joss Whedon and J.J. Abrams have learned the advantages of linking storylines across television, feature films, video games and comic books. Recent video game chapters of transmedia franchises have included *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*, *Lost: Via Domus* and, of course, *Enter the Matrix* - but compared to comic books and webisodes, video games still remain a largely underutilized component in this emerging art form. This paper will use case studies from the transmedia franchises of *Star Wars*, *Lost*, *The Matrix*, *Hellboy*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and others to examine some of the reasons why this might be the case (including cost, market size, time to market, and the impacts of interactivity and duration) and provide some suggestions as to how game makers and storytellers alike might use new trends and technologies to close this gap.

INTRODUCTION

First of all, thank you for coming. My name is Geoffrey Long, and I am the Communications Director and a Researcher for the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab, where I've been continuing the research into transmedia storytelling that I began as a Master's student here under Henry Jenkins. If you're interested, the resulting Master's thesis, *Transmedia Storytelling: Business Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company* is available for downloading from <http://www.geoffreylong.com/thesis>.

The talk I'm presenting here today, *Play Chapter: Video Games and Transmedia Storytelling*, builds on that work and drills down into a few of the directions I'm currently pursuing. The areas I'll cover are as follows.

1. Transmedia 101
2. Video Games in Transmedia Stories

3. Why Not Video Games?

4. Looking Forward

I. TRANSMEDIA 101

First of all, for those of you who aren't familiar with the term, we need a working definition of transmedia storytelling. Luckily, just such a definition is provided in Jenkins' 2005 book *Convergence Culture*: "A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole."

It's important that we clarify the distinction between transmedia storytelling and adaptation. A story that is told across different media types, with different chapters of the story being told in different media, is transmedia storytelling. By contrast, a story that first appears in one media form and is then retold in another media form is adaptation. To put it another way, if a story is being adapted for multiple media, such as games, films and comics, there will be three separate and discernable storylines with no crossover - there is no shared continuity or timeline across these three adaptations, and nine times out of ten the same events, characters and plotlines are featured in each storyline. In transmedia storytelling, on the other hand, a storyline is likely to begin in a film, continue on in a game, then another film, then a comic book, back to a film, and so on. There is some gray area in between (for example, whether cross-media retellings of the same events from another character's point of view would be considered transmedia storytelling or adaptation is a ripe area for debate) but for the most part this is a solid operating definition.

For example, the case Jenkins cites in *Convergence Culture* is the Wachowski Brothers' *Matrix* franchise, which can be read chronologically as beginning with the short film "The Second Renaissance" in the animated anthology *The Animatrix*, then moving to the feature film *The Matrix*, continuing on in another short *The Animatrix*, "The Final Flight of the Osiris," then on to the second feature film, *The Matrix Reloaded*, then into the PlayStation 2 video game *Enter the Matrix*, and then into the third feature film *The Matrix Revolutions*. There are more extensions than just these six, including the additional shorts in *The Animatrix*, an MMO that continues the story, and the comics that appeared on the movie's website, but it is arguably these six components that make up the core of the transmedia story of *The Matrix*. This illustrates a messy component of transmedia narratives - an audience can, in fact, get away with not experiencing the animated shorts or the video games and still get a pretty good idea of what's going on - the feature films are the 'primary components' or 'parent components' of this transmedia story - but these other extensions definitely make, as Jenkins suggests, "distinctive and valuable contributions to the whole".

But what exactly does that mean? In short, a "distinct and valuable contribution" is a solid addition to the story world being created, and it does not feel like just a cheap grab for more cash. For example, a book set in the *Star Wars* universe might be considered transmedia storytelling - but a *Star Wars* cereal is not. If anything, a *Star Wars* cereal is transmedia branding, which may be much more in line with traditional concepts of marketing and franchising.

