**TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING**

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This essay is forthcoming in *Directing for the Screen*, one of the first three books in Routledge’s new series, **PERFORM: Succeeding as a Creative Professional** (January 2017), edited by Anna Weinstein.

The goal of this series is to offer engaging, uplifting, and expert support for up-and-coming artists. The series explores success in the arts, how we define success in artistic professions, and how we can prepare the next generation of artists to achieve their career goals and pay their bills.

The books include practical advice, narratives, and insider secrets from successful working artists and other professionals who represent, hire, or collaborate with these artists. The books also include essays by prominent professors, profiling specific artists and their journeys to success, as well as some of the lesser-known difficulties artists face in their fields and the perseverance and successes of marginalized groups.

The first three books, *Directing for the Screen, Writing for the Screen,* and *Acting for the Stage*, feature interviews with award-winning directors, writers, producers, and actors such as Ellen Burstyn, Michael Apted, Susanne Bier, Jeremy Podeswa, Stacy A. Littlejohn, Boaz Yakin, Mary Harron, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, Barry Morrow, Peter Segal, Elizabeth Allen Rosenbaum, Chiemi Karasawa, Sheldon Epps, Mary Jane Skalski, and more.

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Successful filmmakers are always searching for and developing new ideas, themes, and personal projects, as well as learning new technical skillsets. Then, they try to marry all of this good stuff into the concepts they wish to speak about. To be successful, filmmakers need to be curious about new things and disciplined enough to master new tech toys.

Film is, first and foremost, a practical process. Author Malcolm Gladwell says that you need a minimum of 10,000 hours experience to master any given discipline.[[1]](#endnote-1) Most filmmakers would likely say you need more time than that in this particular discipline. The problem is that emerging producers, directors, and screenwriters rarely get the chance to practice the trade from the get-go.

With this in mind, we would like to introduce you to an evolving media phenomenon that may help you solve some creative or career problems. It may ultimately change how we all conceive of and produce motion pictures in the future. That phenomenon is called *transmedia*.

In the simplest terms, transmedia is telling a story across different media platforms. The Producers Guild of America defines it this way:

*A Transmedia Narrative project or franchise must consist of three (or more) narrative storylines existing within the same fictional universe on any of the following platforms: Film, Television, Short Film, Broadband, Publishing, Comics, Animation, Mobile, Special Venues, DVD/Blu-ray/CD-ROM, Narrative Commercial and Marketing rollouts, and other technologies that may or may not currently exist. These narrative extensions are NOT the same as repurposing material from one platform to be cut or repurposed to different platforms.* Producers Guild of America[[2]](#endnote-2)

You can see from this that the concept has become institutionalized and legitimate, even within the Hollywood industry. Still, it’s a relatively new concept, and it might be new to you. So let’s see if we can clear up some questions. We’ll begin with a review of media consumption.

**Media Consumption**

During their youthful heyday, the Baby Boomers of today used to insatiably watch films in theaters and television on television. Today, however, we don’t consume media in the same way. Except for live event coverage like sports or music, most of us no longer sit down in front of the television at designated times. We might stream Netflix or Amazon Prime or iTunes through our televisions and watch when we choose, or we might watch through these platforms on our laptops or tablets. Consuming film in theaters is also changing. The standard movie theater experience has become somewhat akin to opera, a specialty event, dependent on spectacle and big image. Of course, many of us still go to see mainstream and small films, but the business and the audiences seem to be largely driven by the blockbuster rather than the “indie” these days.

Everything else important in media is found in a computer framework, from gaming to online programming. The length of content and the time spent in consumption is also different from the regimented, scheduled past, from minute bites on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter to the extended binge experience with streaming television shows.

Why does this analysis of media consumption matter? Because audience is important. Viewership is the primary currency of media, whether its physical “bums in seats,” or by media subscription for giant media enterprises like HBO or Netflix. And smart media developers and operators may be adapting to their audiences by reworking the stories they tell and how they tell them.

Good friend Peter Hadzipetros worked as a radio story news editor for decades before he switched to writing for his network’s online services. Today, he trains experienced news journalists how to write for the Web. He had this to say about writing news for today’s Web-viewing audience:

“*When I'm telling you a story on the radio, you're hopefully hanging on every word I say as well as the sound I use to make my report interesting. But if you come across a story I've written for the website, you're probably waiting in a line somewhere or stealing a couple of minutes from your job. I only have a few seconds to capture your attention. So I have to craft a headline that's going to want to make you read more, without insulting your intelligence. When you click on my story, if I don't come through with information you can use, I've probably lost you forever.”*

It’s news, but it’s offered to readers who consume on different platforms and therefore in different ways. Is the technology (the website itself) influencing the story, or is the story still driving the technology? Is the content different?

