

Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative Worlds, and Branding in Contemporary Media Production

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Many concepts have been developed to describe the convergence of media, languages, and formats in contemporary media systems. This article is a theoretical reflection on "transmedia storytelling" from a perspective that integrates semiotics and narratology in the context of media studies. After dealing with the conceptual chaos around transmedia storytelling, the article analyzes how these new multimodal narrative structures create different implicit consumers and construct a narrative world. The analysis includes a description of the multimedia textual structure created around the Fox television series *24*. Finally, the article analyzes transmedia storytelling from the perspective of a semiotics of branding.

The article proposes a theoretical approach to transmedia storytelling (TS) that combines semiotics and narratology — a combination that should be explained before these complex textual structures are analyzed. Semiotics is not just the "science of signs" as many scholars may believe but a discipline concerned with sense production and interpretation processes. It studies objects (texts) to understand processes. Semiotics is very useful for describing sense production devices — in this case, transmedia narratives — and when integrated with other disciplines like sociology or anthropology, can be very helpful for understanding complex cultural processes. As TS proposes a new narrative model based on different media and languages, the scientific intervention of narratology — a discipline born with Aristotle's *Poetics* and reconstructed in the early 1900s by Vladimir Propp and the Russian Formalist movement — should not only be considered pertinent but also an invaluable strategic scientific field for understanding TS.

In other words, the study of TS, a concept introduced by Henry Jenkins (2003), could be enriched if analyzed from a semio-narratological point of view. Introducing the transmedia storytelling concept into the semiotic approach — a discipline that has not renewed its theoretical models in (practically) the last

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two decades (Scolari, 2004) — may also serve as a catalyst for developing new analytical categories and methodologies.¹ Like any other scientific discipline, semiotics and narratology mature and grow when confronted with new objects and phenomena. Finally, the dialogue between media studies, semiotics, and narratology delimits a territory defined by Marie-Laure Ryan as “narrative media studies” or “transmedial narratology” (2004, p. 35). This article attempts to consolidate this epistemological field by analyzing TS.

1. Toward a Definition of Transmedia Storytelling

This section describes the different definitions and conceptions of TS. The first impression the researcher has of this area of media studies is the seeming semantic chaos surrounding this concept. To increase this complexity, conversations about TS also include many other adjacent concepts: “cross media,” “multimodality,” “multiplatform,” “enhanced storytelling,” and others. This semantic chaos is not new in digital communication conversations (Scolari, 2008b, 2009), and it is necessary to start here to develop a more consistent theoretical TS discourse.

1.1 Definition

At the most basic level, transmedia stories “are stories told across multiple media. At the present time, the most significant stories tend to flow across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel & Robison, 2006, p. 46). In the ideal form of TS,

each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa. (Jenkins, 2003)

Briefly then, TS is a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.). TS is not just an adaptation from one media to another. The story that the comics tell is not the same as that told on television or in cinema; the different media and languages participate and contribute to the construction of the transmedia narrative world. This textual dispersion is one of the most important sources of complexity in contemporary popular culture.

As pointed out above, TS is not alone: concepts like “cross media” (Bechmann Petersen, 2006), “multiple platforms” (Jeffery-Poulter, 2003), “hybrid media” (Boumans, 2004), “intertextual commodity”

¹ Daniel Chandler, in his classic, didactic book *Semiotics for Beginners* (1995), explains the benefits of semiotics very clearly: “. . . semiotics provides us with a potentially unifying conceptual framework and a set of methods and terms for use across the full range of signifying practices, which include gesture, posture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television, and radio. Semiotics may not itself be a discipline, but it is at least a focus of enquiry, with a central concern for meaning-making practices which conventional academic disciplines treat as peripheral.”

(Marshall, 2004), "transmedial worlds" (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004), "transmedial interactions" (Bardzell, Wu, Bardzell & Quagliara, 2007), "multimodality" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), or "intermedia" (Higgins, 1966)² may be found orbiting in the same semantic galaxy. All of these concepts try to define roughly the same experience: a sense production and interpretation practice based on narratives expressed through a coordinated combination of languages and media or "platforms," (Bechmann Petersen, 2006, p. 95).