Recent years have seen an explosion of transmedia stories, including such as examples as:

- The aforementioned *Matrix* franchise
- Square Enix's *Final Fantasy* series, which included such transmedia components as *Final Fantasy XII* on the PlayStation 2 and *Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings* on the Nintendo DS, or *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, the animated feature film sequel to *Final Fantasy VII*
- *Oakdale Confidential*, a fictional tell-all novel turned diegetic artifact from the soap opera *As the World Turns*
- Orson Scott Card's *Empire*, a new franchise from the author of *Ender's Game* that's designed as a transmedia story from the ground up
- *24: The Game*, a third-person shooter for the PlayStation 2 that was set between the second and third seasons of the show
- *Bad Twin*, another diegetic artifact, this time from *Lost*
- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season 8*, a comics-only continuation of the hit television series from Joss Whedon
- *Serenity: Those Left Behind*, a comics miniseries set between the end of Joss Whedon's TV series *Firefly* and the feature film follow-up *Serenity*
- *Dead Space*, a sci-fi horror game from Electronic Arts that was accompanied by a comic book prequel by the game's writer Antony Johnston and artist Ben Templesmith; another animated prequel film called *Dead Space: Downfall*, and a third upcoming video game prequel for the Nintendo Wii called *Dead Space: Extraction*
- *True Blood*, an HBO television series based on the Sookie Stackhouse vampire novels by Charlaine Harris, which was accompanied by a prequel ARG designed by Campfire in New York
- This summer's upcoming *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* is being ushered in by a series of canonical comics published by IDW

- The long-running sci-fi franchise *Stargate* began as a feature film directed by Roland Emmerich, and then continued as the television series *Stargate: SG-1* for ten seasons before moving back into films with the direct-to-DVD features *Stargate: The Ark of Truth* and *Stargate: Continuum*; it also has spawned two spinoff TV series, *Stargate: Atlantis* and the upcoming *Stargate: Universe*, as well as numerous comics, novels, a Saturday morning cartoon and an upcoming massively multiplayer online game
- Jim Henson's sci-fi series *Farscape* ended its television run after four seasons, but continued on in the four-hour miniseries *Farscape: The Peacekeeper Wars*. In addition to three novels based on the series, *Farscape* also has recently continued in canonical comics form, and will also be continued in a series of upcoming webisodes
- NBC's hit series *Heroes* has multiple transmedia extensions, primarily corralled through the show's website. These extensions include graphic novels, webisodes and interactive story chapters
- *Battlestar Galatica* features such extensions as *The Resistance*, a series of ten webisodes that aired on SciFi.com and *Caprica*, a prequel film
- One possible reason for the current transmedia explosion may be the mid-1980s transmedia experiments of *Masters of the Universe*, *Transformers*, *G.I. Joe* and *Care Bears* all moving from television series to feature films and back again with various degrees of success - those of us who grew up with these properties are not only likely to be more comfortable consuming transmedia stories, but creating them as well
- And, of course, *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*

II. VIDEO GAMES IN TRANSMEDIA STORIES

In addition to these examples, there's also a number of video games that play explicit roles in transmedia franchises. In addition to the ones we've already covered, there's also:

- *Star Wars: the Force Unleashed* (2008, Microsoft Xbox 360/Sony PlayStation 3/Nintendo Wii), which is set between *Star Wars* Episodes III and IV
- *Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire* (1996, Nintendo 64), which is set between *Star Wars* Episodes V and VI, and falls in that gray area I mentioned before - while it is largely an adaptation of the novel written by Steve Perry, the game

