

On cinema and convergence

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Resumo

Utilizando *Star Wars* e o Universo Expandido da Marvel como principais exemplos, este ensaio explora os modos como as práticas de narrativa transmídia modificaram o entretenimento hollywoodiano, resultando em uma maior ênfase na construção de mundos e relações mais participativas com o público. Na sua forma contemporânea, a transmídia assume um público mais interligado que ativamente procura informações sobre a experiência do entretenimento que lhes interessa, resultando em um uso ainda mais extensivo de paratextos para sinalizar o que se espera dos próximos lançamentos, de blogs e podcasts que recapitulam e interpretam textos midiáticos cult e de mais espaços informais onde as pessoas podem debater, confrontar conhecimentos, partilhar suas criações e participar do fenômeno dos fãs que cresce ao redor de tais obras.

Palavras-chave: Transmídia; fãs; construção de mundos; cinefilia.

Abstract

Using *Star Wars* and the Marvel Extended Universe as primary examples, this essay explores the ways that transmedia storytelling practices have altered Hollywood entertainment, resulting in a stronger emphasis on world building and a more participatory relationship with its audiences. Transmedia in its contemporary form assumes a networked audience that is actively seeking out information about entertainment experiences they care about, resulting in much more extensive use of paratexts to signal what we might expect from upcoming releases, more blogs and podcasts that recap and interpret cult media texts, and more informal spaces where people can debate, pool knowledge, share their own grassroots creations, and otherwise participate in the fan phenomenon that grow up around such works.

Keywords: Transmedia; fans; world-building; cinephilia.

Let's begin with a thought experiment. Suppose you were asked to explain *Rogue One* to someone who had no familiarity with the Star Wars franchise. Where would you start? You might, for example, describe *Rogue One* as *Star Wars 3.5*, focusing on its relationship to the timeline generated by the series of films as a whole. Of course you would then have to explain that the first *Star Wars* film was actually *Star Wars 4*, that they then produced *Star Wars 5* and *6* before going back to make *Star Wars 1, 2, and 3* and now they are on to making *Star Wars 7, 8, and 9*, but in the midst of doing so, they stopped and made *Star Wars 3.5* as a kind of connecting tissue within the series. Got that!

Now, consider that *Rogue One* contains only short cameos by characters (such as Princess Leia) from the core franchise and that it is predominantly about a different set of characters that co-exist within the same fictional world. World (WOLF, 2014) is going to be a key word in this essay so hold onto that thought for a moment. Also, consider that the producers went to the difficulty of developing a new cast of characters only to kill them off by the end of the film, which means they have no future within the Star Wars universe. But, here's the key point -- they do have a past that can be potentially explored in future vehicles.

Of course, those future vehicles are unlikely to be films for theatrical distribution. They are more likely to appear in future games, comics, novels, and animated television series, each of which will make its own contribution to the unfolding of the Star Wars franchise.

Now, keep in mind that the core concepts here are communicated to the majority of viewers before they ever bought tickets and entered the cinemahouse, and that *Rogue One*, for all of its intertextual complexities, ended up being one of the top box office successes of recent years. In my 2008 book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, I described some of the changes that were then impacting the entertainment industry. Here are some of the key claims:

- It no longer made sense to think in terms of the specificity of individual media, because we were entering a world where every story, image, sound, brand, etc. would flow across every available

media platform, with the flow shaped as much by choices being made in teenagers' bedrooms as in corporate boardrooms, because if the media companies did not make media available to us when we wanted it, where we wanted it, and how we wanted it, then the public would take it there illegally. In such a world, the boundaries between film, television, games, and the internet were going to become increasingly more blurry.

- Technologies were not converging, but content was. Convergence was not so much an endpoint as it was an ongoing process, a shifting set of relationships between producers, consumers, platforms, and content.
- Audiences were increasingly demanding the right to meaningfully participate within the entertainment experiences that mattered to them. They did not simply want preprogrammed forms of interactivity but wanted the right to organize their own communities around the content (collective intelligence) and to use the content as raw materials for their own creative expression (participatory culture).
- Through this process, they were developing new skills that would eventually get applied to more "serious" purposes, such as those around religion, education, and politics.
- All of this paved the way for what my book described as transmedia storytelling. Here's how I defined it more than a decade ago: "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story."

I documented some of the early experiments in transmedia entertainment using *The Matrix* as my primary example. The term has since been taken up by media producers and audiences around the world (JENKINS 2014, 2016). While some of the more radical potentials of crosscutting stories across media

platforms are now probably off the table, at least in terms of mainstream media properties, other aspects of transmedia storytelling have become absolutely normative in the ways contemporary popular cinema operates. One needs to look no further than the Marvel Extended Universe or, to go back to our earlier example, Star Wars, to get a sense of how sophisticated contemporary transmedia practices have become.

