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Transmedia Play: Literacy Across Media

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Abstract

Transmedia play is a new way to understand how children develop critical media literacy and new media literacies through their interactions with contemporary media that links stories and structures across platforms. This essay highlights five characteristics of transmedia play that make it particularly useful for learning: *resourcefulness*, *sociality*, *mobility*, *accessibility*, and *replayability*, and explains how each characteristic relates to digital and media literacy education.

Keywords: transmedia, media literacy, play

Over the past decade, within the context of an increasingly media saturated world, *transmedia* has evolved as a way to understand the complex relationships between media audiences, producers, and content. Coined by media scholar Marsha Kinder (1991), *transmedia* refers to a set of narrative and non-narrative media elements that are spread systematically across multiple platforms. Narrative elements include things like plot, setting, and characters, while non-narrative elements tend to be modes of participation (for example, ways to contribute to an online community or types of actions in a video game) or design features (such as menu structure in an e-book or even instructional design in an in-person activity; see Herr-Stephenson and Alper 2013 for examples).

Transmedia takes various shapes depending on the context, audience, and purpose, a set of forms described as “transmedia logics” (Jenkins 2011). Henry Jenkins (2006) has extended Kinder’s work particularly through his discussion of one such logic, “transmedia storytelling,” whereby elements of a story develop across multiple media platforms to constitute a larger story world. “Transmedia play” (Herr-Stephenson and Alper 2013), another transmedia logic, is a related but distinct concept from transmedia storytelling. It involves experimentation with and participation in a transmedia experience, but also applies to media that has no storyline; for example, crossword puzzles or open-ended videogames.

While transmedia logics frequently structure contemporary entertainment franchises and branding strategies, its application towards enhancing and enriching learning experiences with media is largely underdeveloped. Kinder describes Saturday morning TV shows in the 1980s, such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or *Garfield and Friends*, as inexorably linked to post-World War II consumer culture, presenting children with opportunities “to recognize, distinguish, and combine different popular genres and their respective iconography that cut across movies, television, comic books, commercials, video games, and toys” (Kinder, 47). Transmedia relies upon children’s abilities to decode, remix, create, and circulate many kinds of media content, from *Sesame Street* to *Star Wars*, across contexts, including school, extended learning programs, and home environments. The value of these activities for learning is just beginning to be explored by media researchers. Such explorations are timely, as children’s content producers increasingly look to transmedia as part of a strategy for incorporating media into new and existing properties, and as educators look ever more to new media as a site for meaningful opportunities for children, transmedia can be a resource for learning in various contexts.

Transmedia play is a way of thinking about children’s experimentation with, expression through, and participation in media. Within a networked society, where learners are required to find, assemble,

and reassemble information dispersed across various knowledge communities, transmedia requires creative and collaborative reworking of media content. This includes materials that may or may not be designed with explicit learning goals in mind. Transmedia navigation, described as “the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities” (Jenkins 2006, 4), is at the heart of the new media literacies framework. Pedagogical approaches to transmedia do not exclusively focus on new or digital media. “Older” platforms, such as print books, magazine advertisements, and analog radio, can also be leveraged in critical and creative ways in a learning environment. Transmedia experiences invite children to draw upon multiple literacies, including digital, textual, visual, and media literacies, as well as social skills and cultural competencies.

We believe that transmedia play is also well aligned with The Core Principles of Media Literacy Education (National Association for Media Literacy Education 2007). For example, transmedia play encourages critical and active inquiry (the first Core Principle), asking young people not only to consider that all media messages are produced for a specific purpose, but also to gain a deeper understanding of how those media messages are systematically spread across various networks. The second Core Principle of Media Literacy Education states, “Media Literacy Education expands the concept of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) to include all forms of media.” Transmedia play also encourages new types of reading and authorship using a wide array of media texts. Since there are many ways to enter a transmedia storyworld, students with varied learning styles have multiple opportunities to revisit a story and reinforce skills of analysis and expression over sustained periods of time. Transmedia encourages engaged participation and citizenship (the fourth Core Principle), with a particular emphasis on understanding the ways in which media elements travel locally as well as transnationally. Learners not only construct their own meanings from transmedia messages, but also derive meaning from the paths they make for consuming, creating, and sharing media elements.

Transmedia play is a new way to understand how children develop critical media literacy and new media literacies through their interactions with contemporary media that links stories and structures across platforms. This essay highlights five characteristics of transmedia play that make it particularly useful for learning: *resourcefulness*, *sociality*, *mobility*, *accessibility*, and

replayability, and explains how each characteristic relates to digital and media literacy education (Gillmor 2010; Hobbs 2010).

Five Characteristics of Transmedia Play

Well-crafted and well-designed transmedia play experiences have the potential to be a valuable tool for enhanced and expanded learning, contributing to efforts to address some of the most pressing challenges facing educators and children’s media producers. Herr-Stephenson and Alper (2013) identified five qualities of transmedia play that spark potential for young people’s experiential learning and literacy development. The first of these characteristics is *resourcefulness*, or “the ability to act with/react to diverse, challenging situations by thinking creatively about solutions that leverage any and all available tools and materials” (3). Children are encouraged to make connections between elements of a transmedia story found in different media. For example, in Scholastic’s historical fiction/adventure transmedia property *The 39 Clues*, “reading” the series not only involves books, but also engaging with a number of game-like elements of the story, including finding collectable cards and participating in an ongoing interactive game. As it relates to digital and media literacy education, resourcefulness can entail analyzing materials spread across online and/or offline communities, or making connections across subject areas using media.