- retells the story from the point of view one of the novel's characters, Dash Rendar, filling in some of the blanks. This transmedia franchise-within-a-franchise also included a graphic novel that featured Boba Fett as its main character and was published by Dark Horse
- *Mirror's Edge* (2008, Microsoft Xbox 360/Sony PlayStation 3), which featured a prequel comic written by the game's writer, Rhianna Pratchett
 - *X-Men: The Official Game* (2006, Microsoft Xbox / Sony PlayStation / Nintendo GameCube, Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Game Boy Advance, and Nintendo DS) filled in the gaps between *X-Men 2: Mutants United* and *X3: The Last Stand*, including answering why Nightcrawler wasn't present in the third film
 - *Lost: Via Domus* (2008, Microsoft Xbox 360, Microsoft Windows, Sony PlayStation 3) tells the story of another passenger lost on the ill-fated Oceanic Flight 815, with events running largely in parallel to seasons 1, 2 and the beginning of 3
 - *Halo* (2001, Microsoft Xbox), the old flagship series for Microsoft's Xbox and Xbox 360, has also spawned a rich narrative universe of novels and graphic novels, all of which are apparently canon - including an upcoming trilogy of prequel novels by Greg Bear
 - *Gears of War* (2006, Microsoft Xbox 360), Microsoft's new flagship series, has also spawned books and comics, with a rumored feature film on the way
 - *Warcraft*, *Diablo*, *Starcraft* (1994, 1996 and 1998; PC/Mac) - all three of Blizzard Entertainment's main properties have spawned canonical narrative spinoffs, including novels, comics, tabletop games and so on. Most interestingly, according to a talk presented by Cory Jones, Blizzard's director of global business development and licensing at the 2009 Game Developers Conference, all story elements in merchandising related to Blizzard's games are considered canon, which has led to the discontinuation of some spinoffs, such as the tabletop RPG, due to concerns of conflicting storylines

The roles that these games play in larger franchises are, obviously, wide and varied. Again, *X-Men: The Official Game* fits in between the second and third *X-Men* movies, *Lost: Via Domus* runs parallel to the first 2-and-some seasons of *Lost*, *Mirror's Edge* has its prequel comics published by DC's Wildstorm imprint, and *Warcraft* has an entire page on its website dedicated to keeping the timeline of its transmedia extensions straight - and that's only the games, comics and novels.

There are a number of intriguing observations to be made here - not just about the existence of so many transmedia stories incorporating video games, but also about

the nature of the roles that games are playing within these franchises. To better understand this, we need to reflect for a moment on a very comparative media studies-esque topic - what are some of the unique affordances of video games? Or, in other words, what is it that video games have to offer over other forms of media?

2.1. Some Unique Characteristics of Video Games

First of all, perhaps the primary characteristic of interactive entertainment is interactivity. (Duh.) Players want to see how they themselves would fare in similar situations, exerting a degree of control over the events in a story. Some interactive narrative theorists, such as Chris Crawford, insist that the ideal degree of interactivity within an interactive narrative is as close to 100% as you can get, while others (such as, well, me) prefer a more 'collapsible' model of interactivity within a narrative, allowing users to still follow a carefully-crafted story "on rails" but with the option of following side quests or taking the time to consume optional backstory or worldbuilding content within the game. I don't think either of these is absolutely correct - asserting that one particular tactic is the best for all games is as ridiculous as asserting that one tactic is the best for all books - but I'm old-school enough to believe that games have yet to fully incorporate the lessons learned from storytelling in more linear media, and I remain intrigued to see more exploration of more directly scripted narratives as opposed to what are called emergent narratives, which are the stories that arise out of largely unscripted events.

Related to this is the element of performance, the desire to try on the skins of their favorite characters and see what it's like to run in their shoes. While books provide a greater sense as to the internal dialogue of a character, games provide a more visceral sense of what it's like to perform the same actions of a character. A friend of mine was disappointed by a recent *X-Men* game for the Wii because it failed to do one simple thing: use the Wiimote to provide a satisfying simulation of what it's like to "snikt" out Wolverine's claws. Whether a game is a transmedia extension or simply an adaptation, it's this desire to be Wolverine, Neo, Luke Skywalker, Hellboy, and so on that leads many players to while away many a happy hour on the couch with a controller in their hands.

