

## CHAPTER ONE

# *Think Transmedia*

Media is like pollen, all around us, and inside of us. Each day we collect and stack up pieces from the media, reconstructing layer by layer their *invisible scripts*, and then we bring them to bed with us every night in our cement beehives. We are in contact with hundreds of communicative environments for 24 hours a day, we put up with about 3000 advertisements and by now we are accustomed to getting information and feelings from the media with the total confidence and the same fictional agreement of the five senses that nature gave us. But it is not always like this. The confluence of media involves everything in our collective imagery-making, and by now it enables us to love and engage with a complexity, rather than a simplicity in our stories<sup>1</sup>. And at the same time it brings information and messages to us as well as bringing us towards a *progressive personalization of consumption*, towards an aggregation of *transversal* expressive spaces (online communities, m-sites, reality shows on TV...) where we are able to satisfy our desires for a tale's appropriation and sharing. From this point, the experience can develop the vital energy of *transmedia* storytelling with the promotion of stories across multiple media that interact with

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006).

each other in a way that is even more evocative, integrated and participative to the audience. How?

- By creating publishing spaces that, being simultaneously distributed through multiple media, involve different and interactive methods of consumption for the different audiences of the project (even if educating them to its use).
- By making the consumer of each media asset autonomously develop the contents of the project, exposing himself and becoming *visibly present and identifiable* in the universe of the tale.

In fact, thinking *transmedia* doesn't mean just distributing parts of the story in different media, then strictly putting publishing restrictions and dealing with the shuffled parts on the table, as in a charming *solitaire* game. On the contrary. *Conditio sine qua non* for a transmedia tale is the continuous dialogue between the involved publishing platforms and the consideration of creative and consumer spaces that belong to each of them, necessarily *starting from the audiences*<sup>2</sup>, at all times. In transmedia projects, the authorship is often more hidden than shown, and the responsibility for the tale is disguised in the story and its different uses, in order to consider – from the beginning – the WHAT and HOW of the tale as a function of the audience, more than the creator (storyteller, producer, promotions manager). An example?

One morning in June 2006 three hundred people all met together just outside the POW Entertainment studios in Santa Monica, all dressed-up as improbable superheroes, all armed to the teeth. They are there in the hopes of being selected for a

---

<sup>2</sup> It is a condition that partially modifies M. McLuhan's theory (*Understanding media*, 1964) that states "the content of any medium is always another medium" changing it into "a medium that is incorporated or represented within another medium", or even into multiple media positively combined in one single system.

new reality broadcast by SciFi Channel: *Who Wants to Be a Superhero*, created by Stan Lee, who is also the creator of *Spider-Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *X-Men* and the whole pantheon of the “Marvel Universe”.

The first ones to go are men and women who use their “closeted superheroes” on this occasion, because, following the rules of their favorite masked characters, the costumes should be original and *self-made*. Hence, the first ones to pass through the gate of the broadcasting station are: narrators (writers, communicators, scriptwriters) and creative people (sketch artists, storyboarders, comic-strip writers, actors) of fandoms and American communities.

“Muscular teenagers and never-ending fanatics, art directors from Hollywood, pretty schoolgirls and refined intellectuals enter the structure where the selection is, while Stan Lee is announcing to the *Los Angeles Times*: ‘we are not going to ask them to show us they are able to fly or climb skyscrapers. But each of these heroes has some powers, such as bravery, fortitude, honesty, integrity, self-sacrifice, altruism and the ability to adapt. These are the values we are going to consider’”.<sup>3</sup>

How? By creating stories for the candidates to directly experience, individually or in groups. After all, the prize was very tempting – for these kind of fans, you know – and it directly linked the reality play with the transmedia: a comic book would be created on the basis of the winner’s achievements and signed by Stan Lee himself, and a TV-movie would be produced and broadcast by the SciFi Channel. Previously, candidates took part in dozens of challenge matches and for 6 weeks they spent 24 hours a day in a mystery den, under the watchful eye of the authors and the audience.

