

THE EXPERIENCE OF **STORY WORLDS** ACROSS MEDIA A CONVERSATION WITH **AARON SMITH***

by Francisco Trento**

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Introdução

Aaron Smith has been known in the academic environment because of his texts about structures within transmedia narratives. His most famous work is “Transmedia Storytelling in Television 2.0”; a thesis for the Middlebury College presented in Spring, 2009, in which he discusses canonicity and world building processes in transmedia storytelling. One of the examples analyzed is the TV series *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) and its narrative extensions in other platforms, like mobile phones, books, games and ARGs (Alternate Reality Games). At this time, Smith is working at the advertising agency; having clients like ABC Entertainment and Disney XD. In this interview for GEMInIS journal, among other things, he talked about his theoretical influences, differences between concepts of transmedia narrative and transmediation, and the definition of Narrativized Geography of Play.

The opinions given in this interview do not necessarily reflect the views of the employers in which Aaron works or has worked.

GEMInIS: Talk about your actual work.

Aaron M. Smith: As an academic, my research focuses on the “complex design ecology” that shape the construction, proliferation, and experience of story worlds across media.¹ That is, I look at how specific contexts, cultures, techniques, and objectives help configure and influence the development of transmedia systems. Transmedia design may be applied a lot of different ways, which is why I think about it as a framework and not a formula, but I’m most curious about its applications in entertainment (how the creative industries can craft richer texts) and higher education (how students can

¹ Christy Dena introduced the term “design ecology” to me as the aesthetic and economic decisions that affect a transmedia practitioner’s decisions. She has developed this idea in her Ph.D thesis *Transmedia Practice: Theorising the Practice of Expressing a Fictional World across Distinct Media and Environments*. University of Sydney, Australia, 2009.

communicate, critically read, and translate stories across media).

Transmedia storytelling is not just about what each medium does best, but what all media do together. It's important, then, to consider the specificities of various media in relation to the cumulative experience of them. When and how does one migrate from solitary reading to social gaming, or from a vibrant crowded theater to an intimate mobile device? Every transmedia project has unique constraints and objectives. *Star Wars* differs from *The Blair Witch Project*, which differs from *World Without Oil* in fundamental ways. Yet to truly design transmedia systems meaningfully, research them thoroughly, and critique them fairly, we must examine why to choose not just one medium over another, but one transmedia form over another as well. Thus, the underlying question I'm currently grappling is, "how do we compare transmedia strategies?"

As an Interactive Media Planner for the creative advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy, my job is to coordinate display, gaming, mobile, and social media efforts to promote television shows. My team makes a recommendation for the best way to spend money online, in conjunction with radio, outdoor, television, and print, in a way that most effectively generates awareness and buzz for the premiere. With the client's approval, we then carry out that plan at every level – developing the strategy, buying the media, executing the campaign, monitoring the performance, and analyzing the results.

It's a tricky process because our entire goal is to drive people from one electronic device (the computer) to another (the television set). In the United States, selling air-time for advertising remains the primary source of revenue. So while digital media has enabled all kinds of new possibilities—for deepening engagement, reporting metrics, facilitating conversation, and so forth—these affordances are largely understood in terms of their ability to preserve the live ratings. The television advertising industry, despite technological and cultural convergence, still subscribes to the same business model as the classic network era, when mass audiences watched live television simultaneously. For transmedia design to reach its full aesthetic and economic potential, there needs to be pragmatic solutions for exploring new business models and negotiating multiple media commodities. I'm interested in understanding what that shift might mean, both from industry and academic perspectives.

GEMInIS: Talk about transmedia narratives as a tool for education. Have you ever been in contact with a transmediatic system of education? Did it work?; or do you have any suggestion to make narratives that flow in a variety of more palatable platforms and formats?

