Stories are More than Paper: Using Transmedia with Young Adults

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Abstract:

Transmedia is a powerful tool that supports self-directed learning and encourages emotional engagement. In this paper, we highlight the emerging practice of using transmedia with teens, with a focus on both consumption and creation. We discuss the barriers and challenges to introducing teens to transmedia, including the digital divide and the knowledge gap, and the ways in which libraries, schools, and other cultural institutions can leverage experience and partnerships to help bridge that gap.

Keywords: Transmedia, Teens, Emerging Practices, Knowledge Gap, Instruction

Will we always read on paper?

Stories on paper are static. Digital stories can expand in any direction, with multiple entry points that allow for a deeper and more flexible user-centered experience. Transmedia is able to accommodate a variety of learning styles, motivate extended learning beyond a single format or session, offer opportunities for connected or self-directed learning, and engage participants on an emotional level. Paper can and may always be a part of the experience, but the act of reading is no longer limited to a linear format.

Teens growing up today are often referred to as digital natives; they live in a media-rich environment where they are constantly communicating across multiple platforms (text messages, social media, etc). Technological advances have made the convergence of different types of media not only possible, but commonplace. However, transmedia is not a new phenomenon, but "a contemporary embracing of a classical paradigm in entertainment that enables the imagination via story-driven extensions into a 'world' in which the player seeks to be further immersed" (Dinehart, 2011).

Dr. Henry Jenkins, Professor of Communication Arts, defines transmedia as:

> [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.

In addition to the above definitions, we posit that transmedia is a user-focused experience that is collaborative, immersive, and interactive. It should prize emotional engagement and aid contextual understanding. Transmedia need not be limited to fiction, but can be effectively used to explore a variety of non-fiction subjects.

Emerging Practices: Teaching and Learning

Using transmedia in the classroom can involve incorporating new formats into curriculum, particularly in language arts curriculum. MindConnex Learning, an educational software company, has created a multimedia approach to learning Shakespeare's plays, featuring animated reenactments, audio tracks, and unabridged text all together. They currently have five titles: *Romeo & Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*. Kelly Stroud, a high school English teacher from Sweeny Independent School District in Texas, uses Shakespeare in Bits with her students. Stroud said that she has an easier time teaching the material in this manner as opposed to having students read from a book while listening to a CD. Using Shakespeare in Bits, students are able to read the text while listening to and viewing animation of the play at the same time. Stroud notes that "The students love learning this way. They prefer it over traditional methods. I have been teaching for 15 years and this is probably the most beneficial tool I have found for teaching Shakespeare" (K. Stroud, personal communication, October 31, 2012).

Incorporating transmedia into classrooms can make subjects and texts that students struggle to comprehend more accessible by aiding in contextual understanding and facilitating self-directed learning. Iowa Park High School English teacher Brandy Lowery also uses Shakespeare in Bits with her students. "[Students] liked that they could click on words they didn't understand to get an explanation or definition. They also appreciated that if they were absent they could catch up fairly quickly" (B. Lowery, personal communication, April 18, 2014).

In a testimonial on MindConnex Learning's website, Lowery reported that she saw a drastic change in her students' response to the play and the characters within. "They wanted to know what happened to Hamlet," she said (Mindconnex, 2012, p. 2). Students were emotionally engaged with the play and thus found it much easier to recall information. "They began to put

faces to the names, which in previous years they have struggled with; they could also recall important events and scenes without hesitation," said Lowery (Mindconnex, 2012, p. 4). Using Shakespeare in Bits enabled Lowery and her class to cover the play in two weeks, instead of the three weeks it had taken in previous years. In addition, students' grades on the material improved (Mindconnex, 2012, p. 4). However, Lowery reported that she had other students who preferred reading aloud with her "because they liked the challenge Shakespeare's style provided" (B. Lowery, personal communication, April 18, 2014). Lowery's experiences are not unusual; her classroom like all students classrooms contains students with different learning styles, and educators must adapt their curriculum to accommodate these preferences.

Marcel Prins, a documentary filmmaker and photographer, recently published a book and website entitled *Hidden Like Anne Frank*, which was envisioned as a transmedia experience from its inception. His idea was formed during a masterclass where filmmakers and web designers were paired together to investigate new ways of storytelling. "We started out using the map as an interface with little dots that refer to hiding places," he said (M. Prins, personal communication, April 17, 2014). The goal of the website was to encourage users to explore the dots in whatever order they chose, allowing them to experience true stories of Jewish children hiding from the Nazis. Initially, Prins planned to collect additional biographical information for each interviewee and simply place it on the website. However, Prins found that "the interviews were so rich and interesting and far too extensive to fit on a website. So my friend Peter Henk Steenhuis, a journalist and author, suggested [we] write a book together" (M. Prins, personal communication, April 17, 2014).

Prins has heard from several teachers in Holland who use the book and the animated interviews on the website to explore this episode in history with their students. Teachers would explain the context of the stories and would show some of the animated interviews to the entire class. The teachers then asked students to choose stories to study individually and give presentations on the story they prepared, which sparked student discussion. Prins mentioned that many students responded well to the animated films and wanted to know more about the interviewees. "We've also had a few get togethers in the Jewish Historical museum with school classes," Prins states. "Children are very interested especially when one of the interviewees was present" (M. Prins, personal communication, April 17, 2014). Through self-paced exploration of the animated interviews on the website, students were able to interact with the personal narratives that interested them most.