Many of these concepts come directly from a semiotic discursive territory —see, for example, the long tradition of semiotic reflections on "intertextuality" (Bakhtin, 1968, 1981; Todorov, 1981) or "multimodality" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Ventola, Cassil & Kaltenbacher, 2004) — while concepts like "transmedial worlds" are very close to it. In this semantic reflection on TS, the "intertext" concept — another complex expression widely discussed in semiotics and media studies (Agger, 1999) — will not be considered in order to focus on "multimodality." For Kress, the new media

make it easy to use a multiplicity of modes, and in particular the mode of image — still or moving — as well as other modes, such as music and sound effects for instance The ease in the use of different modes, a significant aspect of the affordances of the new technologies of information and communication, makes the use of a multiplicity of modes usual and unremarkable Multimodality is made easy, usual, "natural" by these technologies. (2003, p. 5)

The combination of languages and media in interactive environments challenges traditional semiotic and narratologic research. First, research on multimodality focused on the verbal/non-verbal combination during communication processes or on the text/image relationship, for example, the contribution of typography or layout to newspaper sense construction.

All texts are multimodal There is a trend in which, increasingly, the written text is no longer structured by linguistic means but visually, through layout, through the spatial arrangement of blocks of text, of pictures and other graphic elements on the page. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1998, p. 187)

The logical next step of this approach is to analyze different multimodal combinations such as those in television discourse (Bell & Garrett, 1998; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) or in multimedia

² Ventola et al. consider that "although multimodality and multimediality, when seen as combinations of writing, speaking, visualization, sounds, music, etc., have always been omnipresent in most of the communicative contexts in which humans engage, they have for a long time been ignored, as various academic disciplines have pursued their own research agendas as research fields. Thus, it is relatively recent that the developments of the various possibilities of combining communication modes in the "new" media, like the computer and the Internet, have forced scholars to think about the particular characteristics of these modes and the way that they semiotically function and combine in the modern discourse worlds" (2004, p. 1).

environments. In this context, TS can be seen as a new dimension of the multimodal discourse, which situates the analysis of the narrative at the center of the research program.

1.2 Examples of transmedia storytelling

For Jenkins, the different works produced under the *The Matrix* brand can be considered a good example of TS:

The Matrix is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 95).

Key bits of information are conveyed through three live action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games. There is no one single source or ur-text where one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the Matrix universe. (Jenkins, 2007)

The *Pokemon* universe is also a good example of TS:

Several hundred different *Pokemon* exist, each with multiple evolutionary forms and a complex set of rivalries and attachments. There is no one text for information about these various species. Rather, the child assembles information from various media, with the result that each child knows something his or her friends do not. As a result, the child can share his or her expertise with others. (Jenkins et al., 2006, pp. 46-47)

Jenkins is not talking about an "intersemiotic translation" or "transmutation" (Jakobson, 1959; Eco, 2003) from one semiotic system to another. A traditional marketing strategy of media companies is to develop the same story in different media and languages, for example the comic book version of the *Alien Resurrection* film or the film version of Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind*. In TS, the strategy goes further and develops a *multimodal narrative world* expressed in different media and languages.

1.3 From text to subjects

TS not only affects the text but also includes transformations in the production and consumption processes. Researchers and producers visualize new business opportunities for the media market as new generations of consumers develop the skills to deal with the flow of stories and become hunters of information from multiple sources.

From the producers' perspective, "storytellers exploit this potential for TS; advertisers talk about branding as depending on multiple touch points; networks seek to exploit their intellectual properties across many different channels" (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 46). TS is also a consequence of the main media producers being large corporations with investments in cinema, television, video games, etc. In other words, TS makes economic sense. As Jenkins puts it, "a good transmedia franchise attracts a wider

audience by pitching the content differently in the different media. If each work offers fresh experiences, then a crossover market will expand the potential gross within any individual media" (Jenkins, 2003).

In this context, *The Matrix* and *Harry Potter* are not just names of movies or narrative sagas for young readers; they're heavyweight narrative brands that express themselves in different media, languages, and business areas. TS is an excellent way for corporations to extend their base and target different groups. For Jenkins, "transmedia storytelling practices may expand the potential market for a property by creating different points of entry for different audience segments" (Jenkins, 2007).

Nowadays, TS seems to be one of the most widespread strategies of media corporations. TS has gone beyond the experimental phase and can be found in any kind of genre, from science fiction (*The Matrix*) to comedy (*High School Musical*) to thriller (*24*) to horror (*The Blair Witch Project*) to fantasy (*Harry Potter*). Reality shows were one of the first formats to experiment with TS. For example, the UK 2001 edition of *Big Brother* was disseminated over nine different platforms: terrestrial broadcast, E4 digital interactive, the Internet, mobile phone, land-line phones, audio, video, book retail, and tabloid press. The economic dimension of TS seems to be outside semiotic scientific intervention, unless the analysis includes the concept of branding, a term that has already been incorporated in semiotic reflections (see Section 4).