The third element that games offer over other media forms is frequently expansiveness - or sheer size. While this is not always the case - as Rhianna Pratchett notes in a post to the IGDA Writers SIG mailing list, she found a greater opportunity to expand the City in which *Mirror's Edge* is set in the prequel comic than in the game itself. Still, video games frequently offer players the chance to wander more freely through virtual locations than are afforded in other media. In this way, video games have more in common with location-based entertainments such as theme park rides or art installations than linear media forms, as Henry Jenkins notes in his essay on Game Design as Narrative Architecture.

It's this last characteristic that makes video games so uniquely suited to transmedia storytelling, as one of the primary characteristics of transmedia stories is a shift in emphasis from plot to character to world.

2.2. From Plot to Character to World

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that “Most important of all is [Plot,] the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality... Without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. ...The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place.” In other words, it is possible to tell a story with no characters - I could tell you the story of World War II by abstracting it out to a conflict between the Axis and the Allies, and there would still be a story without having to involve any particular individual generals or soldiers. Similarly, I could also tell the story of the changing of the seasons, without having to have any particular characters. (Granted, there's an argument a-brewing in here about whether or not abstracted countries and seasons could be considered 'characters', but that's a topic for another paper.) Aristotle's point is that plot, the action, is what's crucial to a story (or, in his words, in tragedy or drama).

We see a shift away from this type of thinking when people become interested not just in one story, but in a series of stories. The trials of Hercules, for example, is an early case of a successful franchise; audiences become entranced in the feats and adventures of this particular character, and thus the character of Hercules becomes the central point of emphasis within these stories. So in series, we see an emphasis shift from plot to character.

Now, in modern franchise-driven entertainment - and especially in transmedia storytelling - we have a shift from plot to character to world. The *Star Trek* universe, for example, grew beyond the constraints of the original TV show into a series of films starring those characters - but then also into a spin-off TV show, and then three spin-offs and two feature films of that spin-off TV series, not to mention countless novels, comics, video games, and even theme park-like attractions. What we see here is the rise of the world as the primary element within these stories, with an expanded storyline that is not the particular three-act character arc of Pike, Kirk, Picard, Janeway, Sisko or Archer, but of the United Federation of Planets as a whole. Indeed, once stories have grown out of plotlines and into entire narrative universes, the entire concept of the three-act structure seems to feel sort of antiquated. By the same token, however, it becomes obvious that attempting to consume and keep track of an entire narrative universe becomes problematic, to say the least. While the ability to quote increasingly obscure levels of minute trivia about a storyworld used to be the hallmark of the nerd still living in his mother's basement, now similar comfort levels with such narrative complexity are increasingly expected, if not demanded, by such relatively mainstream entertainment as *Heroes* and *Lost*.

Still, while the universe of *Star Trek* is compelling, it's the characters that tended to draw in audiences. With many transmedia franchises, it's clear that the initial attraction grew out of attachments to such plotlines and characters - as long as the primary media component, the 'parent' component, remains a linear narrative. When the primary media component is a video game, however, it's an all-different ball game.

Blizzard's games have long been associated with rich story worlds and captivating characters, yet when they released *World of Warcraft* in 2004, there was a very notable shift in emphasis. No longer could players assume the role of such larger-than-life characters as Illidan Stormrage - instead, they were expected to create characters of their own and tell their own stories within the story world. The degree to which each player-created character had any kind of backstory or personality was completely up to the player, and wasn't managed in-game. Role-playing servers were set up so that players who wanted to stay 'in-character' throughout their entire play experience could do so, but most conversations on most of the servers wound up being the rough equivalent of an enormous chatroom. The stories that were being told were no longer focused on the franchise's main characters - indeed, Medivh, Thrall, Arthas, and the other legends of this storyworld are largely kept to the sidelines, rendered non-player characters (NPCs) that would take action only in cutscenes and perhaps as part of larger narrative provocations accompanied with expansion pack releases. Still, the lore of *World of Warcraft* remains compelling - and lucrative. Since the release of the game, scores of extensions have been released that fill in the backstory of the world, as evidenced by the earlier list of novels, comics and so on. The question, however, is whether or not *World of Warcraft* could have succeeded in this fashion if it hadn't been preceded by three hugely successful games in the same universe (plus expansion packs).