---

<sup>3</sup> M. Giovagnoli, *Cross-media. Le nuove narrazioni* (2009).

From a commercial point of view, *Who Wants to Be a Superhero* didn't stake everything on the television program's success, but, in particular, on the feedback of the deep-rooted and *media-active* fans of comics, cartoons and movie heroes<sup>4</sup>. Narrators and creators who had always wished in life to not only embody their favorite superhero, but "Themselves as Superhero".

Following the narrative structures and stories that were useful for the show, the program was the paradigmatic example of one of the most innovative forms of the contemporary story: the *stunt-show narratives*, stories that make the specific audience of a media arena able to have direct experiences with spectacularly high potential. This happens because they are simultaneously distributed on multiple media as an anarchical and unconditional choice to experience them. Consequently, they are more touching and "truer than reality", and open up several possible *stories* in the articulated plot.

Thus, *Who Wants to Be a Superhero* is much more than the umpteenth reality show or a "Big Brother for the superheroes' maniacs". *Stunt-show narratives* today are also part of the most specialized forms for audience *entertainment*, because through them the physical distance between the narrative (stories, heroes) and the technological platforms (TV, web, comics) is transcended.

Yet, what are the most efficient strategies and operations to create this kind of narrative?

To enable the participation of the audience and the sharing of a tale's imagery distributed on multiple media, it is necessary to guide the different audiences of each medium involved in the project towards an independent use of the story, expressing clearly:

---

<sup>4</sup> A. Haas Dyson, *Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Childhood, Popular Culture, and Classroom Literacy* (1997).

- short parts of the plot and the rules of the “game” you are going to play, clarifying the roles and contents you need to create in the multiple media involved;
- associations that link the multiple media in those areas of the tale that could work as easily shared *points of entry* for the audience;
- the basic features of the *narrative contract* that links the authors to the users, that is: the action space of audiences, both for the character’s development in the story and for the solution of a problem, the reversal or confirmation of a point of view, etc.

An example for this case? Picking up in the “prehistory” of transmedia, the mixing of stories and tales of the first Disneyland, created in Anaheim, California in 1955, led to the theme park: the first huge world location that would host a promotional system, movies and cartoon launches through multiple media. At the same time, Disneyland in Anaheim was the prototype for the amusement park and a transmedia framework, the fruits of a Disney and ABC TV broadcast partnership aimed at the shows and events planned for the occasions of new movie releases (yearly) or the broadcast of old successful movies (every seven years)<sup>5</sup>.

An efficient *fil rouge* made of gadgets, real scale masks and different attractions which let millions of spectators and thousands of young visitors to Anaheim feel as if they were sharing the same imagery or, as Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin write, they were physically and constantly “*surrounded by media*”.<sup>6</sup>

*And now, here we are.* In the space of a few generations we have technologized our bards and disguised our shamans that were created in five millennia of History. In order to *imagine differently* we have created and then made the media compete

---

<sup>5</sup> C. Anderson, ‘Disneyland’, in: H. Newcomb (edited by), *Television. The Critical View* (1994).

<sup>6</sup> J. D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (2000).

with each other, and then with our imagination. We have searched for new, free territories where we could learn from storytelling and now we are exactly there. We are continuously spurred into action by new technological goals, in a non-place, following Pierre Lévy's theory, at the edge between the commodity space and the knowledge one (*cosmopedia*)<sup>7</sup>. For this reason, "thinking transmedia" means: to face the remediation of our contemporary industry of information, entertainment and communications, getting ready for a "new creation each time"; for a *redistribution of the imagination*; and for a new artistic and scientific opportunity to communicate information and feelings that help the audience to continue developing.

### *Short Introduction to Transmedia Definition*

A history about the definition of *transmedia* has not been written yet and scientific sources and academic research would be necessary to do it, as well as documentation, marketing plans, networks, broadcasters, and major media communications companies' promotions, which are all spread around the world. The following summary is not a scientific reconstruction, but rather an outline of the principal points that helped clarify the *use of this term* in the everyday life of (corporate and amateur) narrative, and in multiple media all over the world, both incidentally and intentionally, during the last fifty years.

