

# changing worlds & signs of the times

## **Selected Proceedings**

from the 10th International Conference  
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

*EDITORS*

Eleftheria Deltsou

Maria Papadopoulou

**E-BOOK (PDF)**

Changing Worlds & Signs of the Times /  
Selected Proceedings  
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**EDITORS:**

Eleftheria Deltsou  
Maria Papadopoulou

**DESIGN:**

Yorgos Rimenidis

**PUBLISHER:**



The Hellenic Semiotics Society  
Ελληνική Σημειωτική Εταιρία

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**FOR THE EDITION**  
the publisher

**FOR THE PROCEEDINGS**  
the authors

ISBN 978-618-82184-0-6

# Changing Worlds & Signs of the Times

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# Transmedia Narratives for Children and Young Adults

Angela Yannicopoulou UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS [aggianik@ecd.uoa.gr](mailto:aggianik@ecd.uoa.gr)

Elita Fokiali UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS [elitafo@yahoo.gr](mailto:elitafo@yahoo.gr)

## Abstract

*In the 21st century transmedia narratives for children and young adults gain ground in both their forms: as stories that after becoming extremely popular or culturally prominent, have generated a wide range of prequels, sequels, fan fiction and adaptations across media (e.g. Harry Potter); as multiplatform narratives conceived from the very beginning as transmedia projects. Transmedia storytelling, which even challenges today's notions of textuality, is: participatory, because it asks for the reader's contribution to storytelling (see fanfiction); multimedia, since it is dispersed in many media and platforms; highly commercial; and blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, as it uses reality as another platform for storytelling.*

## Keywords

transmedia storytelling, young adults' literature, textuality, participatory culture



## Defining transmedia narratives

In the 21st century transmedia storytelling has emerged as an innovative and exciting way to tell stories across multiple media channels. Transmedia or multiplatform narratives relate stories with the aid of current digital technologies and make extensive use of multiple formats and platforms. Each platform renders a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole (Jenkins, 2006, p.95-96) and each medium offers a unique and pervasive experience of the storyworld. Combining all three modes of narration, telling as in novels, showing as in films, and participatory as in video games (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 22), transmedia narratives have not only changed the art of storytelling (Hoefs, 2011), but also the very act of reading that is now transformed into “a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (Jenkins 2007, para. 1).

Transmedia (“transmedial or convergent”, according to Ryan, 2012) storytelling can be classified into two major types, or rather, in a continuum located between two poles (Ryan, 2012, para. 31). The first pole consists of what could be called the “snowball effect”; a certain story becomes extremely popular or culturally prominent and generates a wide range of prequels, sequels, fan fiction and adaptations across media (Ryan, 2012, para. 31). *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* remain the most striking examples, because, though originated as book-novels, they have expanded to other media and genres, such as films, computer games, advertisements, etc., exploring additional aspects of the stories. The other pole is taken by multiplatform narratives conceived from the very beginning as transmedia projects (Ryan, 2004). Jenkins (2006, pp. 93-130) refers to *The Matrix*, a science fiction about a dystopian future, as the most prominent example which develops around three films written and directed by the Wachowski brothers and extends to animated short films, video games, graphic novels and comic books.

Transmedia storytelling is addressed to different audiences ranging from adults (see *The Write1.com* by Davis, 2005) to young children; see *Spaceheadz* by Jon Scieszka, a narrative conveyed by books and four websites that contribute important information to the story and ask for participation in the storyworld by visiting the facebook and the twitter, submitting stories and photos, finding missing pages and taking part in a worldwide mission for saving the earth. However, a great number of transmedia narratives are, not surprisingly, addressed to young adults who are adept at using the new technology in their everyday routines (see blogs, wikis, facebook, twitter, fan fiction sites, mobile phones). Transmedia narratives, as they break away from books and evolve across many different platforms, very often target young adults and become the new literary reality for “the digital natives” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), the “net generation” (Tapscott, 1999).