Which brings us to the question - if video games are so ideally suited to transmedia franchises, why aren't we seeing even more of them?

III. WHY NOT VIDEO GAMES?

The fact of the matter is that there are multiple very good reasons why video games aren't more prevalent in transmedia franchises.

3.1. Cost (Money)

The first of these is simple: video games cost money. From a consumer's perspective, making the leap from a TV show to a video game frequently requires an investment upwards of several hundred dollars - first for the hardware and then for the video game itself. A baseline Xbox 360 Arcade system retails for \$199, and many

console titles carry an initial retail price tag of between \$50 and \$70. For example, at its time of release *Lost: Via Domus* retailed for \$59.99. It has since dropped to half of that, but still - for a die-hard *Lost* fan to make the plunge into video games simply to continue their experience with the franchise would require an investment of around \$250. By contrast, each season of *Lost* retails for around \$60, so a collection of all four seasons to date would retail for \$240.

Not only are video games frequently expensive to purchase, video games are frequently expensive to produce as well. While it's certainly possible to create a game on a shoestring budget (as many creators of casual games and iPhone games will attest), the budgets of AAA games are positively ballooning. Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto IV*, for example, took three and a half years to complete, had 1,000 people working on it, and had a budget of \$100 million [1]. While that nine-digit budget may be an outlier, eight-digit budgets aren't that uncommon - Midway reportedly spent between \$40M and \$50M to produce the upcoming *This is Vegas* [1], Silicon Knights spent between \$80 and \$100M to produce *Too Human* [2], Bungie spent \$60M on *Halo 3* [2], and Square Enix spent \$40M on *Final Fantasy XII*. This is why, although video game sales are still doing fairly well in our current sluggish economy, so many video game companies are financially struggling. Imagine you're a transmedia producer and you need to decide how you're going to extend your narrative franchise - now contrast these numbers against what it costs to make a comic book. Even with the lowered financial barriers to entry afforded by Apple's App Store, Facebook games and web-based games, it's not surprising that franchises like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Farscape*, *CSI* and *Eureka* are turning to comics.

3.2. Cost (Time)

The second challenge against video games is another take on cost - time. Again, this is wildly variable based on whether the game being discussed is a casual game or a AAA title, but the general assumption is that one of these \$50-\$70 console titles will provide somewhere around 40 hours of gameplay. While this might ease the pain of the increased cost of these games over, say, a season of *Lost* on DVD, many adults simply do not have the time in their everyday lives to dedicate forty hours to finishing a video game. This is not to say that no adults have this time - again, one of the reasons people play video games that are adaptations or extensions of existing narrative universes is to extend their experience with those storyworlds. In these instances, 40 hours of gameplay may be exactly what they're looking for. Unfortunately, these lucky souls are likely to be in the minority.

To its further detriment, frequently the amount of value in the game's 'valuable contribution to the whole' is somewhat negligible - largely for this very reason. There is some funny - and likely infuriating - calculus to be done by transmedia producers in determining precisely how much payoff to embed within these ancillary components - knowing that only die-hard fans of *LOST* may be driven to invest the time and money into *Lost: Via Domus*, what should the exclusive

information be that's embedded in the content? How do you repay the investment of so much time and money, while still having those fans who haven't made that investment not feel like they've missed something critical?