In the West, the term *transmedia* was first coined by the American researcher Marsha Kinder, who wrote in her 1991 book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* about

---

<sup>7</sup> P. Lévy, *Collective Intelligence* (1988).

“commercial transmedia supersystems.” She was referring to the publishing projects of some globally important franchises distributed on multiple media.

Five years later, Paul Zazzera, CEO at Time Inc., was the first to use the similar term *cross-media* that was soon seen all over the world through the start of *Big Brother* (a reality show presented as a cross-media format by its creator John De Mol in 1997) and the unexpected global success of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), as well as the creation of *Second Life*, which according to statements by Linden Lab (2003) included and “crossed” all the media within its virtual world.

The *transmedia* definition was drawn on during the same year (2003) by Henry Jenkins in an article in *MIT Technology Review* that was entitled “Transmedia Storytelling” and highlighted the basic differences between the experiences that were unexpectedly and randomly being diffused across the world. Meanwhile, thanks to the 2003 study by the researchers Christy Dena and Jak Bouman in the Dutch *Acten Report*, the definition of cross-media was being refined, while in the professional world, both expressions began to crossbreed, becoming even more difficult to distinguish. At the same time, quite a number of essays on the topic were being written all over the world and in 2005 I also wrote a book, the first one published in Europe, which was entitled *Fare cross-media*. I then held the first Italian *Cross-media # 1 Day* event, which to this day is still organized once a year in Rome with a focus on new trends and experimental projects in the transmedia industry. But the most official page in the history of the *transmedia* definition was written in 2010, after the industry adoption of the term by American cinema, thanks to Jeff Gomez and the Producers Guild of America, who finally inserted the title, “transmedia producer,” in the list of credits for Hollywood movies.

If we move from the definition’s history to the practice of transmedia in the world after its baptism in the Disneyland resort in Anaheim, we should go back to its genesis in 1976.

This was the year of the creation of the *Star Wars* saga by George Lucas, which started the transmedia model on a corporate level and soon transformed into a publishing group in order to produce and promote all the multimedia materials that were linked to the project. At the same time, this year was the origin of *text-adventures* – which are played by connected multiple users – with the release of *Colossal Cave* by William Crowther, linking it with the global growth of gamebooks<sup>8</sup>, thanks in particular to *The Cave of Time* written by Edward Packard in 1979. All of these are examples of interactive tales through which new forms of *dramatic cooperation* were quickly being established between authors and audiences for the creation of plot and characters of the story.

There is another prior term, which is becoming more popular in the conferences and international meetings about transmedia: a term coined by the German composer Richard Wagner, who in 1846 was already talking about the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that is to say a sort of total, comprehensive, universal work. His essay was the “setting” of a synthesis of the subjects involved in the future work of art, within the physical framework and the imaginative universe of the theater. This synthesis was not so far from reality, considering that the theatre spaces of a contemporary metropolis are even more part of the fabric of a city, through works and performances on interactive floors or by videomapping, augmented reality or soundscapes, walk shows and further forms of interactive storytelling. On the contrary, a fine

---

<sup>8</sup> The first work that was considered similar to the gamebook was the *Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain* written by Jorge Luis Borges in 1941 and dedicated to the tale of a novel divided into 3 parts that are linked through 2 “narrative bridges”, each with nine different endings. The gamebook is a second-person narrative, with chapters that develop through different narrative options, depending on the reader’s decisions. Its global distribution was marked by the creation of novels’ series for young people “Choose Your Own Adventure” published by the English Bantam Books between 1979 and 1998, in which the novel by Edward Packard, *The Cave of Time*, was the first work in the backlist, with 40 alternate endings.



distinction that is important and often undervalued when talking about Wagner and *his* “Artwork of the future”, is related to his idea of authorship, which focused on how the artist had an “absolute responsibility for the planning and its realization” of the work, without devolving any creative space to the audience’s contribution.