In the digital era “to talk about children’s literature, in the normal restricted sense of children’s novels, poems and picture-books, is to ignore the multi-media expertise of our children” (Mackey, 1994, p.17). It seems that children’s and young adults’ literature is under a major transformation which takes place in cyberspace (Reynolds, 2007,

p. 180), and, though still print-based, heads towards creating “transliterary texts” or “transtexts”, which “combine elements from fixed print and different media” (Reynolds, 2007, p. 155). Today’s literature is different and it will become even more (Murray, 1997). Transmedia storytelling for young adults might reveal the tendencies of tomorrow’s narratives for future readers. Transmedia text dispersed across different media merges the past, the present and possibly the future of storytelling and is differentiated from the single-medium literature in many aspects:

### **Multimedia**

It seems that the main difference between single-medium and transmedia literature concerns the fact that in a transmedia narrative a central text (e.g. the novels *Harry Potter*, the television program *Lost*), like a “mothership” (Scott, 2012) from which smaller space ships are launched, propels a series of new texts scattered across many media. In the transmedia *Harry Potter*, for example, which started from the books, but extends to fictional material outside of them, such as films, video games, websites and, in short, everything that enables the reader-viewer-user-player to immerse themselves in the storyworld, get information about the story and gain a fuller sense of it.

In the case of *Harry Potter*, the story world is also expanded at *Pottermore* (2011), an interactive website where Harry Potter’s fans can be amused getting additional information regarding unknown parts of the story. At *Pottermore* Rowling communicates unpublished texts and extra information about the evolution of the plot events and the development of the characters, such as the entire life of professor McGonagall or how Aunt Petunia met Uncle Vernon. In addition readers-players are sorted into one of the four Hogwarts houses, explore Diagon Alley, the fictional high London street, brew several potions, cast spells and compete for the coveted House Cup. As the fans experience how difficult is to mix different potions using three types of cauldrons –they should be careful about the precise amount and the crushing of the ingredients, the temperature of the fire, the cooking time and the way of stirring– they manage both to read the text as extradiegetic readers and experience the fictional facts as diageitic, interactive players.

Even video or online games may contribute to the construction of the story world in transmedia storytelling. For example, two official games are connected with *The Hunger Games*, a young-adult science fiction, which is set in a post-apocalyptic world and echoes the Greek myth of Theseus, Roman gladiatorial games and contemporary reality television (McGunigal, 2012). The narrative relates the annual event of a boy and a girl who fight to the death in a cruel televised battle. Both, the *Girl on Fire*, a ‘teaser game’ and *The Hunger Games Adventures*, a free game on Facebook, that remains in beta weeks after the film’s release, reveal not only that what was previously “entry paratext” can later be transformed into text, but also that even digital games can become textual within a larger transmedia storytelling. Due to their fractured storylines and revised

ideology, the two games force a more intense and active identification of the players with the oppressed victims who struggle for survival, in contrast to films and books that encourage the readers/ viewers to observe passively the death games along with the diegetic oppressors. As the focus shifts from the reader-observer to the player-participant and the audience gets a fuller sense of the story and additional information about it (e.g. the official map of Panem), the games gain the status of authentic text within the transmedia storytelling (DeVane, 2012).

Moreover, although single-medium literature (book, film, TV show) has normally one entry point, a transmedia project that develops storytelling across multiple platforms has many “entry points” for “different audience segments” (Jenkins, 2007). It enables a non-linear approach to the digitally transmitted story-events and permits readers, in a process that, unlike cinema or TV programs, is controlled by the individual users, who find their way through a rich textual material. *Dark Eden*, for example, reaches traditional readers through books, while its app invites different readers into the same story-universe.

However, since “the medium in which the text appears is not neutral”, “text’s materiality changes the sense readers make of the ‘same’ content” (McCracken, 2013: 107), and not even a single chapter is exactly the same if it is read on page or on screen. Also the immediate availability of extra material, like maps or word definitions, and the possibility of communication with other readers/ users for comments, ratings, reviews, deepens and broadens story-reading.