From the consumers' perspective, transmedia practices are based on and at the same time promote multiliteracy, which is the ability to interpret discourses from different media and languages. Dinehart maintains that, in a transmedia work,

the viewer/user/player (VUP) transforms the story via his or her own natural cognitive psychological abilities, and enables the Artwork to surpass medium. It is in transmedial play that the ultimate story agency, and decentralized authorship can be realized. Thus the VUP becomes the true producer of the Artwork. (Dinehart, 2008)

As can be seen, TS introduces deep transformations into textualities, production logics, and cultural consumption practices. The next section concentrates on the narrative structures of TS, a field in which semiotics can be very helpful for describing how to create meaning in multimodal environments and construct different implicit consumers.

2. A Semio-narratological Approach to Transmedia Storytelling

2.1 Semiotics and narrative

Many researchers who were educated in the late 1980s or 1990s consider semiotics to be an outdated or old discipline that only considers texts and has nothing to say about real subjects or processes. However, semioticians' huge output in the last 30 years concerning television, advertising, cinema, political discourse, and new media contradicts this superficial vision. Semiotics has a lot to say about media languages and, especially, about TS. If the researcher needs a unifying conceptual framework for analyzing the convergence of different media and languages in a multimodal narrative

world, semiotics can be a very useful tool. TS integrates different applied semiotics (Eco, 1975), like those of television, cinema, theater, comics, etc.

In other words, if the researcher is dealing with texts — for example, a transmedia narrative expressed in a collection of movies, comics, films, video games, etc. — a semiotic approach is necessary and beneficial. However, if the researcher also wants to analyze consumption practices, other disciplines like ethnography or sociology of consumers should be included in the research (though even in this case, the semiotic analysis of the subject-text interaction is necessary).

Because the objective of this article is to describe the narrative structure of a TS experience from a semio-narratological perspective, it will take special note of Umberto Eco's and Juri Lotman's contributions of the *implicit reader* and the *primary modeling system* respectively.

2.2 *Semiotics of transmedia storytelling*

The analysis starts with a hypothesis that is quite accepted in the semiotic and narratology academic environments: texts are not necessarily linguistic (or visual) but narratively structured. In other words, narrative is the basic structure-creating device for meaning production.

Juri Lotman (1977) introduced the well-known distinction between a "primary modeling system" and a "secondary modeling system." From Lotman's perspective, verbal language is the primary modeling system in our culture, the most important and basic cognitive device for interpreting the world.³ Many scholars have introduced a variation into this hypothesis. Ferraro (1994) believes that "the narrative form constitutes a basic tool for meaning construction and event interpretation. It could be said that, more than language, narrative should be considered the primary modeling system" (1994, p. 157).

Classical researchers like Bremond (1973) or Chatman (1978) considered narrative structures to be independent of any media. For Chatman, the story "exists only at an abstract level; any manifestation already entails the selection and arrangement performed by the discourse as actualized by a given medium" (1978, p. 37). Scholars like Marie-Laure Ryan have developed this idea and consider narrative not just as a formal discourse issue but also as "a cognitive construct, or mental image, built by the interpreter in response to the text" (2004, p. 8). As explained in Section 1.3, going from text to subjects is necessary in order to enrich the traditional formal approach to narrative. In TS, more than in classic textualities, the role of the reader (Eco, 1979) is strategic for narrative interpretation.

How can semiotics analyze TS? If narrative is the primary modeling system, the first step, after defining a basic set of analytic categories, is to clarify the narrative structure of TS and then, in a second phase, propose an initial taxonomy of TS structures. Umberto Eco's contributions are helpful for understanding the reader's role in these complex textual structures. As Jenkins notes, the corporations are

³ For a discussion about this hypothesis, see Chang (2003).

"creating different points of entry for different audience segments." As one of the objectives of TS is to increase the number of consumers and target different groups, a semiotic reflection on the textual construction of consumers is pertinent.