### *Transmedia Culture*

Maybe it’s because of a need for higher autonomy with the stories and characters they create, but today directors and authors who have contributed to the creation of the collective imagination are now choosing to create their own transmedia transpositions of their work. Products and content that are created for movies or TV are adapted and then distributed via cell phones, comics or books, on the web or as videogames, leading to a “freshness” and a generally positive brand image. Steven Spielberg cooperated for the creation of the videogame of *Jaws*. George Lucas cooperated for the TV series made out of *Star Wars*. Peter Jackson for the movie that drew inspiration from the *Halo* videogame series and, at the same time, for the realization of the game made from his *King Kong*<sup>9</sup>. Not to mention the Wachowski brothers, who even cooperated with their audience to create the script and direction of short animations, and the storyboard of comics that drew inspiration from the movie and the *Matrix* videogame.

If the creators of large global franchises are even more engaged in the development of a transmedia universe of their projects, then there is also an increase of spaces in which the audiences can reinterpret the imagery of the story. Above all, these “new narratives” are interpreted by the audiences as a

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.cross-media.it>

*semantic basin*<sup>10</sup>, which is open to continuous crossbreeding, and as a *cultural activator*<sup>11</sup> that is able to incorporate different narratives and other kinds of constructions, even if things don't always go in the same way. An example?

This production model of Renaissance workshops can be corrupted by advertising factories, as highlighted by Lucas, as well as by the *LOST* creators, Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, who worked to make the writing process of the TV series simultaneously useful to the creation of all the other official brand products as well, enabling *permanently changeable imagery* for the series. In this way, *LOST* gradually became a mobisode (the story is about a manuscript found on the island) and at the same time a series of console and PC videogames, a comic series, a book and a series of *alternate reality games* (*The Lost Experience*, *Find 815*, *Lost University* and more). It is the first large “transmedia bouquet” around a TV series, with numerous usable and playable, editable spaces for the audience, all of them characterized by a strong osmosis between *immediacy* and *hypermediacy*<sup>12</sup>, with an endless exchange between the immediacy of the tale and its permutations and the obscurity and presence of alternate and hyperstructured additions, which are not always found in the audiovisual series, but exist in other kinds of media spaces (*hypermediacy*).

Similarly, a *two-goal structure*<sup>13</sup>, which highlights the co-presence of two main aims in the narrative line of each character is used in all aspects of the series. In each episode,

---

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert Durand defines the *semantic basin* of a story as the relation between the life and the length of one's imaginary productivity, in: G. Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (1960).

<sup>11</sup> Analyzing *Star Wars* as a case of a cultural activator, Joseph Campbell defined this saga as a “monomyth, that is a conceptual structure that comes from an intercultural contagion of images and icons of the largest religions in the world” which is based on the narrative myth of the *travel of a Hero*, as you can read in: B. S. Flowers, *Joseph Campbell's The Power of Myth with Bill Moyers* (1988).

<sup>12</sup> For the definitions of *immediacy* and *hypermediacy*, ref. to J. D. Bolter R. Grusin, cit.

<sup>13</sup> To see the definition of “two goal structure”, ref. to D. Siegel, *The Nine Act Story Structure*, “Proceedings of the Computer Game Developers Conference” (1996).

this is always linked to a sub-plot, which involves all the collectively experienced adventures of the castaways.