Aaron M. Smith: From my experience as a multimedia consultant in higher education, many students are technologically savvy, but many more cringe at the thought of video editing, lighting, or podcasting. Sure, they are quite comfortable in recording video on their phones or using social media, but that is very different from authoring a quality project with a high production value. Students struggle to leverage the tech tools in meaningful ways, the same way they struggle to transform their writing into effective rhetoric. For example, I consulted on an assignment that had students translate their essays on American culture into a digital story. The students had trouble understanding that the process of translating text to video is not a manner of recording one's voice reading over the essay and then inserting relevant images. Rather, a visual narrative conveys emotion differently. To maximize a medium's storytelling potential, students needed to rework their papers so as to "translate" it for the language of cinema or for Google Maps or for a podcast, and so on. I believe there is a need for greater instruction in this regard.

The thing we have to remember, though, is that any new technology or mode of communication in the classroom should first and foremost serve a pedagogical objective. And this technology or mode of communication should have distinct teaching and learning advantages over any other solution. If we are to use transmedia in education, the instructional design must be flawlessly sound. It must incorporate and promote the same intellectual rigor and critical thinking skills as any traditional assignment. The curriculum can be experimental, yes, but I've seen many projects fall flat because of the lack of clear expectations for participation and evaluation.

Ultimately, I think about transmedia education less in terms of replicating how an entertainment franchise operates, and more in terms of developing a 21st century type of literacy. To me, transmedia education represents designing, translating, and communicating stories effectively across media. It addresses questions like, how do I craft a compelling cross-platform story that plays to the strengths of each medium? How do I critically dissect the mechanics of a transmedia system? How do I adapt an academic research paper into different media? How do I create a media text that challenges or subverts the message from another? When students begin to contemplate these questions, that's when I see transmedia design as a powerful tool in education.

There are of course numerous barriers and challenges, including copyright concerns, varying levels of technological expertise, lack of a grading rubric, and lack of technical support and available resources. On the other hand, I believe there is tremendous potential for creative expression. Rather than having students robotically regurgitate dates, or rush through an essay for a single reader, we can ask them to dive

deep into their topic, discover the most compelling narrative elements, strategize how their message can best be conveyed, and convincingly show a public audience why we should care. The exact methodology for this is unclear. Yet when it works, it can be tremendously gratifying for both students and instructors alike.

GEMINIS: I've read your last article, in which you develop the Gerard Genette idea of paratexts and its "updates" to newer media, developed by Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittel, to talk about the Star Wars Lego franchise. In that text, you use the expression "narrativized geography of play". Can you describe this concept to us?

Aaron M. Smith: In her book *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures*, Maaïke Lauwaert conceptualizes the sum of all play practices, design, and discourses in terms of a "geography of play."² This geography of play consists of a dynamic between the core, the intended play practices, and the peripheral, fan practices that deviate from the intended use. For example, we might say LEGO's core practices involve stacking bricks to construct a house or structure. But because LEGO's bricks are interchangeable across all sets, they also facilitate a large peripheral area, allowing builders to create literally anything they can imagine for a variety of uses.

Today, LEGO's licensed and original properties involve fantasylands, supernatural environments, and galaxies far far away. LEGO is as much about world building as it is about architectural building. To play with LEGO in the digital age is to use media to produce or re-enact fictional stories and share them with a community; it is to use media to collaboratively participate in narratives across media or re-contextualize characters from one world to another. I suggest the concept of a "narrativized geography of play" to describe the social, virtual, and physical play practices associated with such transmedia entertainment. In both the core and peripheral areas, I apply two other terms with spatial connotations—spreadability and drillability.³ I argue that LEGO Star Wars excels at spreadability⁴, motivating audiences to produce and share divergent stories outside the official canon and circulate them to a wide audience.

² Lauwaert, Maaïke. *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009.

³ Both both of these terms will be discussed in the forthcoming book, *Spreadable Media*, edited by Sam Ford, Joshua Green, and Henry Jenkins.

⁴ Henry Jenkins describes spreadability as the way "communities circulate content according to their own interpretations, uses, and social relations." See: "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling." [Henryjenkins.org](http://www.henryjenkins.org),

December 12th, 2009. http://www.henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html

LEGO BIONICLE, on the other hand emphasizes drillability⁵ by positioning its toys as narrative portals and inviting fans to descend into its vast mythology. These properties help make up a narrativized geography of play that does not replace the traditional notion of construction play; it simply provides another level of meaning. Narrativized toys can co-exist with the free-form traditional LEGO play sets, offering different modes of creative play and self-expression.