From a semiotic perspective, every text constructs its reader (Eco, 1979). For example, a scientific article about nanophysics "is talking to" a specific public: experts in physics with good interpretation skills in that particular field. The reader "inside" the text, who may be considered a strategy or virtual figure, is defined as the *model* or *implicit* reader (Eco, 1979). If the empirical (real) reader recognizes the implicit reader proposed by the text and accepts the proposal, a *reading contract* is established (Verón, 1985).

Often the same text may create different implicit consumers. For example, a movie like *Shrek* (Adamson & Jenson, 2001) is not just for kids; it also features conspiratorial winks to experienced viewers as well as links to other movies and situations, meaning that adults also can enjoy the film. The same text then is constructing at least two implicit groups of consumers: children and their parents.

How do texts create two or more implicit readers? By constructing a sedimentary multilayer text that needs different cognitive skills to be interpreted. One *Shrek* level is for children, the other for adults. The first level includes the simple folktale and a basic set of intertextual references (especially to children's fables and Walt Disney's fictional world). The second level is based on the ironic deconstruction of the traditional folktale and a rich intertextual network of cinematographic and mass culture references that only an adult with good interpretative skills can decipher (*The Matrix*, *Frankenstein*, *Austin Powers*, *There's Something About Mary*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, etc.). Both viewer groups, adults and children, participate from different cognitive and semiotic positions in the creation of *Shrek's* fictional world. This strategy can be defined as a *multilayer text*.

Another way of creating different implicit readers is to operate on the structure of the narrative, for example, telling the same story from different points of view. In this case, the different readers are not dealing with different levels of interpretative skills but with the serial structure of the narrative. This second strategy can be defined as a *multipath* or *multilane text*. To understand the complexity of transmedia textualities, it could be useful to compare them with traditional strategies for implicit reader construction.

3. A Tale of Two Stories: Steve Canyon vs. Jack Bauer

Newspapers have different readers. Many buy the newspaper every day from Monday through Sunday, others purchase only the Sunday edition, and still others prefer to buy the paper Monday through Saturday. How do comic artists deal with this situation? By creating a multipath text that includes three stories in one.

Traditionally, comics production for newspapers was divided between the daily strips (black and white) and the Sunday page (color). There were different combinations of narrative structures: a story

only for the Sunday page (*Little Nemo*); a story only for the daily strips (*Dickie Dare*); two parallel stories that didn't interrelate at all, one on the Sunday page, the other in daily strips (*Mickey Mouse*); the same story integrated into the Sunday page and into daily strips (*Little Orphan Annie*, *Steve Canyon*); and so on. (Fornaroli, 1988, p. 52). Milton Caniff used a narrative structure in *Steve Canyon* that had already been applied by Harold Grey in *Little Orphan Annie*: the same story expressed in the Sunday page and the daily strips without a continuity solution.

However, comics had to deal with the newspaper's different readers. To solve this situation, the daily strips developed the plot, and on Sunday, the color page described situations related to the daily plotlines, but from a different point of view.

In *Steve Canyon*, the narrative devices that integrate in just one story the daily strips and the Sunday page are more sophisticated. The mechanism that keeps both levels independent from the development of the story, without punishing the different consumers and preserving the text consistency, involve superior semiotic skills. (Fornaroli, 1988, p. 55)

In this structure, the Sunday page was independent, yet also integrated into the daily strip narrative. On Mondays, the first comic strip image was a recap to bring readers up to date if they had missed the Sunday edition. The comic strip, therefore, proposed three reading paths for three implicit readers in just one narration: from Monday through Sunday, only on Sunday and from Monday through Saturday (see Table 1).

Steve Canyon's narrative world produced these three implicit readers by manipulating the serial organization of the discourse and the narrative structure inside the same media (newspaper). This strategy — defined above as *multipath* or *multilane* text — can be considered an example of *single media storytelling*.

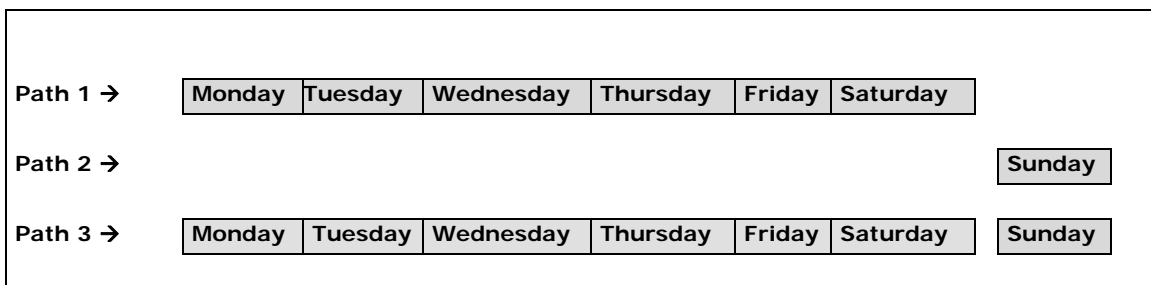


Table 1. *Steve Canyon's* narrative structure.