This is a very real problem. In its review of the game, IGN.com notes that Ubisoft, the game's developers, attempted to sidestep at least the time issue by making the game finishable in 4-6 hours, but this then made the pricetag even harder to swallow. Worse, according to IGN, *Lost: Via Domus* "is a game for the fans, which only fans can appreciate. But at the same time - in a strange bit of paradox - this is a game that will disappoint almost every Lost fan" [3]. This is due to an apparently shoddy retelling of the story arc from the first two seasons, mediocre to poor character performances by actors other than those from the show, and the only real moment of narrative payoff coming within literally the last five minutes of the game. The game also simply isn't a very good game, relying on fairly weak mechanics and basic puzzles, perhaps as a concession to the idea that this is a game designed for non-gamers - but this also means that *Lost: Via Domus* wasn't very well received by the gaming market in general (it currently has a paltry 55/100 rating on metacritic.com), which then means that it is incredibly unlikely to serve as a jumping-on point for the rest of the franchise. This also updates the notion of Henry's "real and valuable contribution to the whole" as not just the whole *understanding* of the experience but also the whole *experience of the experience* - which suggests that, getting back to Rule #1, Don't Suck - there is some careful consideration yet to be given to the damage that can be done to a franchise via poorly thought-out transmedia extensions. Which brings me to a third challenge.

3.3. Low Perceived Value

This is mercifully changing, but video games, like comic books, are still struggling with the perception they are a 'lesser' media form than books and films. Thus, it becomes easier to write off video game chapters of a transmedia franchise as optional on the part of the audience, and all too frequently this translates into a lessened effort on the part of the producers and the developers. Anyone who considers themselves a gamer has come across at least one licensed game that's little more than a branded character slapped onto a halfhearted, mediocre video game. This is frequently due to the high cost of securing the rights to the characters' likenesses or voice talents - again, *Lost: Via Domus* is frequently criticized for poor voice acting that barely resembles the stars' own voices - but the challenge remains. Games like *Enter the Matrix*, which was produced in conjunction with the feature film sequels, remain the exception, not the rule.

The resulting low perceived value is problematic because a frequently overlooked concept of transmedia storytelling - not to mention transmedia branding, franchising and merchandising - is that in the ideal franchise, every chapter of a transmedia story serves as an on-ramp into the rest of the franchise. An excellent

example of this is *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*, which serves as a prequel to the Vin Diesel actioners *Pitch Black* and *The Chronicles of Riddick*. While the franchise as a whole may not measure up to the scale (or, ahem, quality) of *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, *Escape from Butcher Bay* is a solid, well-done video game in its own regard, which means that it also serves as a solid, well-done entry point into the franchise. (Its metacritic rating, for comparison, is a much more respectable 89 - which, incidentally, is much higher than the ratings for either *Pitch Black* [49] or *The Chronicles of Riddick* [38].) A fan is just as likely, if not more so, to come to the *Riddick* franchise through a recommendation of the game as they are via a recommendation of the film, and the connections between the films and the games reach a level of - yes, I'll say it - synergy that it makes the entire franchise feel organic, as opposed to, again, a cheap grab for more money.

Unfortunately, *The Chronicles of Riddick* is the exception, not the rule - and that's just among console games. The low perceived value of casual games is right there in the genre's title - within the industry, they're considered games for people who do not consider themselves gamers, who have a lessened investment in the games they play. Again, this is changing - the 2009 Game Developers Conference was abuzz with people who have come to view this market as a gold mine, and are thus investing real time and money into learning how to make these games work. Some transmedia storytelling exploration is currently being done on that front - as Jesper Juul observes, *Righteous Kill* is notable due to its being a lot darker than most other casual games [4], but it's also an extension of the 2008 cop movie starring Robert De Niro and Al Pacino. Yet the game's connections to the film are tenuous at best - you play a rookie cop who does not appear in the feature film, and Pacino and De Niro's likenesses are nowhere to be seen. As one reviewer notes, "*Righteous Kill* is basically a generic hidden object game that bears only a passing connection to its licensed subject matter. The game ostensibly takes place in Manhattan but it's hard to tell that based on the 11 scenes, which, aside from lip-service to a few recognizable places like Central Park, are nonspecific locations like a shooting range, courtroom and hospital" [5]. So although some early steps are being taken to use casual games as a viable channel for transmedia extensions, we still have a long way to go. As long as this practice continues, it will remain difficult for video games to overcome this prejudice, and thus overcome the inherent resistance that many audiences feel towards exploring a new media form.