GEMInIS: As some theorists said transmedia narratives are present since a long-time ago. Geoffrey Long, for example, argues that the bible can be considered a transmedia narrative (depending on the theoretical field in which you are based). "... to compensate for widespread illiteracy the church provided parishioners with multiple ways to experience the stories in the Bible. These took form of hymns, sermons, artifacts, and, perhaps, most spectacularly, enormous stained-glass windows." (...) "If Genesis only existed as an stained glass, Exodus as spoken words, Leviticus as music and Deuteronomy as brushstrokes as canvas, then the Bible would objectively be a transmedial franchise" (LONG, 2007, p. 24). As you see, if we take Jenkins's transmedia references, the Bible isn't a perfect transmedia narrative, but we have many of them long before the internet (Star Wars, Star Trek, etc). So the question is, isn't transmediatic narratives just a new drapery of a thing that existed for ages in benefit of the capitalist system and the Cultural Industry? (are these concepts applicable to our spirit of time?)

Aaron M. Smith: You are correct in that transmedia storytelling is not a new phenomenon. We can look at examples in everything from Greek mythology to Japanese manga to Lovecraftian horror to government propaganda. I think you can make a case that sacred texts in all religions incorporate world building strategies and allow for a multiplicity of tales and characters to flourish across media. However I think the key today is that, amidst technological and cultural convergence, we are beginning to understand transmedia storytelling as a practice, a technique, and as an increasingly relevant mode of communication. It's now possible to coordinate and design cross-media experiences with a level of precision that was previously impossible before. Media consolidation, technological advances, and participatory audiences have paved the way for the recent explosion in transmedia discourse. These changes have raised a whole new set of questions and challenges for the 21st century, forcing us to re-think

⁵ Jason Mittell coined the term drillability to describe programs that "encourage viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling." See "To Spread or to Drill." Justtv.wordpress.com, February 25th, 2009. <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2009/02/25/to-spread-or-to-drill/>

our traditional understanding of creative control, authorship, literacy, aesthetics, and monetization.

Since Henry Jenkins wrote *Convergence Culture*⁶ in 2006 we've been in a kind of "Transmedia 101" stage, where academics, practitioners, and educators were still learning how to talk about, critique, and produce projects. Now that the term has caught on a bit, I think we're entering a new era, one where we can hopefully shift the conversation away from transmedia's definitions and towards transmedia's implications, mechanics, and best practices.⁷ Frank Rose, author of *The Art of Immersion*, argues that "whenever a new medium comes along, it takes people 20 or 30 years to figure out what to do with it."⁸ I think we're in a similar experimental phase when it comes to developing a common language and grammar for modern transmedia storytelling, which is why the field is so exciting to me.

GEMINIS: How do you categorize *Lost*? Is it a transmedia narrative (Jenkins) or a transmediation (Christy Dena) phenomena?

Aaron M. Smith: This is a really complex question, one that I think can be muddled by debating the intricacies of the transmedia definition. In my thesis, I focused on the aesthetic potential for transmedia storytelling to coexist with television, but I wouldn't argue that narrative is the only mode present in such a system. Indeed, Christy Dena contends that both game and narrative modes can be equally applicable in a transmedia project, and therefore prefers the terms "transmedia fiction" and "transmedia practice."⁹ Likewise, Henry Jenkins considers transmedia narrative to be just one type of operating logic, alongside other logics like transmedia branding, transmedia performance, and transmedia play. All of these have their place in *LOST* as well. As Jason Mittell argues, playfulness is an important aspect to *LOST*'s narrative comprehension, since viewers become players who actively engage with paratexts to uncover insights, hypothesize about their significance, and theorize about future events. When I think about *LOST* as a transmedia narrative, I think about it as one that is deeply intertwined with ludic modes of engagement. And I think about it as a franchise that involves a multitude of transmedia logics intricately stitched together.

The other implication to your question involves varying perspectives between

6 JENKINS, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

7 See JENKINS, Henry. "Transmedia 202: Further Reflections," Confessions of an Aca/Fan, August 1, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html.