Another characteristic of transmedia play is that it is inherently *social*, and involves play that generally happens in conversation with others who may be co-located physically and/or linked digitally through media and technology. In this case, *social* may mean young people sharing proximal space and/or connected digitally with one another over a distance. Conversations set within the context of transmedia play can also spark discussions about social responsibility and social action. For example, the Harry Potter Alliance’s *Imagine Better* project seeks to create a space where young fans of properties such as *The Hunger Games* series, *Glee*, and of course, the *Harry Potter* series, can build an engaged community committed to social justice issues. With younger children, participation in fandom can be a next step in imaginary play, with children imagining possible publics with whom they might engage. Social and civic engagement, a key digital and media literacy competency, is well aligned with transmedia play.

Transmedia (literally meaning “across media”)

is also *mobile*—though not just “mobile” as in “mobile media.” Different ways of understanding mobility within the context of transmedia play include “use of mobile technologies; movement between platforms, media, and setting; and causing movement within media themselves” (27). Children move stories, characters, merchandise, and media elements between platforms in order to create new meanings. One recent exemplar of the mobility of transmedia play is the case of Caine’s Arcade¹. Caine’s Arcade is an elaborate DIY (Do-it-Yourself) cardboard creation built by a nine-year-old arcade-obsessed boy named Caine Monroy. *Caine’s Arcade* is also an eleven-minute short film directed by Nirvan Mullick that has been viewed over seven million times on YouTube. The film documents not only Caine’s story, but also the support of his family and the collaborative efforts of online and offline community members to support his imaginative pursuits. A grassroots version of fandom has developed around Caine, as children and families post response videos and photos on Facebook featuring their own cardboard creations, and educators develop and share curriculum around the film². Now, both Caine’s Arcade and *Caine’s Arcade* exist in the minds of people young and old around the world. The transmedia story world continues to play out between media platforms—from cardboard paper towel tubes to YouTube.

Another quality of transmedia play is the ways in which it is *accessible*, or the ability for children “to jump in to play with transmedia from a variety of starting points and define a trajectory that takes into account their own unique context and access” (27). One example of an accessible and memorable cross-platform transmedia play experience is Story Pirates. An arts and literacy program, Story Pirates pairs experienced teachers, actors, artists, and comedians with schools and community organizations to collaborate in creating dynamic creative writing classes and workshops covering a broad range of academic topics. Through a mix of transmedia play, storytelling, and performance, the Story Pirates disperse interconnected content across various social contexts and multiple media platforms. Children can extend their experience with Story Pirates in any number of ways, including participating in improvised live performances known as Create-A-Shows, listening to the Story Pirates on a regular slot on Sirius XM’s Kids Place Live radio show, and

viewing and sharing on YouTube³ the Story Pirates’ internally-produced online video versions of student stories. Having a wide range of digital and non-digital entry points to a transmedia experience can allow for a wider audience of children to access unique learning opportunities.

Lastly, transmedia play is *replayable*, or can entice “people to revisit, explore, and investigate rich worlds so intensive that they require multiple ‘visits’” (3). Many transmedia experiences are large-scale and unfold over time, leading to high potential for replayability. A nice example of a replayable transmedia play experience with vast potential for learning is *Minecraft*, an immensely popular open-ended video game that challenges players to build complex social worlds with virtual blocks. As of April 2013, nearly ten million people had bought the PC/Mac version of the game. A modified version of the game for educators called *MinecraftEdu*⁴ allows for special tools that make it simpler for teachers to incorporate curricular text-based content, ranging from foreign language to chemistry to geography. In and outside of school, children learn to explore *Minecraft* by attending to various other media resources, including online videos, wikis, and other websites to learn from other players’ experiences. Because users are constantly building and rebuilding the game, children are encouraged to discover, research, gather, and experiment within and beyond the game space.

Future Directions

While the above examples point to the pedagogical potential of transmedia play, there is a need among researchers to better understand and leverage the possibilities of transmedia learning for all children. More empirical research is warranted to find out where, when, how, and under what conditions transmedia supports social skills and cultural competencies, as well as digital, textual, visual, and media literacies. The core principles of media literacy education also illuminate various questions within the context of transmedia play. For example, there are ethical and legal issues raised around children’s sharing of content online and the ways in which producers and other audience members may integrate part or all of that material into a transmedia storyworld.

The five characteristics of transmedia play are

1. <http://cainesarcade.com>

2. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/307587742652034/>

3. <http://www.youtube.com/user/StoryPirates>

4. <http://minecrafteu.com/page/>

possible starting points for future research directions as well. For example, depending on the type of mobile platform, are there clear differences in learning outcomes when a child begins participating in a transmedia experience through an interactive app as opposed a printed book? How much of an impact does having access to all of the media, versus selected access points, make in the quality and appeal of a transmedia experience among children? If a transmedia play experience takes place over a prolonged period of time, how does the duration of participation affect learning?

These questions are just a few of the many areas for investigation within a transmedia and learning research and development agenda. As the complex relationships between media audiences, producers, and content continues to evolve, let us forge collaborations among researchers, designers, and media literacy education practitioners to determine how best to utilize transmedia logics to craft enticing learning experiences and environments for youth of today and tomorrow.

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