Emerging Practices: Teens as Content Creators

Consuming transmedia isn't the only way to introduce teens to the practice. During the 2011-2012 school year, middle school librarian Gladys Fox worked with English Language Learner (ELL) students to create their own digital memoirs, complete with photos, maps, videos, and audio narration (Fox, 2013). Throughout the nine-month process, Fox spent many hours investigating and experimenting with various publishing platforms in order to find one that the students would be able to use easily. For the first two months, students were paired up to read interactive book apps in order to practice their reading comprehension and fluency. Following that, Fox and the ELL teachers had the students complete a writing assignment, as well as edit and record their personal stories. Finally, the students created digital books using apps such as

iTunes and a free app called Book Creator. Since most of the students were immigrants and refugees from other countries, they were able to share aspects of their respective cultures and publish them online for the school community to access and respond to (Fox, 2013).

The Yijala Yala Project was created by the social art company Big hArt in order to connect culture, history, and a shared future between generations of the indigenous Roebourne community in Australia. The project's focus is on mentoring across generations and between skill sets. An ambitious undertaking, a staff of eight artists began by teaching fifteen students all aspects of filmmaking, including cinematography, sound, songwriting, costumes, makeup, set design, and choreography, as well as how to act and direct. Once the students felt more comfortable, Big hArt teamed up with the local school and began incorporating stop motion animation into the curriculum, as well as offering Photoshop workshops four days a week and additional after school lab sessions.

That multi-phase foundation has occurred over the course of years. Students have made films, video games, and iPad apps, but their crowning achievement to date is NEOMAD. NEOMAD is an interactive digital comic that incorporates music, sound effects, narration, and animation, as well as live action video to tell a science fiction story that has a subtle environmental message. Working together and advised by mentors, the students had a hand in all aspects of the app and story. Mentoring the Yijala Yala Project "is a story about how to stimulate learning, relationships across generations, cultural transmission, [and] reconfiguring how people imagine themselves and in turn are seen by those outside their community" (Campbell & Palmer, nd., p. 13).

Writing programs for teens in schools and libraries are common, but Amy Holcomb, a Youth Technology Librarian at Northbrook Public Library in Illinois, developed a workshop entitled "Born Digital" that modernized the event by incorporating transmedia elements. Instead of focusing solely on writing, library staff spent seven weeks instructing teens on the process of publishing, copyright, and promotion. They encouraged participants to include multiple media formats in their storytelling (Holcomb, 2013).

The teens were exposed to examples of transmedia like Dan Morris' adaptation of Frankenstein, but what the librarians found was that this group was very focused on traditional storytelling. Even though the tools to incorporate multiple media formats were free and accessible, teens did not utilize them. Participants were focused on the written word, and Holcomb reports that "it took a lot of coaxing just to get them to create a cover" (A. Holcomb, personal communication, April 13, 2014).

This illustrates one challenge of transmedia in general; very rarely is it the effort of one single individual. The required skill set is vast, and the collaboration of a team with varied strengths facilitates production.

The next iteration of Born Digital will be open to all ages, focus more deliberately on exposing students to more examples of transmedia, and include a more firmly structured lesson plan. Holcomb will also allow collaboration between those who tell their stories through different media (Holcomb, 2013).

One element that links all of the production emerging practice examples is the dissemination of the end product. Educators agree that "today's digital technologies allow students to 'share their work with a wider and more varied audience'" (Purcell et al., 2013). Born Digital published on multiple platforms, adding digital copies to the library's circulating ebook collection. The ELL students at Fox's middle school were able to share their stories beyond their classrooms by publishing them on her blog. The youth involved with NEOMAD have seen an incredible reception to their releases in Apple's App Store.

For the emerging practices regarding consuming of and synthesizing information, like with Shakespeare in Bits, we see a more emotionally engaged audience who has higher comprehension levels. With *Hidden Like Anne Frank*, we see students exploring a historical event through first-person experiences.

21st Century Learning: Digital Citizens

The Born Digital project explored copyright and fair use as both consumers and creators and resulted in better digital citizens. Copyright, fair use, and plagiarism are concepts that librarians and educators struggle to explain to students. In a 2013 report from the Pew Research Internet Project called "The Impact of Digital Tools on Student Writing and How Writing is Taught in Schools," two-thirds of the teachers surveyed rated students "fair" or "poor" in terms of navigating these issues in composition (Purcell, Buchanan, & Friedrich, 2013). However, the same report revealed that teachers believe that digital technologies benefit student writing in three ways: 96% say that technology allows students to share their writing with a wider, more diverse audience, 79% believe it enables more collaboration among students, and 78% feel it "encourages greater creativity and personal expression" (Purcell et al., 2013).