Now I'll compare this structure with one of the best examples of TS: *24* (Fox, 2001-2008). Fox's serial was born on television, but within a few years it had generated a complex network of comics, video games, soundtracks, books, mobisodes, etc. around the main character (Jack Bauer) and the Los Angeles Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU). The fictional world of *24* is formed by the following components:

- Six seasons of the TV series (144 episodes up to October 2008).
- *24: Conspiracy*: mobile-only spin-off of 24 one-minute episodes released in 2005. Although set in Washington, DC, it included references to the TV show plot.
- *The Rookie*: online spin-off of 12 three-to-five-minute Webisodes — made by many of the same crew members who made the *24* TV show — released in 2007-08. It referenced the plot and characters of the sixth season of the TV show.
- *24: Day Zero*: online animated webisode released in 2007. It is a prequel series that focuses on Jack Bauer's first 18 months at CTU.
- *24: Day 6 Debrief*: two-minute online Webisodes set between the sixth and the seventh seasons and released in 2007.
- *Season 4 Prequel*: This six-minute prequel bridges the third and the fourth seasons, just after publication of the *Cold Warriors* graphic novel.
- *Season 5 Prequel*: This prequel bridges the fourth and fifth seasons, just after the *24: Conspiracy* mobile spinoff set in Washington, DC.

Graphic novels include:

- *24: One Shot* (2004): prequel to the first season.
- *24: Stories* (2005): prequel to the third season.
- *24: Midnight Sun* (2005): prequel to the third season.
- *24: Nightfall* (2005-06): prequel to the first season.
- *24: Cold Warriors* (2008): The chronology of this comic appears to be soon after the third season, but before the fourth season prequel.

Games include:

- *24: The Game*: takes place between the second and third seasons (for Playstation 2, 2006).
- *24: DVD Board Game*: Each player takes on the role of a CTU agent, released in 2006.
- *24: Mobile Game* and *24: Agent Down*: video games for cell phones, released in 2006. *24: Mobile Game* takes place sometime after the end of the third season and prior to the fourth season prequel.
- *24: Countdown*: online game situated between the second and third seasons.

Paperback novels include:

- *24: The House Special Subcommittee's Findings at CTU* (Marc Cerasini, 2003): takes place between the first and second seasons.
- *Operation Hell Gate* (Marc Cerasini, 2005): prequel to the first season.
- *Veto Power* (John Whitman, 2005): prequel to the first season.
- *Trojan Horse* (Marc Cerasini, 2006): prequel to the first season.
- *Cat's Claw* (John Whitman, 2006): prequel to the first season.
- *Vanishing Point* (Marc Cerasini, 2007): prequel to the first season.

- *Chaos Theory* (John Whitman, 2007): prequel to the first season.
- *Storm Force* (David Jacobs, 2008): between the third and fourth seasons.
- *Collateral Damage* (Marc Cerasini, 2008): prequel to the first season.
- *Trinity* (John Whitman (2008): prequel to the first season.
- *24: Redemption*: TV movie bridging the gap between the sixth and seventh seasons.
- A series of companion books, official and non-official guides to episodes, handbooks, behind-the-lines stories, etc.

Finally, a description of the *24* fictional world should also include trading card games, two soundtracks, action figures, the feature film adaptation of *24* (originally planned for production during the hiatus between the TV show's sixth and seventh seasons, but cancelled due to the writers' strike) and finally a huge number of Web pages, Weblogs, and wikis created by *24*'s fans.⁴ Table 2 presents a map of the narrative world of *24* according to a temporal diegetic axis.

⁴ For a complete timeline of the *24* narrative world, see <http://24.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline> (accessed December 2008).