3.4. Interactivity

I'll concede that I've included this last one as a hat-tip to a fairly clichéd concept in game studies - that video games aren't literature and should not be evaluated on the same criteria. This is due to the simple truth that storytelling in games requires a different set of skills than storytelling in more linear media - writers in video games are frequently brought on-board well after game levels and assets have been created, and forced to come up with some reason why these monsters are attacking those monsters; and even when writers are brought in early on in the development

process, they frequently cannot rely on such traditional writing tools as pacing or even character development, as the speed at which the game's events unfold and the manner in which the character develops is largely conceded to the player. However, again, much of this is mercifully changing - an entire generation of game writers have come to learn the aesthetics of writing for video games, and in the past few years a virtual explosion of new books and resources have become available to teach would-be writers how to tell stories in games.

Still, the challenge of telling really good, meaningful stories in video games remains considerably daunting. The challenges of yielding control of pacing, frequently plot, and the question of character development versus player agency remain issues that we're still, if not in the wild, untamed frontier stages of, then at least still in the log cabin and covered wagon stages. Regardless of whatever progress we've made, this question of interactivity remains reasonably off-putting to transmedia producers who might not be familiar with video games. Again, this is changing - but it's definitely still currently an issue.

IV. LOOKING FORWARD

So what are some of the ways in which these transmedia franchises are addressing these challenges, and what can we learn from them? Where are transmedia franchises going from here?

First, NBC's *Heroes* is adapting a unique approach to the issue of cost - the interactive story extensions that are posted regularly to the show's site at NBC.com are delivered as interactive text adventures. While the writing is fair to middling at best and the graphics that accompany the stories are frequently not up to the quality of the illustrations from the *Heroes* comic extensions that appear on the same site, as an experiment these interactive stories are really quite compelling. They're clearly done with almost no budget and likely a very small team of creators, but they still deliver insight into what's happening with characters that audiences care about but have not, for one reason or another, appeared on-screen during the current season of the show. As long as these extensions are considered canonical - and all indications point to the fact that they are - these definitely do make a "valuable and distinctive contribution to the whole".

Our second example is Lionhead Studios, who in early 2008 announced the launch of three Xbox Live Arcade mini-games that would precede the launch of *Fable 2*, their major AAA release on the Xbox 360 [6]. These mini-games enabled audiences to play what are essentially casual games in order to rack up additional gold that would then be made available to their characters in *Fable 2*. I'll concede the point that yes, this is actually two subsets of the larger 'games' media type, but the lesson learned is valuable - that the low perceived value of one media type can be overcome by providing a real and measurable impact onto the experience in a

second media type. This "valuable and distinctive" contribution is similar to what up-and-coming transmedia scholar Aaron Michael Smith at Middlebury College calls the "validation effect", which is the sensation of payoff achieved when one recognizes real value in the parent media form for having invested the time in the extensions. Here, the gold from the mini-games is very literally added value - but in the case of *Lost: Via Domus*, it's in any mention of Elliot (the player's character) in future episodes or reference to the insight granted at the end of the game. The fact that these validation effects have not, as far as I know, been very well utilized in the show to date further belittles the value of *Lost: Via Domus*.