We exist in a time where the consumer can enjoy media on the largest IMAX screen, having decided to go to that particular motion picture because he saw the piece advertised on his iPhone, perhaps the smallest commercial screen in play these days. Would he watch the same motion picture on his phone? Perhaps. How would the experience be different if he watched the film in the IMAX theater with dedicated attention as compared to on his phone perhaps on a train ride from Philly to New York?

Yes, size and environment guarantees that it would have to be a different physical and psychological experience. We consume media differently today than in years past, and these new habits may strongly affect how and what media we produce in the future.

**Traditional Motion Picture Workflows**

Traditional motion picture workflow is a linear process that works something like this: The storyteller formulates, researches, and develops an idea, and then she pitches that idea, gets feedbacks, and develops it further. She drafts a treatment and then a script. She gets feedback, and then she rewrites.

The development to final screenplay or documentary treatment stage is the longest, most difficult stage of the successful motion picture. This development stage takes on an accordion-like shape, expanding and contracting with the evolution of the project. It expands at the beginning to include the director and talent input, and it then contracts as the screenwriter revises. It then expands later when investors, distributors, or other influences come on board, bringing with them budgets, schedules, and other factors that cause change to the script. The script then contracts as the producer-director team work closely with the writer to make it a producible project.

In the pro ranks, players may also change, and the work will reboot into new creative directions when the new creatives inject their choices into the work. Some projects take years to morph into a producible work. Assuming your funding is set, preparation begins officially and in earnest. Themes and concepts are traded among the larger creative production team, who bring their specialized talent to the project – visual, costume, art, audio design, and so forth. Contraction comes again as the screenwriter revises script #23 into script #24, keeping all of this input in mind.

After production, post-production process begins, first with picture and then with the other elements of the project.

That’s the traditional model that you might be experienced with or perhaps you’ve just learned about it. So what is the new model with transmedia storytelling? Before we can answer that question, we first need to explore transmedia storytelling in a little more depth.

**Transmedia Storytelling**

Storytelling is central to human existence and common to every culture. We might assume that the nature of storytelling changes when the method of telling the story changes. But not always so quickly – or so obviously.

Historically, when technology created new means of telling story, there was usually an inaugural period when the new medium process copied the old. For example, when film first came about in the late 1800s, the creators and the consumers projected this visual as an extension of the theater proscenium. No camera movement, no variations of framing, and no special composition or editing. It was literally a fixed, unmoving audience view staring at the 180-degree stage. Television, although a visual medium, copied radio story and arc structures. Social media, complex and radical, is still searching for an easy definition, operating both as an extension of traditional media and alone in its own right.

Although transmedia is rapidly changing media and audience response, the traditional method of storytelling has been slow to recognize the change. Perhaps we aren’t exactly sure what transmedia is really all about.

Here’s what the scholars say:

*“Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes it own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.”[[3]](#endnote-3)*

–Henry Jenkins, Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California (USC)

*“Trans Media is the process of conveying messages, themes, or story lines to a mass audience through the artful and well planned use of multi-media platforms. It is a philosophy of communications and brand extension that broadens the lifecycle of creative content.’”[[4]](#endnote-4)*

– Jeremy Gomez, CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment, created multiplatform content for intellectual properties such as James Cameron’s [*Avatar*](http://www.avatarmovie.com/), Disney’s [*Pirates of the Caribbean*](http://disney.go.com/pirates/), and Microsoft’s *Halo*.

Is this merely an exercise in expanded storytelling? New definitions for old backstory devices? Or is this a brave new world? In his book, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (2013), Jonathan Gottschall has a simple story formula that might help us:

**Story = Character + Predicament + Attempted Extrication[[5]](#endnote-5)**

Story is also theme, the canon that drives the purpose of the work and ensuring the universal audience interest. Theme establishes story purpose and forces logic on its structure. Transmedia suggests other questions that can help to reveal or sift out theme. You might ask, can I explore the idea in depth? Can I go deeper into the story by learning more about it or heightening my sensory perceptions of it?