TV	WWW	Comics	Mobile	Videogames	Novels
					Trinity
		One shot			
		Nightfall			
					Op. Hell Gate
					Veto Power
					Trojan Horse
					Cat's Claw
					Vanishing Point
					Chaos Theory
					Collateral Damage
	Day Zero				
Season 1					
					The House...
Season 2					
				The Game	
	Countdown				
		Midnight Sun			
		Stories			
Season 3					
			Mobile game		
			Agent Down		
					Storm Force
		Cold Warriors			
<i>Season 4 prequel</i>					
Season 4					
<i>Season 5 prequel</i>					
Season 5					
<i>Season 6 prequel</i>					
Season 6					
	Day 6 Debrief				
24: Redemption					

Table 2. The 24 transmedia narrative world (updated December 2008).

If *Steve Canyon's* narrative structure constructed three implicit comics readers, then *24* proposes a complex semiotic device for generating multiple implicit (trans)media consumers, who can be classified according to their relationship with the media:

- At the first level, *24* constructs different *single text consumers*. The player of the video game or the reader of the *One Shot* comic book interprets these single units of the fictional world without taking into account the total geography of this world. Any of these textual units can be considered an open door to the *24* narrative universe. In any case, the single text — for example, a novel or the videogame — is independent and can be understood without consuming the rest of the texts.⁵
- On a second level, *24* constructs different *single media consumers* (television spectators, Web navigators, mobile users, comics and novel readers, etc.). A viewer can enter the narrative world by watching the TV episodes every week or by viewing the previous seasons on DVD.
- On a third level, the *transmedia consumers* process representations from different media and languages and reconstruct more extensive areas of the fictional world.

This consumer-nested structure, like that of matryoshka dolls, is particularly useful for creating different entry points to the *24* fictional world, based on the consumer's media competences. This complex textual structure facilitates the creation of a broad spectrum of audience segments (see Table 3). For example, the occasional consumer will have sporadic and isolated contacts with the *24* narrative universe (single text consumer). A dedicated *24* fan, however, will move from one media to another, applying a different set of skills to interpret each media text while reconstructing the entire fictional world (transmedia consumer). In the middle, the single media consumer follows only one specific media content. This sector is comprised of comics readers, TV audiences, Web navigators, etc.

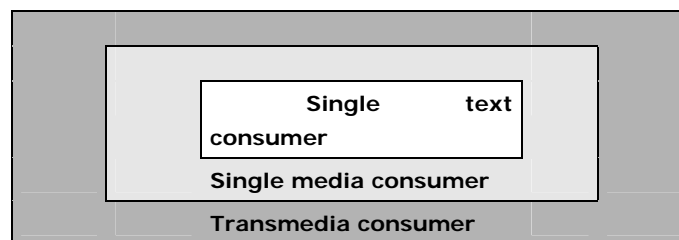


Table 3. Implicit consumer-nested structure of transmedia storytelling.

⁵ The complexity of *24's* fictional world is so high that it is not easy to consider a TV episode as a "single text." For this reason, the possibility of considering that the "single text" is the complete season (and not just a single 40-minute episode) should not be discarded.

3.1 *Strategies for expanding fictional worlds*

The textual complexity described above is enriched by means of the narrative structure of the story. If *Steve Canyon* proposed a single media story expressed in three discourses (Monday/Sunday, only Sunday and Monday/Saturday), then *24* presents a transmedia set of stories through multiple discourses. In this sense, the stories of *24* are characterized by a radial structure that facilitates the expansion of the fictional world.

It could be said that the TV series is the narrative core of *24*'s fictional world. The succession of seasons and their respective prequels constitute the *macrostory*. This narrative integrates *interstitial microstories* (comics, online clips, video games and mobisodes) that fill in the gaps between the seasons. The contents for mobiles — for example, *24: Conspiracy* and *The Rookie* — are situated a long way from the central axis: the first one is located in Washington, DC and the second includes only some of the characters from the TV show (and not Jack Bauer, the main character). Another level is the novels that generally explain stories about Jack Bauer before the first season. Finally, the user-generated content in unofficial blogs and Webpages should be included in the expansion of the *24* world as it increases the fictional geography of this universe by proposing new stories.