## Participatory

Contemporary readers who read transmedia texts are actively involved in a wide story universe and collaborate in its construction. Since transmedia environments “function as textual activators” (Jenkins, 2007, para. 8), readers-fans explore content, exchange ideas and collaborate with other readers “taking pleasure in tracking down character backgrounds and plot points and making connections between different texts within the same franchise” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 129). By chasing down bits of information dispersed across multiple channels (Jenkins, 2006, p. 32) they “become hunters and gatherers moving back across the various narratives trying to stitch together a coherent picture from the dispersed information” (Jenkins, 2007, para. 8).

Also, transmedia storytelling infuses the storyworld with gaming behavior and often uses a ‘treasure hunt’ in order to increase the immersion of the audience, who dig for clues and solve mysteries. For example, in *Cathy’s Book* (2006) –a young adult novel that interweaves print text and digital media, websites, online quizzes, internet videos etc– the book comes with a pack full of evidence, e.g. letters, phone numbers, photos, birth certificates, notes, that sends the reader on a ‘mission’ through websites, including MySpace pages of the characters, iPhone app, Flickr, iTunes audio download etc. The concept of “a teenage girl asking teenage girls for help” and the way it reaches its target

audience resulted in the large followship of readers-users, who contribute, along with the fictional characters, to the development of the story events.

On the other hand, readers participate into storytelling expressing their views about the story. Very often readers-users communicate with the producers in order to ask questions, to decipher puzzles, to reveal their preferences. According to Jenkins (2006: 177), the active participation of fans in a community with similar interests provide “a free venue where they can pursue their passion by creating, showcasing, reading, reviewing, sharing, archiving, and discovering stories”. Fan-produced material can potentially take many different forms (e.g. videos, forums, comments in social media, mobile apps) and is developed across multiple media platforms, made *for* and occasionally *from* readers-users. At *The 39 Clues*, for example, “Fan Fiction Fridays” encourage readers to respond digitally to a given explosive story-starter and write their own fiction in order to be read at the website by all readers-users.

In a “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006a) of “collective intelligence” (Levy, 1994; Jenkins, 2007), transmedia storytelling converges the cultures of books, films, TV programs, computer games, social media and adds them to real life through the participation of real people who make their personal contribution to the story making. The meaning is elaborated collectively through intersubjective encounters with readers-“prosumers”, engaged in activities of “produsage” (Bruns, 2008) –neologisms derived from an amalgamation of consumers, producers and users.

The most striking example of readers-users participation into the story world is fanfiction, which is defined as the fictional texts produced by fans as an elaboration of characters, settings and the story universe of the original work. Fanfiction may agree or disagree with the story facts as they are presented by the design and production group of the transmedia project. Also, it is written by fans for fans and its content may be insulting or merely pornographic (see for example slash fanfiction). The encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts often results in what might be seen as gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story: that is, they introduce potential plots which can not be fully told or extra details which hint at more than can be revealed. Readers, thus, have a strong incentive to continue to elaborate on these story elements, working them over through their speculations, until they take on a life of their own. Fan fiction can be seen as an unauthorized expansion of these media franchises into new directions which reflect the reader’s desire to ‘fill in the gaps’ they have discovered in the commercially produced material.

### **Blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality**

In transmedia storytelling, where several platforms are combined in order to construct a greater narrative which unfolds across multiple channels, the boundaries which separate story from non-story are rather blurred. Since the immersion of the reader- user-viewer in the storyworld is absolutely desirable, it is constantly repeated that the

related stories are absolutely real (see how the site of *Skeleton Creek* is named, <http://www.skeletoncreekisreal.com>), official websites are fakely presented as not accessible to readers-users (see the falsely aversive UNDER CONSTRUCTION and WARNING for *Skeleton Creek* which cultivate the false impression that readers-users are involved in a real life experience), while entry points, the 'rabbitholes' or 'trailheads', pretend to prevent the audience from seeing the website.