8 ROSE, Frank. *The Art of Immersion*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.

9 DENA, Christy. *Transmedia Practice: Theorising the Practice of Expressing a Fictional World across Distinct Media and Environments*. University of Sydney, Australia, 2009.

Henry Jenkins and Christy Dena. I would say that both media scholars push for the concept of transmedia to help the creative industries develop richer, more meaningful texts, in contrast to franchising, which involves the reproduction of the same stories in the same ways across media. However, Jenkins and Dena differ in their approach towards this end. Jenkins, with a firm grounding in fan studies, focuses on the relationship between corporate and fan cultures, studying the dialogue and tension between the two forces. To Jenkins, the transmedia meaning making process can be shaped as much by unauthorized fan fiction as official Hollywood productions. Dena, on the other hand, emphasizes her research on the intent of the transmedia producer and the unique skill-set needed to practice transmedia authorship.

Neither is wrong in my opinion and I think we can examine LOST from both approaches. We certainly can look at how fan paratexts provide unique and valuable meaning – for example, the fan wiki Lostpedia offers such a comprehensive archive of the LOST universe that even the LOST producers have admitted to referring to it. The popular site offers in-depth analysis and documentation, both in canonical and non-canonical forms, which improves fans’ understanding of the show and informs further speculation. At the same time, we might study LOST’s transmedia design and world building strategies that encourage such encyclopedic tendencies, as I elaborate on in my thesis. So, in short, I think you can categorize LOST from both perspectives depending on the research objective in mind.

GEMInIS: Which are, at this time, your main influences and theorists? Are you in contact of new forms of describing transmedia, apart from the ones we’ve usually set as references? If it’s the case, can you describe a little of these theories and “the new names in transmedia”, if they exist.

Aaron M. Smith: My main influences come from a solid mix of academics and practitioners, many of which I’m sure you already know as references. There are indeed a growing number of transmedia innovators who I would consider to be both, people like Geoffrey Long, Jeff Watson, and Christy Dena (and others!). I’d like to envision my work existing at the intersection between theory and practice, so I’m fascinated by how aca-practioners negotiate those realms and push both the academy and industry to inform one another.

As far as new ways of thinking about transmedia, I think there’s an interesting relationship between remediation¹⁰ (refashioning one medium for another) and

¹⁰ David Bolter and Richard Grusin introduced this term in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000.

transmediation. I have a theory that if you're going to launch a transmedia franchise, it helps to create a text that *feels* like it could branch out into any number of media. This might involve borrowing narrative structures, aesthetic qualities, visual representations from other media and repurposing them to fit the affordances of that medium. It could be something explicit - for example, in *Avatar*, we see Jake Sully talking into a web cam documenting his experience, thereby strengthening the connective tissue between the film and "the travel logs" on the website. Or it could be implicit - *Avatar's* luscious world and sense of discovery makes it feel natural to expand into a video game or augmented reality app. That doesn't mean the video game or any other extension will be better because of remediation in the primary text, but it does mean that when such extensions are done right, they feel more complete in relation to the text at large. Ultimately, I think we need to pay more attention not just to the narrative flowing across media, but also the style, mechanics, and aesthetics behind that narrative flow.

I'll conclude by noting one of my creative inspirations -- J.J. Abrams' mystery box -- since it speaks to my dual interest in storytelling and media.¹¹ In his TED Talk, Abrams presents a cardboard "mystery box" he received from his grandfather as a kid. Abrams to this day refuses to open the box because "it represents potential. It represents hope...It represents infinite possibility." When I was a child, my mystery box actually came in the form of a sandbox. My dad would hide toy dinosaur bones beneath the sand for me to excavate and reassemble. Feeling like a true paleontologist, I immediately became entranced by the idea of uncovering clues to a rich, expansive world that was fundamentally unlike our own. Each piece told me something different about that world, but when I fit all the pieces together and created a complete dinosaur model, my imagination really began to take off. What excites me about transmedia storytelling today is that same sense of wonderment, that sense of playfully connecting the pieces together only to realize that what you've discovered is only a small trace of infinite possibility.

11 ABRAMS, J.J. "J.J. Abrams' mystery box." Blog.ted.com, January 10th, 2008. http://www.ted.com/talks/j_j_abrams_mystery_box.html