It's a TV model that seems to be even better articulated in the videogames related to the series, which go from graphic adventures to first-person *quests* or multiplayer ones with *plot-driven* or *character-driven* stories. All the games are related to the background of the characters, moving through the various media, through the present time of the plane crash and the flashback of the characters lives *before* the airplane crash. All of these are strengths of *LOST*, but what is the worst part of this transmedia experience? The *interoperability*. In other words, you can watch *LOST* on TV, you can play it, relive or collect it, but it is impossible for anyone to influence the story. The brand, in fact, does not include any room for audience agency that comes from the "low level", and its dimension, which is exclusively *corporate*, does not leave any room for the revision or modification of the tale. This is an aspect that is very important to the grassroots narratives of new consumers of Entertainment 3.0.<sup>14</sup>

It's a choice oriented towards editorial caution, necessary because of the great amount of "unmentionable secrets" in the plots throughout the series. From the authors' point of view, in new *transmedia culture* narratives, the social development and emancipation of the audience's role is strongly oriented towards the opportunity to use different forms of a tale by highlighting:

- your own emotional experience in spaces that are gratifying and can be directly and explicitly emphasized through the audience's involvement in multiple media;

---

<sup>14</sup> Here it refers to the distinction between a corporate dimension (whose leaders are the major copyrights' possessors of the tale) and the grassroots ones (which come from the "low level", undirectly and unprogrammed, by the users); this is the theory of Henry Jenkins in: H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (2006).

- a deeper sense of personification in the tale, also through the tale's transposition on a performative level (for example, through "urban" actions or experiential marketing);
- a greater tendency to an emotional economy in opposition to the audience of traditional broadcasters. More active, attached and socially connected to the "heart" of the brand.

Following this way of understanding, in the book *E-Tribalized Marketing* by Robert V. Kozinetz, the author divides the participants of today's transmedia communities into the following categories by their *active involvement* and their *proactiveness*: *tourists*, *minglers*, *insiders* and *devotees* (from the least involved users to the ones that are most involved in the communication and in the brand content)<sup>15</sup>. Some examples?

In 2008, Coca Cola created the *Happiness Factory* campaign, a contest that aimed to create an animated movie with the active contribution of the users on an interactive site. You had to choose a character from the ones presented in an introductory trailer, then register in a virtual job center and you soon started to work in the "Coca Cola factory". At the end of the competition, through the contribution of all the participants, an ad of the initiative was realized. The appropriation of the narrative and the participation in the creation of the story were the users' task, but, at the same time, they were guided and helped to set the tale by the authors of the campaign who created an innovative narrative process that was protected by the brand. It was very successful on a media level, but not so appealing for the most active communities more interested in the *personification* of brands in the whole "transmedia culture", the Kozinets' insiders and devotees, that

---

<sup>15</sup> R.V. Kosinetz, *E-Tribalized Marketing? The Strategic Implications of Virtual Communities of Consumption*, in: "European Management Journal", 17/3/1999.

are *cosplayers* and *fandoms* (though they were not the main audience of the campaign). Cosplayers and fandoms are examples of a *post-literate*<sup>16</sup> culture, which prefers active intervention in managing information and exposure to the horizontal communication of major companies and mass media. They are annoyed by editorial “leveling out” and, consequently, they tend to show their personal *èthos* through the tale. They enjoy creating their own stories, unifying fragments of information that will be shared among the few experts, chosen people, and fans that they are. The aim of their actions is to create a new and more personally imaginative mythology. But, considering the *traits d'union* between these two different groups, it is also necessary to briefly illustrate the great differences between them.

Cosplayers are “the saga of game-lovers, who transform themselves from passive users to protagonists through the person of the tale, changing their appearance through the use of clothing and behavior of original characters in the story”<sup>17</sup>. A narcissistic aspect along with a great competitiveness make cosplayers more sensitive to performances and shows than the actual tale. Generally, their narratives consist of photo books and reportages, photo-stories, videos and animated choreographies. Bright and sculpted hair, thin and plucked eyebrows as in Japanese anime, modeled clothing and extreme paleness of the skin, or even the extreme use of cosmetics to look very pale are all the signs of the desire to embody a brand and a *cartoonization* of a look; they strive for new self-

---

<sup>16</sup> U. Eco, *Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals* (1978). As regarding as comics analysis, new media narratives and “post-literacy”, also refer to L. Fiedler, *The Middle against Both Ends*, in: *The Collected Essays*, Vol. II (1971).