Latitude’s *The Future of Storytelling* study is alarge-scale, international exploration focused on quantifying trends, opportunities, and key audience targets for second screen and transmedia storytelling across genres – including both fiction and non-fiction.[[6]](#endnote-6) Here’s an example the study cites to demonstrate how this type of questioning with new technologies in mind can deepen the research for a story:

*“I wish there was an app that would give me information about the historical time*

*period that the work took place during. What else was going on in the world when Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were falling in love? Who was the king or queen of England? What would the characters typically eat for breakfast? What type of music did they listen to? Immerse me in their world.”* – speaking about Pride & Prejudice, female, 29, Berkeley, CA

So with this type of exploration, further questions emerge: Can I spread the story into another realm, and therefore into another platform? Can I develop characters and their world beyond the initial story? Can I look deeper into the backstory, or create a new backstory, with new characters and themes?

Transmedia is redefining how we creatively approach our long-form story, using parallel platform activity to speak to the time, place, or mood of the story. The media maker can further develop knowledge and connection to character or extend the story beyond the main narrative, or even change the nature of how the story reaches an audience by moving from one delivery form into another, a feature film becoming episodic or “serialized,” changing the tone and tension and experience of the story.

**The *Star Wars* Example**

Perhaps the best-known example of this is in the *Star Wars* franchise, which began with the blockbuster trilogy of films and then expanded into a complex broad transmedia universe. *Star Wars* is often cited as providing one of the earliest examples of transmedia storytelling. In 1978, an animated sequence in the *Star Wars Holiday Special* introduced a new character named Boba Fett. This character would later reappear in films, games, and fan fiction. In the decades since, *Star Wars* has continued to be exemplary of this transmedia process. The seven films have generated enormous spin-off and cross-platform activity, from six seasons of a CGI-animated television series, *Clone Wars*, to novels and comic books, merchandizing, and videogame output.

In 2012, Disney purchased *Star Wars* as part of a larger Lucasfilm acquisition. This deal had the potential to reestablish *Star Wars* as a transmedia showpiece through the combined resources of the two companies. Since the acquisition, Disney has incorporated *Star Wars* into its Infinity game platform and invested in the new immersive Star Wars Land attractions at its theme parks. Lucasfilm has also established a new research and development wing called *ILMxLAB*, dedicated to exploring new platforms for immersive entertainment. Some of their work is already reaching audiences. The mobile app that was released in advance of Episode VII included an augmented reality poster. They also released a 360-degree video that allowed audiences to take a virtual speeder ride across the Jaku desert.

This example only hint at the immersive multiplatform story experiences that Disney and Lucasfilm are sure to release alongside the new films in the coming years.

**Audience and Transmedia**

There’s always been a need to identify a preferred or niche audience for stories. The Hollywood studio system was created for exactly this purpose. Controlling the development of product, its editorial completion and commercial marketing were the pillars of Irving Thalberg’s MGM grand design in the 1920s.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Today, technology has brought us analytics. The “Moneyball” numbers approach (using statistics to justify a decision) has become the prevailing approach for studio executives green lighting their feature film or television projects.

In the past, marketing and analytics always connected their product to niche audiences with the goal of then expanding consumer interest beyond the original interested audience. A typical broadcaster constantly reworked its television slate each season to attract the preferred viewership. We would see many popular series cancelled, because the numbers were either too low or because the wrong audience (for the product being advertised) were watching the show.

With transmedia, there’s a new role for the audience. The audience is still a consumer, but the audience is also a critic, promoter, crowd-funding investor, or possibly even co-creator. How is the audience a creator?

**Sheridan College Experiment**

Here’s a class project we recently engaged in at Sheridan to consider this audience idea. We chose to examine an already-produced, ten-minute film called *Portrait of Ryan*. It was the story of a teenager with a dysfunctional family background who is bullied at school and contemplates responding violently to the bullies or by committing suicide. It’s a powerful and complex topic for a student film. The theme that the filmmakers chose was while violence begets violence, love and communication can counter violence. Or, we find courage by accepting love.

We asked the Producing class to conduct in-depth online research to identify specific audiences or communities who might be sympathetic to the theme of the film. Initial audiences included:

* Extended network of friends, family, and crew
* Friends and fans of actors in the film
* Audiences at film festivals sympathetic to the theme
* Participants in anti-bullying educational events
* Online audiences who connect to the material through related online communities

We then sought to find natural social media support of the theme, and the action list expanded even further.