A striking example for how the distinction between reality and fiction becomes nebulous can be found in the viral marketing campaign of Christopher Nolan's film *The Dark Knight* (2008), a fantasy thriller, which launched its promotional campaign about 15 months before the release of the film and its novelization. The campaign focused on Joker, one of the movie characters and Gotham, a virtually created city. The inclusion of a 'fake' newspaper named "The Gotham Times" ([TheGothamTimes.com](http://TheGothamTimes.com)), the use of phones and emails, the programming of live events, such as the shining of the Bat-sign in New York, puzzles and scavenger hunts in many cities managed to add a veneer of realism to the narrative.

As transmedia narratives use the real world as another platform and the story is embedded in everyday context, the borderline between real life and fictional worlds becomes uncertain. The characters do not remain trapped in their make-believe universe, but assert, and eventually achieve, the right to be treated as persons who interact 'on equal terms' with their readers. For example, the novel *Cathy's Book: If Found Call 650-266-8233*, one finds in a real-life-diary (e.g. photos, scribbles, napkins with phone numbers), but also refers to websites that exist in the real world (e.g. the Musée Mécanique in San Francisco). Moreover, the name of the author does not appear on the book cover and the telephone number is a real one (Dena, 2009: 301).

In transmedia storytelling the fictional characters have voices the readers can hear on their mobile phones, they have faces the viewers can see on their computer screens and they keep Facebooks the users can use to communicate with them (e.g. "Hi Cathy, r u planning to stay with Denny????").

The trend seems to reach its peak with Alternate Reality Games (ARG). Players of ARG –a combination of interactive networked narratives with cultural context games– put together story scraps and plot-based puzzles using the real world as a platform. ARGs are not mere role-playing games because they operate in a real world environment and the players often maintain their identity when they try to decipher the clues the narrative puts forward. As the users-players immerse themselves in the story and interact directly with the fictional characters, they are involved in a collective experience that hovers between reality and fiction. In *Hunger Games*, for example, the ARG, accessible at the *Citizen Information Terminal* website, gives fans the chance to become citizens of Panem. "Collecting content from Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter and Youtube, the ARG mixes extradiegetic with diegetic material and permits real audience to participate in fictional endeavours" (Kohnen, 2012).

## Commercial

As in traditional books where the artistic is combined with commercial, so transmedia narratives have the dual quality to satisfy both aesthetic and marketing criteria. The difference with print literature is that the commercial dimension of the paratext is much more intense in transmedia storytelling. As Jenkins argues, transmedia storytelling has strong economic motives (2006, p.104) and a huge interest in increasing sales through emotional attachments.

In contemporary “media-saturated society” (Strinati, 2008, p.206), the popular culture increasingly determines consumption and the publishing companies make great efforts to create an entire franchise around a published story. The new ideal consumer “is active, emotionally engaged and socially networked”, while “the company invites the audience inside the brand community” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 20). The most striking example is the Harry Potter franchise. It began as a series of seven books and evolved into a worldwide phenomenon, that includes films, video games, websites, posters, apps for mobile phones, toys, action figures, theme parks, wizard’s equipment, posters, tie-in objects like mugs, t-shirts, pencils, etc. This development of transmedia storytelling has heavily expanded the market of the franchise taking into account that the ideal consumer of today is the fan of an already existing, much-loved story.

In narratives such as *Harry Potter*, where the storytelling is generated by a single medium and which, as a result of the ‘snowball effect’, has spread across a wide variety of media and platforms, its transformation to a transmedia text is due to a tremendously successful commerciality. As the readers become avid fans, they ask for more products and the paratext gains a clearly commercial dimension. Spin offs, such as sequels, TV shows, extra books, websites and lots of merchandise exploit and maintain the consumers’ interest in the famous story. Since the commercial success results in new text production and the new text boosts trade, the commercial is connected integrally with the literary in a relationship that is definitely reciprocal.