Transmedia in its contemporary form assumes a networked audience that is actively seeking out information about entertainment experiences they care about, resulting in much more extensive use of paratexts to signal what we might expect from upcoming releases, more blogs and podcasts that recap and interpret cult media texts, and more informal spaces where people can debate, pool knowledge, share their own grassroots creations, and otherwise participate in the fan phenomenon that grow up around such works. As a result, the most avid consumers are constantly scanning the horizon, trying to identify interesting bits of content in a world where there are more options than any of us can process, and then, when we find something we like, we want to drill down as deep as we can and settle in for one long binge viewing.

These processes are taking place on a global scale, with the world's digital elites plugging into the same communication networks and participating in the same forum discussions. But participatory culture also represents a point of localization as Hollywood franchises get reimagined and re-presented through grassroots media practices characteristic of specific national and regional cultures. So, *Rogue One* inspires shadow puppet shows in Indonesia and Malaysia, sand sculpture on the beaches of Rio, gets turned into stacked dolls in Moscow or *piñatas* in Mexico City, and provides raw materials for street artists or meme-makers everywhere. These participatory practices are also part of the transmedia spread of contemporary cinema, forcing us to revise an earlier emphasis on the systematic rolling out of content or on the continuity within a transmedia world, in favor of a more open-ended model where transmedia content accrues over time and is shaped, much like convergence itself, by audiences

as well as authorized producers.

In *Convergence Culture*, I quoted a veteran scriptwriter who had told me that at the start of his career, he had pitched a story because you had to have a great story to make a great movie (say, *Casablanca*). Then, he pitched a character -- for example, Freddy Kruger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series -- because a great character could support a series of sequels.

And now, he pitches a world because a great world can spawn many stories involving many characters across many different media platforms. The concept of world building is not new. In a recent essay (JENKINS, 2017), I traced the emergence of the Oz mythology across a number of books by L. Frank Baum and others and across a range of other media experiences (films, stage plays, comic strips, board games) across the first few decades of the 20th century. From the start, Baum understood Oz as a geography he could map, a history he could recount, and a platform which could spawn future stories, as he told his readers “more” about aspects that had generated their interest in the past (See, also, FREEMAN, 2016).

Walt Disney, in the 1950s, modeled new ways of organizing stories into an intertextual network of associated properties that could be laid out in front of us as “lands” or “worlds,” resulting in the modern theme park, which he linked in complex ways into his larger film and television skews. Marvel Comics had begun by the 1960s to talk about themselves as a “universe” where characters could cross over from one title into another and where major events could have ripple effects across all of the comics they produced within a given quarter.

George Lucas can be said to have realized the commercial potentials of world building when he signed a contract with 20th Century Fox for the first *Star Wars* film which gave up a salary for directing in return for a higher percentage of the gross for ancillary products. Lucas saw the comics, the toys, and the games as central to the *Star Wars* experience and proceeded to design the subsequent films so that more and more people would follow

the story across media.

We can see this increased emphasis on world building within film and television in any number of ways. One consequence is that films have a much more visually dense *mise-en scène*, as sets get crammed with details that hint at the larger world surrounding the characters and the depicted event. Derek Johnson (2013) describes this process as “over-design,” suggesting that more information gets packed into a film or television program than can be exploited in any given story - more or less the opposite of the highly motivated plot elements we associate with the Classical Hollywood Cinema. This kind of detail- rich film-making rewards reviewing, encourages fans to track down new information via dvd extras, coffee table books, websites, and so forth, where the details get displayed and unpacked, and creates a context for ongoing speculation and prediction that keeps viewers socially interacting around the property between installments.

This new cinematic world-building makes production designers and art directors as central to the storytelling as screenwriters are because many of those details emerge through the design process rather than being introduced within the script. These details may function as rabbit holes that can be built upon and explored through subsequent vehicles and they can be easter eggs, rewarding the most knowledgeable and attentive audience members. Increasingly, advertising practices showcase the rich worlds on offer more than any particular character or story element. There are some contemporary filmmakers (Tim Burton, Zack Snyder) who have developed a reputation for their rich world-building even as they also drawn complaints from critics because of their sloppy or under nourished storytelling.

Even some art house favorites, such as Wes Anderson or David Lynch, develop reputations as compelling world-builders, even if they are building worlds that exist only within one highly idiosyncratic film. And of course, more and more, worlds are being built into physical attractions, such as those recently launched around Harry Potter, Avatar, Pixar, or again, Star Wars and Marvel.