* Website campaigns
* Help lines
* Specific celebrities
* Safe schools
* Local, national, international activist groups
* Canadian Red Cross
* Much Music campaign
* Philosophical positions discussed in blogs and e-papers
* Family Channel campaign
* Religious group discussions on the specific topics
* Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC) campaign
* Facebook discussions
* Call in shows
* Film festivals
* Activist sites like www.stopabully.ca
* Other producers (co-prod) working on similar projects
* Local reporter with a cause
* Government anti-bullying programs
* Authors
* School programs

This was one large activist community exchanging passionate messages about bullying. The size and scope of the passion group’ activities were impressive, which triggered a number of questions:

* If we’d been in tune with this niche community or passion group’s voice and goals a few years back, when the project was produced, would we have written the project differently?
* What elements might we have added or deleted? What additional characters might we have conceived?
* What platforms might we have employed? What multiple platform strategies might we have contrived to promote the project or the project’s theme? Would the students have produced a short film or a social media piece? Or both?
* Would we have integrated audience commentary into the creation of the project?
* Would the students have sought out audience influencers during the promotion period?
* Would their interest have assisted the production being accepted into a film festival?
* Could the students have funded a larger, more substantial work through a crowd funding effort because of community interest?

The idea is that when you determine an end user before developing a project, you can develop the project to suit the user’s needs as well as your own. The user doesn’t control you, but as the innovative film producer (and also CEO of Fandor) Ted Hope suggests, you respect the users and their tastes and concerns.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Transmedia content simultaneously combines audience marketing with idea development, funding, and multiplatform story worlds. The audience is the consumer as well as the “brand” of the experiential product. In this way, the project is more likely to reach the audience successfully when the filmmaker develops a project with art and consumer inseparably.

Transmedia is about employing combined platform technologies and strategies that deliver an expanded story world to an engaged, interactive audience. In a competitive world, we can’t conceive of or successfully execute media storytelling in a vacuum. We must seize the available social media and transmedia tools to reach our allies, collaborators, and audience as we work toward building our stories.

Transmedia requires deep creativity and competence in traditional filmmaking as well as in the new, expanded multiplatform universe. When we work in this universe, we work as integrated but independent artists.

Not every project will fit seamlessly into this process. Not all projects have a games component or webisodes, literature, or merchandizing. But especially for those filmmakers still working on their craft – still in the process of collecting the 10,000 hours Gladwell describes – transmedia married to traditional motion picture workflows is a creative opportunity to write, produce, and direct expanded stories and develop skills on the journey toward mastery.

* You will by necessity develop a deeper understanding of your craft and your collaborative discipline.
* You will learn the psychology of audiences and marketing and distribution.
* You will learn to listen and think and develop projects with resonance.
* You may also see an opportunity to work with experienced storytellers as a creative participant in this area of the global commercial enterprise.

In doing all of this, you might be creatively growing and contributing much earlier in your career than my many frustrated friends from the Boomer era.

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Current Professor and former Program Coordinator in Sheridan’s graduate Advanced Television and Film Program, Professor **Jean Desormeaux** has worked both as an independent producer and as a corporate executive with many of the more prominent media companies in Canada and the US. Notable work includes feature film (*Johnny Mnemonic, Never Talk to Strangers*) and episodic television series (*Due South, ENG, North of Sixty*), and he is a recipient of Gemini (Television) and Air Canada (Feature Film) awards. Desormeaux holds degrees in Film Communications from Concordia University, two law degrees from McGill University, and an MFA in Film from York University. He is a member of the bar of the Law Society of Upper Canada. Desormeaux also presently sits on the North American executive committee of the International Association of Film and Television Schools (CILECT) and acts as an advisor to the University Film and Video Association (UFVA) and trustee to the University Film and Video Fund of America (UFVF). He continues to produce select films and transmedia projects and is engaged in researching media trends and leadership in the cultural industries.

**Randall Kapuscinski** is a professor at Sheridan College in the Faculty of Art, Animation, and Design. Randall has an educational and professional background that is a blend of technical and creative elements. He graduated from the University of Waterloo with a B.A.Sc. in Mechanical Engineering, and later enrolled at the University of Victoria in pursuit of a second undergraduate degree in Classics. In 2003, Randall enrolled in the Advanced TV and Film program at Sheridan and studied Camera and Lighting under Richard Leiterman. The following year, Randall was hired at Sheridan as the lead technologist for the Advanced TV & Film Program. In 2011, Randall left Sheridan to pursue interests related to mobile technology and e-publishing. Through his company, Ripple Digital Media, he was contracted to develop several mobile applications and eBooks. In 2012 Randall returned to Sheridan College as faculty. He is currently teaching courses in transmedia and previsualization in several programs including Media Arts, Advanced TV & Film, Journalism New Media, the Bachelor of Film and TV, and the Bachelor of Photography. His areas of interest for research and curriculum development include 360-degree filmmaking, immersive journalism, and the use of drones for film and journalism.

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