<sup>17</sup> Cosplay tendency was historically created on 1981, during the 20th edition of Comic Market in Tokyo, the most important international event for Manga and Anime, where some girls began to be dressed *Lamù*, the greatly renowned heroine and protagonist of *Lum Uruseiyastura*. After this specific context, cosplayers spontaneously developed on Web, through thousands of websites all over the world.

representations, which is typical of their generation and culture.

In comparison, the fandom audience<sup>18</sup> is more inclined toward the creation of written and audiovisual tales (text only, short films, cartoons and graphics) and the creation of imageries, rather than their *representation*. On a global level, this is currently the largest area in the creation of new transmedia narratives. And thanks to the web, you can explore thousands of fandoms. Fandoms can be found all over the planet and are continuously bolstered by the perseverance and constructive aspect of every member. They use open source publishing platforms for their tales and social networks in order to best keep their relationships alive. It's a daily experience of the *foundational narrative*<sup>19</sup> as defined by Brenda Laurel, which is based on legends, narrative cycles and plots written in order to explain the roles and hierarchies of each group. Keeping this perspective in mind, the basic elements of fandoms are:

- narrative voluntarism;
- strict internal rules (narrative ones, but also referring to the imagery of the brand of the group);
- testing (in two ways: anonymously and explicitly);
- opposition to external aggregation (for example, the aggregation that exists among the different groups who favor the same brand).

Fandoms are most often textual *fanfictions* and audiovisual *fanmovies* related to internationally-known transmedia brands. Some examples?

*Case 1.* “The Daily Prophet” is the title of a project created in March 2008 by a young girl named Heather Lawyer, an

---

<sup>18</sup> Oxford English Dictionary traces the origins of fandoms to 1903, but it is through the fiction and fantasy series and movies that fandoms actually developed all over the world, since 50s of last century.

<sup>19</sup> B. Laurel, *Design Research: Methods and Perspectives*, Cambridge, MA (2004).

online magazine with a strong group of about 100 fanfiction writers from around the world who are working within the *Harry Potter* brand. In 2010 it even became a “movie” thanks to the contributions of the magazine’s editors. Both “The Daily Prophet” and “Potter War” were selected by a major company to help create the *We are Wizards* documentary, a full-length movie that was screened at the Southwest Film Festival; and, as Henry Jenkins noted<sup>20</sup>, it was a powerful example of digital transmedia storytelling, especially considering that in order to be part of the “Prophet” community, the authors had to assume the identity of a secondary character or invent a new one (an *original character*) in the saga.<sup>21</sup>

*Case 2.* The 501st Itatica Garrison is the Italian garrison of the 501st Legion, the greatest club of Star Wars Imperial cosplayers in the world. It is active, with performances, events and parades all around the world, and it has also begun creating successful online short movies and fan videos for hundreds of thousands of users, which have even been broadcast on MTV. A fun example is the video "Never Call Me at Work", which narrates the story of an Imperial trooper being harassed by his hysterical wife on the phone while he is on guard duty on an imperial cruiser, until finally a threatening black figure appears behind him, freeing him from his problem... *forever!*

In both cases above, it is clear that the aspect that stirs the fan-authors’ interest the most is the limitlessness of the stories and characters that can be created, killed, and invented anew without any problem, or any justifications of the audience’s suspension of disbelief, or with regard to the prestige of the brand. They are used to being free from direct censorship and accustomed to acting without strict respect of copyright laws or corporate interests. Thus, these communities of writers,

---

<sup>20</sup> H. Jenkins, *Convergence...* cit.

<sup>21</sup> [www.dprophet.com/](http://www.dprophet.com/)

creators and communicators are occasionally able to create forms of transmedia communications that are extremely *complex and original*. They are able to easily cross national borders and, often, become privileged interlocutors with the creators of major companies of the cinema, videogames and cartoons of their favorite brands.

But, in order to describe and explain this level of complexity, it is necessary to begin talking about projects. And Planning...