Another noted characteristic of each of these transmedia franchises that we've examined so far is where the transmedia extensions are placed. It's an obvious point but still worth mentioning that transmedia extensions are rarely sequels, unless continuation in the primary parent media form is rendered either unlikely or completely out of the question. Such is the case with the comics-only sequels to Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *Firefly* and the Jim Henson Company's *Farscape*. Prequels are far more common, such as the case with the novels set in the universes of Bungie's *Halo* and Blizzard's *Warcraft*. As IGDA Writer's SIG member Andy Walsh pointed out in an email, "The reason that many such stories are done as prequels is simple...if the game is to have a sequel and the world is to keep continuity then the designers and writers don't want to have any such sequel hampered by the comic or the novel's storyline. That's why many (not all, but most) comics and books predate the game, or fill in the gaps between games rather than extending the story into the future." The same observation can be made about films and TV shows; moving forward with the primary characters and plotlines in a secondary media form is largely verboten, unless the primary narrative thread is contractually limited, as in *Lost*.

Another trend of video games in transmedia franchises is the 'big boxed set' distribution model, or the inclusion of transmedia extensions with the parent properties in big collector's editions. The aforementioned Andy Walsh wrote a prequel for the Collector's Edition of *Prince of Persia* that shipped to the world market outside of the United States; inside the US a different prequel was included that was written by Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik of *Penny Arcade*, who also created a similar prequel for the Collector's Edition of *Assassin's Creed*. The \$150 Collectors Edition of Electronic Arts' *Dead Space* included two of its three prequels: the 160-page graphic novel and the *Downfall* animated movie. What I haven't seen yet is a really great example of subscription-based transmedia extensions, but with the continuing rise of both episodic games and downloadable content expansion packs being delivered via digital download services such as Xbox Live Arcade and WiiWare, such an experiment can't be too far off.

Another aspect of transmedia franchises that cannot be underestimated is the value of authority. Video games as transmedia extensions may have a greater degree of success in pulling in new audiences to games if the game extensions are clearly advertised as being written by the same people who write the parent narratives.

The comics-only Season 8 of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* launched with a great deal of fanfare surrounding its being both blessed and partially written by Joss Whedon himself. The storylines picked up where the TV show left off, the initial story arc was written by Whedon and subsequent issues have been written by other staff writers from the days of the TV show. This is in contrast to the *Buffy* comic that was published during the TV show's original run, which was not written by Whedon and was not considered canonical. The value of this authority translated directly into sales - when the original non-canonical *Buffy* comic was cancelled, it was moving less than 25,000 copies per issue. When the canonical season 8 debuted with Whedon at the helm, it moved over 110,000 copies. While it's true that Whedon himself is an unusually high-profile creator, this would definitely be an experiment worth repeating in video games.

Finally, it's worth noting that transmedia storytelling in general still has a lot to learn from the recent successes of video games. I've already mentioned digital distribution, but something that video games frequently do well that transmedia stories frequently do not is providing audiences with some sense of progress. Video games such as Traveller's Tales' *LEGO Star Wars*, *LEGO Indiana Jones* and *LEGO Batman* all provide players with a regularly-updated percentage number of how much of the game players have completed. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins also notes that "Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience." This frequently takes the shape of fan-created resources such as the *Lostpedia*, but it would be useful for transmedia producers to provide some kind of way for these hunters and gatherers to 'keep score' of how much they've consumed, what else is still out there, and how the pieces fit together.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, looking at video games in the context of transmedia storytelling shows that not only are games media, as is sometimes debated, but media, especially transmedia stories, are frequently games. We are indeed, as Jenkins says, hunters and gatherers, putting the pieces together and attempting to "collect 'em all" when we engage with these transmedia franchises, a mechanic not at all dissimilar from detective novels and whodunits. Just as mystery fans do with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, audiences of transmedia stories engage in a playful exchange with transmedia producers and storytellers - and by blending video games into the mix, we're simply increasing the levels of complexity, interactivity and engagement. Precisely how we set about doing this is, obviously, a field for rich and exciting future research.

Some possible directions of future research might include:

- How can digital distribution lower both the costs of video games and the resistance to exploration of video games by non-gamers?
- How to best balance interactivity with plot and character development?
- Where do video games fit in an ideal order of transmedia extensions?
- What is the ideal balance of cost, expected time spent and amount of narrative payoff?

Thank you very much for listening!

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