

Transmedia Consumption Experiences (TCE): Consuming Brand Stories Across Media

There is a new movement in the world of marketing seeking to blend narrative branding with a Hollywood-esque emphasis on multiple media platforms by taking an existing blockbuster, whether a movie, toy, or soda, and extending it via a backstory designed to get masses of new customers interested in its complex and multilayered world. Transmedia consumption experience (TCE) is the consumption of dispersed story elements across multiple media for the purpose of creating a unified and meaningful media consumption experience. The TCE builds on the concept of transmedia storytelling devised by Henry Jenkins that is a consequence of the intensifying socio-cultural, technological, and economic changes. *The Matrix*, one of the best and most frequently cited examples of transmedia storytelling, creates a world that is composed of three movies, 12 animated short movies, two collections of stories, three video games, and comic books. Following the release of the first movie in 2003, important backstory elements of the movie were embedded in video games, comic books, and animations. Jenkins explains how each media platform and content in *The Matrix* franchise makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole *The Matrix* world:

‘The Wachowski brothers played the transmedia game very well, putting out the original film first to stimulate interest, offering up a few Web comics to sustain the hard-core fan’s hunger for more information, launching the anim e in anticipation of the second film, releasing the computer game alongside it to surf the publicity, bringing the whole cycle to a conclusion with *The Matrix Revolutions*, and then turning the whole mythology over to the players of the massively multiplayer online game. Each step along the way built on what has come before, while offering new points of entry’ (p. 95).

Transmedia franchises, though, are not limited to entertainment brands. Coca Cola’s Happiness Factory series created a compelling narrative world through featured TV ads, webisodes, an iPhone game, music videos, and songs on iTunes. Transmedia storytelling has also been utilized in consumer mobilization and journalism projects. Obama For America, for example, was the political campaign organized to build up public support for the re-election of President Barack Obama, in 2012. Starting around March 2011, OFA has used multiple media platforms via forward-looking social media operations and various digital technologies (apps, emails, dashboard, forums) to reach its voter database and mobilize its powerful offline grassroots organization for a social change.

Transmedia reformed the ways brand managers coordinate media, content, and consumers. Particularly for powerful brands (e.g. the American Girl) that are products of multiple narratives at multiple venues, transmediation provides an integrative approach pertaining to the orchestration and management of multimedia storytelling. Transmedia transforms the conventional understanding of iteration and re-iteration of the same messages on several IMC channels into a more 360 approach where the messages complement each other. But it also has implications for multichannel retailing strategies.

Although the interest in transmedia peaked correspondingly with that in “new media,” transmediation can be traced back to the pre-Internet era. The Internet may have accelerated wider application and practice, but it was not necessary for transmedia narratives to flourish, as evidenced by the “Netless” development of complex narrative franchises like *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Blair Witch Project*, and *Star Trek*. However, a wide range of changes in media production, distribution, and use made transmediation a more profitable and easily applicable practice.



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Transmediation operates on the basis of three interconnected elements: (1) media coordination, (2) worldbuilding, and (3) negative capability.

On the production side, transmedia storytelling is a systematic industrial process that requires narrative coordination between media. It is not simply redistributing the same content across different media, but implies intertextuality – interconnected texts – where a central narrative is supported by multiple narratives in other media platforms “with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.”

Successful transmedia narratives such as those about Star Trek, Star Wars, or American Girl are complex storyworlds and seek to create an expanded universe composed of interrelated characters and stories that strategically stretches across platforms. This “act of creating compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted in a single platform” has been termed as worldbuilding. Worldbuilding done well is never complete and is never completely under the control of producers. Instead, consumers endlessly create their own extensions to these rich and layered imaginary worlds.

One of the fundamental elements behind successful transmedia worldbuilding is “the art of building strategic gaps into a narrative to evoke a delicious sense of uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts in the audience,” namely, negative capability. These uncertainties tease the audience, providing tantalizing hints to the past of the characters or to the worlds. As is the case with worldbuilding, negative capability makes the boundaries of the texts porous to other texts and also creates a psycho-imaginary space for consumer co-creation and consumer intelligence “pockets” – spaces for possible narrative expansions – within the narrative.

In short, transmediation has revolutionized narrative consumption practices with its layered, non-linear, and complex stories that migrate consumers across media platforms, providing alternative and multiple touchpoints and allowing them to create customizable media consumption experiences. The three strategies described above, therefore, demand consumers’ motivation, affection, and engagement. ■

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