Furthermore, transmedia storytelling cooperates with other commercial companies in order to promote the story. For example, *The Dark Knight* marketing campaign linked up with Nissan (“The year’s most thrilling car inspired by the year’s most thrilling film”) and the fast food franchise Burger King in order to produce: a burger named “Dark Whopper” followed with adverts featuring people doing bad things (e.g. a secretary tells of how she didn’t tell her boss that his wife had called) and thus displaying their ‘dark side’ and a kids’ menu including free toys of different film characters. Similarly, Scholastic Media cooperates with Post Cereals and apart from featuring the books on more than 4 million cereal boxes sets up a ‘Race to Win’ competition.

Also, for the transmedia narrative of *The 39 Clues* this proves to be an effective campaign that builds interest and engagement among fans. Also Post Cereals consider it the “perfect fit”, since it connects food for body with food for mind and enhances the fun and

nourishment the cereals provide to children. In addition, for the promotion of the same transmedia project Scholastic Media cooperates with Amtrak, a U. S. train company. The summer campaign “Get on Board for the Ride of Your Life” (1/ 7/ 2009-31/8/2009), that captures the spirit of adventure and travel that is an essential element of *The 39 Clues*, consists of 2 million branded ticket jackets, counter cards, seatback signage, banners and a prize of train trips for four.

It seems that heavy commerciality is commonplace for literary texts transmitted digitally. Even regarding e-books many ads of non-book-related products, such as cars, beauty creams, or televisions, occupy their periphery, and become a distracting paratext that interrupts reading and hinders reader’s engagement with the story (McCracken, 2013: 114-7). Those non-related ads that surround and overlay the texts on the electronic devices become a “centrifugal paratext” that draw the readers away from the text and marks a significant change in the textuality of e-books; it brings book reading experience closer to reading of commercial magazines (McCracken, 2013, p. 114). However, though rarely, practices similar to those of product placement are also adopted. *Cathy’s Book* agreed to include, on its website, but not in the novel’s paperback, references to the CoverGirl make-up line in exchange for advertising space at the products’ own site (Norrington, 2010).

Similarly, Lions Gate Entertainment Corporation, responsible for the transmedia *Hunger Games*, with the collaboration of China Glaze created a line of nail polish, the *Colours from the Capital*, inspired by Capital citizens who enjoy lavish cosmetics, fancy costumes and even body modifications. The nail polish collection meant to enrich the story experience by making certain details obvious and facilitate identification with fictitious characters. However, it raises the question whether a narrative about a dystopian society where starving children fight to the death is the best vehicle for promoting makeup products.

### **Concluding remarks**

In transmedia narratives text boundaries become rather blurred, because all textual entities (e.g. book, film, videogame), though comprising an integral part of the overarching story, are complete, self sufficient and independently-approached texts. As stories that create complex fictional worlds do not reside in one location (book, television, comics, game, website), they transgress notions of textuality. The new textuality, in contrast with traditional narratives (e.g. books) in which the text is fixed and specific, in transmedia narratives text becomes fluid, changeable and open to new material. The text, now a product of collaborative authorship, can feasibly grow indefinitely and, as it is constantly on the move, it is impossible to be grasped as a fixed entity. Thus, in transmedia narratives, which are very often referred to as projects, the emphasis is shifted from the completed work of one producer to the process of a flexible creation of many collaborators.

As the text abandons some of the fundamental characteristics of print narratives, such as linearity and stability, and becomes different for any reader/ user, interactive

and ever-expanded, a new complex, dynamic textuality has emerged, conceived as an on-going process across multiple channels and created by many collaborators, including readers. The new era of multimedia communication asks for a new textuality not only regarding transmedia narratives.

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