The Marvel Extended Universe provides a particularly robust model for

how world building might operate in an era of transmedia entertainment. Marvel comics offer media makers a constellation of literally thousands of characters, each with their own backstories and histories of interactions with each other. Marvel has launched multiple film series organized around specific superheroes and their affiliated supporting characters, while also constructing mega-vehicles where characters from multiple series come together for universe-shifting events, as in the *Avengers* films. Other corners of the Marvel universe can spin off to create their own clusters of media experiences - as in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films which explore the cosmic far corners of the Marvel universe or the Netflix television series (*Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, *Iron Fist*, *The Punisher*, *The Defenders*) which focus on the gritty urban world grounded in Harlem and Hell's Kitchen. With *Rogue One*, Disney, which owns both Lucasfilms and Marvel, has begun applying a similar logic to the Star Wars films, alternating installments within the main saga, while also creating stand-alone vehicles for individual characters. And Universal has announced plans to follow a similar strategy for their famous monsters - a dark universe - where there will be a series of films focused around *The Mummy*, say, but characters will cross over between films to create a stronger sense of integration and stronger incentives for audiences to consume across the various franchises.

In the 1970s, George Lucas had discussed how *Star Wars* had been strongly influenced by mythographer Joseph Campbell's notion of the Hero's Journey (1973), a composite narrative built up through comparison across core myths from across history and around the world. The Skywalker Saga, more or less, followed the Hero's Journey structure. Most of today's screenwriting guides introduce the Hero's Journey right next to the Four Act Structure as one of the core building blocks of contemporary screen practice. Given this history, transmedia producer Jeff Gomez (2017) generated much controversy recently when he launched a series of blog posts proclaiming that "the Hero's Journey is No Longer Serving Us." Such stories, he argues, assume a fairly homogeneous culture, where everyone

can identify with the same kinds of characters and share a similar set of values. But, such assumptions no longer hold up in the face of multicultural societies within an individual nation (say, the increasing demand to represent the diversity of the United States on screen), let alone the global market place being served by today's entertainment properties. Instead, he advocates what he calls a collective journey model, one where an ensemble of characters provides multiple points of identification for diverse audience members, with the characters sometimes working together, sometimes working at cross purpose, but each capable of commanding attention if not in the "mother ship" (the big screen epic) than in some of the secondary products that grow up around a transmedia universe. So these characters might be secondary within the film but claim dominance over their own comic, book, or game series, offering multiple points of entry for different kinds of audiences into the franchise as a whole. Take a trip to your local comic shop and you will find ongoing series centered around Chewbacca or Darth Maul, with different secondary characters coming in and out of favor, depending on the build up for the next big screen release.

In discussing the kind of narrative structure that emerges from the Collective Journey, Gomez points to *The Game of Thrones*, where different fans might identify with different potential occupants of the Iron Throne, and where the various characters move across the map, forming alliances, fighting skirmishes, and suffering losses. He might just as easily have pointed to the new *Star Wars* movies where the focus has slowly but decisively shifted from the focus on the Skywalker clan (with its white male heroes) towards a more ensemble model, where female coming of age stories dominate but supporting characters are racially and culturally diverse, providing a fuller reflection of the global audience. One size no longer fits all, but a transmedia system can allow a much broader range of protagonists and narratives. Gomez is almost certainly right that his collective journey model is apt to provide the blueprint for a good many of the most commercially successful media properties in the years to come, reflecting a new narrative strategy more fully aligned with the transmedia storytelling and world-building approaches I've discussed above.

But this represents only one potential future for cinema in the era of media convergence. In talking about transmedia franchises like Star Wars and the Marvel films, we end up talking about fans, since these large scale media franchises court the strong sense of affiliation and engagement that we have come to associate with media fandoms. But, in a recent book, Girish Shambu (2014) talks about the “new cinephilia,” suggesting that network communications have intensified and diversified the range of conversations people are having around films of all kinds, seeing passionate discourse as much as film viewing as a defining trait of cinephilia. If he’s right, this is potentially really good news for filmmakers of all kinds, as they struggle for precious resources, from funding to attention, in an ever more crowded media landscape. Online critics, often performing their tasks as labors of love, can help direct attention onto a promising filmmaker or generate awareness of an emerging film movement, acting as curators and increasingly, in the era of Kickstarter and other crowd-funding platforms, as investors in films they care about.

Shambu begins his discussion with a recontextualization of Susan Sontag’s influential 1996 New York Times essay, “The Decay of Cinema.” Here, Shambu argues, Sontag foresaw a death of cinephilia because she defined it in too exclusive terms in relation to a particular subset of films (primarily European art films) and a particular set of filmgoing rituals. But, today, he argues for a “more expansive cinephilia” (“It includes the ‘art cinema’ that was primarily her taste but also many other kinds of cinema, and it includes the traditional theatrical viewing experience of the era she mourned but also many other kinds of viewing situations,”) and an “internationalist cinephilia” (“not just in terms of the films but, equally important, in terms of the cinephiles themselves”). This new cinephilia, he suggests, will support new kinds of cinemas in the years to come. And this too can be understood as reflecting the consequences of convergence on contemporary cinema.

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