In this description, it is possible to identify at least four strategies for expanding the narrative world:

- Creation of *interstitial microstories*: These enrich the diegetic world by expanding the period between the seasons. The comics, online clips, video games and mobisodes are examples of this strategy. These texts have a close relationship with the macrostory.
- Creation of *parallel stories*: The mobisode *24: Conspiracy* is the only example of this strategy in *24*'s diegetic world. The logic of this strategy is to create another story that unfolds at the same time as the macrostory. Parallel stories may evolve and transform into spin-offs.
- Creation of *peripheral stories* that can be considered more or less distant satellites of the macrostory, such as the *24* novels. These texts have a weak relationship to the macrostory, but even peripheral stories may evolve and transform into spin-offs.
- Creation of *user-generated content platforms* like blogs, wikis, etc. These environments should be considered an open-source story-creation machine that allows users to enrich the fictional world. However, the process of users creating new content based on mass media fictional characters — a phenomenon known as *fan fiction* — is usually outside the copyright owner's control (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b).

The centrality of television (the TV series as macrostory) is beyond discussion in the case of *24*; the fictional world was born in television and expanded in a second phase to other media. However, this centrality may change from one narrative universe to another one. In the case of *Batman*, this place is occupied by the comic, in *Harry Potter* by the novels, and in *Tomb Raider* by the video game. The real

consumption situation may also introduce variations in the centrality of one media inside a certain narrative world. For example, in many countries, *Batman* was introduced by the TV series in the 1960s, and for many young children, *Harry Potter* is a movie character.

4. Transmedia Storytelling and Branding

In this phase of the world economy, communications and symbolic exchanges in general, such as those which stimulate the financial markets, acquire a fundamental relevance. Economic subjects no longer try to sell a product or service by means of persuasive advertising. Now the objectives are much more ambitious; they aim to create a symbolic universe endowed with meaning: brands (Scolari, 2008a).

From a semiotic perspective, the brand is a device that can produce a discourse, give it meaning, and communicate this to audiences. The brand expresses values and is presented as an interpretative contract between the companies and the consumers; it proposes a series of values and the consumers accept (or not) to become part of this world. Therefore, brands appear as narrative or possible worlds since they constitute complex discourse universes with a strong narrative imprint (Codeluppi, 2000, 2001; Ferraro, 1999, 2000; Semprini, 1990, 1996; Semprini & Musso, 2000). Semioticians consider brands as *narrative worlds* that can be analyzed by applying the theoretical tools developed for fictional texts.⁶

The narrative properties that brands have progressively taken on compel researchers to broaden both their analysis tools and the theories used to bring into focus the forms that institutional communications in general and advertising in particular take on.

4.1 Brand fiction

There are different ways of situating a brand inside a fictional narrative. The first is, obviously, the traditional TV spot using a commercial micronarrative structure in which a product or service is usually presented as the consumer's "helper" (Propp, 1968). In these narrative worlds, women can wash better, men can drive faster, and children can be happier if they use a certain "magical" product.

An alternative is to position a product inside a non-commercial fiction, for example, when a fictional character uses a certain car or mobile telephone. This is the so-called product placement or embedded marketing technique (Galician, 2004; Segrave, 2004; Lehu, 2007) where the product becomes integral to the plot. Transmedia storytelling even introduces a mutation to this scenario in which the brand is no longer inside the fiction, but rather the fiction *is* the brand. This mutation in brand fiction — from the product placed inside the fiction to the fictional world becoming the product— closes the analytical path inaugurated by semioticians two decades ago: from "brands as narrative worlds" to "narrative worlds are brands."

⁶ Codeluppi has questioned the "possible world" concept applied to brands, which would be limited when representing the richness and communication potential of current brands. This researcher proposes the concept of "imaginary world" to replace it (Codeluppi, 2000).

From a semiotic perspective, TS is a narrative that includes a series of stories expressed through different media. This narrative articulates an expression (TV serials, comics, video games, etc.) with a hierarchy of values that act as the content of the fictional world. These values are expressed in all the different texts that integrate the space of a certain TS experience. For example, the values of *24* are completely different than the values of *Harry Potter*; the former expresses values like nation loyalty, confidentiality, betrayal, competition, etc., while the latter narrative universe emphasizes friendship, cooperation, etc.

But a brand is not just a set of values; these values must be expressed in certain texts. A brand proposes an aesthetic, a series of textures, colors, materials, and styles that create a difference with respect to other brands. In TS, every fictional world proposes a set of distinctive narrative and discursive traits. For example, *Fox's 24* TV serial is characterized by screen fragmentation, real-time effects, and the complexity of the narrative (Scolari, 2008c).