Since it promotes self-directed learning, transmedia is a powerful tool that can impact how we learn and instruct. It acknowledges that individuals learn and express themselves better through different mediums according to their learning style. "The variety of media can help learners engage content according to their strengths and ideally help them improve across the board. Learners can be encouraged to investigate a topic across media and learn more in their exploration" (Davidson et al., 2010). Transmedia encourages emotional engagement by involving participants in the format they are most excited by. Reluctant and struggling readers are especially enticed and assisted by multimedia elements, which can provide contextual clues.

Transmedia "can contribute to an immersive, responsive and learner-centered learning environment rich in information and linked to children's existing knowledge and experiences. It can build upon what children already know about playing games, telling stories, and sharing media" (Herr-Stephenson & Alper, 2013, p. 10). However, there are barriers to overcome in using transmedia with teens in libraries and schools, specifically access to and knowledge of new technologies.

Through fully 95% of teens in the United States have internet access as of 2013, the digital divide is about more than simply connecting to the internet (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Access to technology for both transmedia consumption and creation is not ubiquitous. Fifty percent of Americans ages 18 and older now have a dedicated handheld device–

either a tablet computer like an iPad, or an e-reader such as a Kindle or Nook–for reading e-content (Zickuhr & Rainie, 2014). However, only 23% of teens ages 12 to 17 own a tablet (Madden et al., 2013). While some libraries are lending ereaders or tablets preloaded with content, most are for use in house only. If the library offers devices for checkout but the requirements, such as requiring parental permission or identification, prohibit wide usage, there is still an access barrier. Teens often visit the library without having a guardian available to sign out equipment. Libraries must balance loss prevention with compassionate access.

The ratio of students to instructional computers with internet access in public schools is dropping, with many schools adopting one-to-one technology (National Center for Education, 2012). This trend may enable consumption of transmedia; however, effective use in schools may be limited by government and school filtering policies that block social media and other websites. Thirty-two percent of United States teachers feel that filtering has a "major impact" on their teaching (Purcell et al., 2012). Devices are frequently locked down and students are unable to download apps or software that are part of a transmedia experience.

If schools and libraries had the resources and permission to allow students access to the tools to consume and create transmedia, teachers and librarians could potentially use it to advance students' 21st century literacy skills. These new media literacies differ from traditional literacies such as reading and writing by placing additional value on oral, visual, and aural communication, as well as performance, experimentation, and play. "Transmedia storytelling and play assume an active audience capable of demonstrating new media literacies - the technical and social skills Jenkins et al. (2006) have identified as essential to taking part in participatory cultures" (Herr-Stephenson & Alper, 2013, p. 15).

Access to technology is not the only issue. People born in the last two decades are commonly referred to as digital natives. However, access to and cursory knowledge of a technology by no means equals mastery of the technology. Nor does it mean that teens will necessarily possess an understanding of all the thorny issues of copyright and fair use that creating content with that technology might entail. As educator Laura Fleming states,

> We cannot and must not be fooled by the technology-readiness our students show us—the fact is that young people, while they are natural and instinctive users of digital technologies, are by no means inherently expert at using them. The digital native is real, but the accepted definition of a digital native is wrong. So we need to be able to equip them with the skills they need to be effective users and consumers of content and information across all media platforms, while providing for them participatory learning experiences that meet them where they are ready to learn. (p. 372)

In order for teens to truly become digital natives, they must learn critical thinking strategies, something that we as educators and librarians can help teach. Incorporating transmedia texts into curriculum and collections allows teens to be involved with the path of their learning (self-directed), and embrace the learning style that suits them best. Transmedia encourages exploration, interaction, and personalization of knowledge acquisition. Connected and peer-to-peer learning, as seen in some of the projects we have outlined, can and should be applied in libraries and schools to bridge knowledge gaps and provide basic transmedia production skills. Creating transmedia with teens is a time-intensive undertaking that requires a skill set not every

librarian or teacher possesses. One essential element of success can include experienced mentors that oversee the project; these could be pursued through partnerships with various agencies. The potential for teens to consume and create interactive stories across formats about topics that interest or engage them marks a shift in the reading experience by placing the user at the center of their learning.

Appendix

Evaluation

The following is a rubric development by the authors to aid in evaluating transmedia for use with teens:

Evaluating Transmedia				
Accessibility	Do you need special technology (e.g. smartphone or tablet) to access it?	Where can the title be purchased? Can it be borrowed?	Does the content work on a small screen or would it be better viewed on a laptop or desktop PC?	Do you need an Internet connection to access content?
Cost	What are the costs associated with accessing the material?	Is there a free or light version?	Does it require or solicit additional in-app or other purchases?	Does it push advertisements at the viewer?
Functionality	Is it easy to use?	Does it freeze or quit?	Does it load quickly upon opening and when switching between media?	Is the narrative flow interrupted because of technical issues?
Relevance	Do individual elements both stand alone and add to the story as a whole?	Are there superfluous elements?	Does it feel contrived or gimmicky?	
Entertainment	Does it help readers visualize the world?	Does it make the world more real?	Does it make the characters more compelling?	Is it immersive?
Readability	Does the font size, color, and background impede reading?	Are there features that give contextual clues or information?	If there are interactive elements, do they aid in decoding the text or impede it?	

Acknowledgments

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