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Transmedia Storytelling and Mobile Devices: The Future of mLearning?

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What is Transmedia Storytelling?

It is "across media" storytelling. Rather than tell the same story in different media, it's about telling different parts of the same story through different media. In doing so, you should take advantage of each medium's unique affordances. Mobile, for example, offers mobility, text messaging, and other features which other media may not.

Each contribution, in each media form, should ideally stand on its own, as well as contribute to the larger story. Each contribution is a seamless point of entry into the larger story.

Transmedia storytelling has several antecedents, but it has evolved most in the entertainment industry. Transmedia storytelling approaches have accompanied films such as *Star Wars*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and *The Matrix*, among others.

Example of Transmedia Storytelling

The *Star Wars* franchise is a good example of transmedia storytelling. The original movie premiered in 1977, and books, a TV special, board game, role playing game, computer game, and other media followed. Each added to the audience's understanding of the Star Wars "expanded universe." What's interesting is that in several cases – such as with Star Wars toys, and the role-playing game – the audience was constructing their own stories.

The "Media" In Transmedia

Virtually any media can be used for transmedia storytelling. In fact, live events can be a part of transmedia storytelling. Sample media include video, websites, social media, podcasts, text messages, email, phone, mobile maps, and various games, including role-playing games, board games, and alternate reality games.

Why Do Transmedia Storytelling?

1) Potential for Learning
   - We know that stories are effective vehicles for sharing knowledge, and that various types of media are as well. Together, these two facts tell us that transmedia storytelling can be a powerful mechanism for learning. Stories can serve as scaffolds for constructivist learning.
2) Reach a larger audience
   - Consumers increasingly access media across a range of devices, services, or applications. There is a need to "go where the audience is." Going cross-platform with transmedia caters to a diverse set of preferences for how people receive and consumer content.

3) Improve engagement

- Transmedia storytelling also offers the potential for improving audience engagement and retaining it over time. People become emotionally invested in good stories and want to learn more about how they evolve. The behavior of the Star Wars fan base over time illustrates this.

How Transmedia Storytelling Is Used

Below are examples of how transmedia storytelling is used in 3 different domains: entertainment, marketing, and corporate education programs.

Entertainment

To build interest around the launch of the film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), its creators commissioned the creation of an alternate reality game (ARG) . An ARG weaves fictional story elements into the real world and challenges participants to achieve a goal by navigating and deciphering these elements. For example, one goal might be to solve a puzzle by tracking down clues left in websites, social media, voicemail, and physical locations. An ARG can employ any form of media.

In the promotional materials leading up to the launch of *A.I.* were subtle clues that, when followed, led to additional clues and puzzles that needed to be solved. The overall goal of the game was to figure out "Who murdered Evan Chan?" Evan was a character who in the movie was murdered.

A world-wide community of thousands formed to collaboratively play the game. The community posted over 40,000 messages to a Yahoo! group set up to share information for the game. No one announced that the game was a game, until the creators finally revealed themselves. One of the principles of ARGs is, "This Is Not A Game."

ARGs have been used in other contexts outside or entertainment. Some argue that ARGs are not transmedia stories. However, ARGs such as the one described above have the characteristics of transmedia stories.

Marketing

In 2012, Ford launched a national advertising campaign for the Ford Fusion called "Random Acts of Fusion". It used transmedia storytelling techniques, beginning with a video featuring US TV personality Ryan Seacrest, Facebook page, and other media. In the course of the campaign, Ford Fusions were loaned to consumers, and stories about how they used the Fusions were documented and shared.

Corporate Education

In 2010, Cisco created an alternate reality game called "The Hunt" for its global sales meeting of 20,000 sales and sales support employees. Previous sales meeting had been in-person events, and the ARG was part of an effort to make its sales meeting more virtual.

In "The Hunt," players helped a fictional Cisco employee unravel the mystery of who had stolen her late father's journal from her apartment. Her father had uncovered an international conspiracy. The game included video clips, fictional websites, and phone messages. The characters used Facebook and Twitter to interact with participants. In the course of playing the game, participants collaborated and communicated with one another using Cisco technologies, which helped them learn about Cisco's products.

When To Use Transmedia Storytelling

There are several considerations to keep in mind about when to use transmedia storytelling. Key among them are:

1) Budget
   - Transmedia storytelling doesn't have to achieve the scope and quality of Cisco's *The Hunt* to be effective. The tools of media creation and distribution are increasingly free or inexpensive and easy to use. For example, an alternate reality game could be created using:
     - Mobile phone - to record video and upload it to YouTube, as well as text messages from characters
     - Social Media – WordPress, Twitter, and other social media tools can be used for character profiles. Read the terms of service, though – Facebook's, for example, only allow real people to have accounts.
     - eVoice – can be used for a local phone number and hosted voicemail
     - GoDaddy – for procuring web domains and hosting sites

     However, recognize that a good end-product requires up-front thinking about design, and this can is an investment of time.

2) Audience is willing
   - Recognize the willingness of your audience to use a given medium. For example, is enough of your audience comfortable with Twitter to use it? Cisco learned this with "The Hunt" ARG. Key populations within Cisco's global sales force are systems engineers and account managers. Engagement in "The Hunt" was higher among the systems engineers than the account managers. Systems engineers were more technically-oriented, and likely to commit the time to play the ARG.

3) You have a good story
- Transmedia storytelling is about the story. You have to have a good story to be successful. There are many elements to successful stories, but key among them are characters, conflict, and plot. Characters facing a conflict is what drives interest in a story. Plot keeps the audience's attention because it is how the characters resolve their conflict. In the science fiction movie *The Matrix* (1999), the characters were fighting to free humanity from the control of machines in a grim future.

Tools for Transmedia Storytelling

Among the tools for transmedia storytelling via mobile devices are:

- QR / Augmented Reality Codes – for example, to have scannable posters providing story information in different locations
- SMS – for interacting with the audience
- Location-based services – such as maps and scavenger hunt apps
- Social media – characters can have personas via social media
- Podcasts – for listening on the go

Select Additional Resources

Books

A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms, by Andrea Phillips

Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture, by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green

Sites

Transmedia Los Angeles - http://transmediala.org/

Henry Jenkins Links - http://henryjenkins.org/links

Transmedia Producer - http://www.transmediaproducer.org

Transmedia Storyteller - http://www.tstoryteller.com/

Slideshare - http://www.slideshare.net/search/slideshow?searchfrom=header&q=transmedia+storytelling