Traditional branding is mainly constructed with iconic elements, such as logotypes or company graphic images. Online branding is based on the interactive experience of the user (Scolari, 2008a). Narrative brands, like *The Matrix*, *24*, or *Harry Potter*, are founded on a set of characters, topics, and an aesthetic style that define the fictional world of the brand. These traits can be reproduced and adapted to different media and genres. For example, the Volvo *Rush*⁷ transmedia campaign reproduces the aesthetics of *24*: screen fragmentation, high speed narration, emergency situations, etc. Sometimes, adapting certain distinctive traits from one media to another is not so easy; the first comic produced from *24* (*24: One Shot*, 2004) tried to emulate the real-time nature of the television show, but subsequent comics did not attempt to do so.

In TS, then, the brand is expressed by the characters, topics, and aesthetic style of the fictional world. This set of distinctive attributes can be translated into different languages and media: It is a "moveable" set of properties that can be applied to different forms of expression. In fan fiction, even consumers can participate in the expansion of the fictional world by applying this set of attributes to create new situations and characters.

5. Conclusions

Transmedia storytelling is a very complex and polysemic term that should be well defined if it is employed in theoretical discourses. After analyzing Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling and reflecting on satellite concepts like "multimodality" (Section 1), this article introduced a basic set of categories — "implicit consumer," "primary modeling system," "reading contract," and "fictional world" —

⁷ *Rush* is an interactive game that promotes the Volvo Ocean Race in Spain. It is based on a rescue team that picks up a mayday (SOS) message. In a four-screen video interface, the user must give the right directions to help the team. Although terrorists are not part of the fictional scenario, the game is a realistic adventure that reproduces the screen fragmentation, the real-time effect, and the general aesthetics of *24*. See <http://www.volvocars.com/intl/campaigns/Misc/VolvoOceanRace/Pages/Rush.aspx> (accessed December 2008).

to develop a semio-narratological approach to TS (Section 2). In Section 3, these categories were applied to the narrative universe of Fox's *24*, one of the most interesting examples of TS. To highlight the distinctive traits of TS, this author compared *24* with a traditional comic strip (*Steve Canyon*) narrative structure. From that analysis emerged a series of categories and models to enrich the analysis of TS: multilayer text/multipath or multilane text; single text consumer/single media consumer/transmedia consumer. That analysis also revealed four strategies for fictional world expansion: creation of interstitial microstories, parallel stories, peripheral stories, and user-generated content. Finally, in Section 4, this description was expanded by proposing to look at TS from the perspective of a semiotics of branding.

There are several possible lines for further theoretical work in this field. Future research in this ambit should refine the definition of TS and analyze more TS experiences to establish the properties, limits, and possibilities of this specific kind of narrative structure. The set of categories and strategies proposed in this article should be applied to other examples of TS to check their analytical usefulness.

Researchers should learn more about transmedia narrative structures. As Vladimir Propp said about folktales in 1928: analyzing their structure will increase the possibilities of creating new stories. In this case, narratology can be very helpful for describing the internal dynamics of these complex textual networks. For example, the expansion of narrative programs, actants, etc. from one media to another should be part of this research agenda. Studies like *Doctor Who and the Convergence of Media. A Case Study in "Transmedia Storytelling"* (Perryman, 2008) or *Transmedia Storytelling. Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company* (Long, 2008) are good examples of this research path.

Research should also expand the analysis of implicit consumers. This classical semiotic issue — based on identifying virtual figures or strategies (also called "enunciatees") inside the text — could be very helpful for producers, scriptwriters, and media programmers interested in producing complex textual structures targeted at a broad spectrum of consumers.

On another level, research should go deeper into the analysis of fictional world expansion strategies. As noted, the scientific objective of semiotics and narratology coincides with the economic interests of media producers; further exploration could create generous feedback between these groups. If convergence must be understood "as both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process" (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 6), then research should not exclude the cocreation of content by audiences (Ross, 2008; Perryman, 2008; Dena, 2008; Askwith, 2007; Ford, 2007). As explained in Section 3.1, user-generated content occupies a central role in fictional world expansion strategies.

Finally, research should focus on *transmedia consumers*. Scholars like Evans (2008) have demonstrated that not all consumers are "transmedia" or are interested in media surfing. Is "transmedia consumption" a property of new users? A characteristic of the digital native generation? Or a practice of a limited, hardcore group of consumers, for example, the fans of a narrative brand? In this case, semiotic and narratological research alone are not sufficient to analyze transmedia consumers; ethnographic and sociological approaches also need to be applied. However, a combination of narratology and semiotics is very helpful for creating analytical models of these new narrative experiences.

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