

TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND CREATIVE WRITING: CAN MEDIA CONVERGENCE CHANGE THE WAY WE CREATIVELY WRITE?

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Abstract

This article traces the history of transmedia storytelling and its evolutionary steps through multidisciplinary fields of media, art, culture and technology and the way it is currently being used and exploited. Transmedia storytelling as a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.) has been engaged by professional and non-professional media as an example of media convergence. The current unprecedented access to content, products and media allows— at least in what is deemed the developed and developing world — unlimited control over a person's experience as he or she can customise, personalise and respond towards a narrative in multiple ways and across multiple platforms. Trying to map this whole narrative universe offers a rather unique experience, especially for a creative writer and potential producer and consumer of this synergy of modes, media, technologies and content. Moreover, it is argued that creative writing can really benefit by introducing its modes and practices into each medium separately and across media at the same time leading into innovative narrative practices.

Keywords: *transmedia storytelling, creative writing, media convergence, narrative structures, interactive storytelling*

In lieu of an introduction

Literature has been steadily unfolding beyond the letters and words on a page. Emerging technologies, new and ever-changing forms of communication, audiovisual designing have all contributed into creating various transformed modes of representation, enhanced with visual, narrative and verbal characteristics, that people interact and connect with: e-books, hypertexts, virtual gaming worlds etc. This unique combination of textual, visual and verbal elements presents an expansive and rather challenging field of representation and interpretation for creators as well as a new way of experiencing

and “living through” a story (or multiple stories) for the “readers”. Thus, the written, handheld book becomes a digital copy with images and sounds or a virtual world with narration and dialogues in simultaneity with the action, where the reader-player becomes the hero (or the villain etc.) and creates his own storyline. In that way, the variability, interactivity and open-endedness of these literary worlds may produce variable instances of place and time, altering several times the initial chronotopy of a literary text.

Digital Literature

Nowadays, people are constantly surrounded by media-rich environments - television, DVDs, MP3s, Touch/iPhones, computers, video games, cell phones, smart toys, 3D goggles are almost ever present in developed countries (Crichter, 2008; Drotner & Livingston, 2008; Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon, & Olafsson, 2009; Linebarger & Piotrowski, 2009). The contact with digital worlds is almost an everyday occurrence (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Byron, T. 2010; Druin, 2009; Guernsey, 2007; Marsh, 2004; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Marsh, Brooks, Hughes, Ritchie, Roberts, & Wright, 2005; McPake, Stephen & Plowman, 2007; Pahl & Roswell, 2006; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Shuler, 2007; Specht, 2009; Stephen, McPake, Plowman, & Berch-Heyman, 2008). This digitization of form, content and presence has not left literature unaffected. Handheld books went on becoming digitised and wholly digital books were created (Koskimaa, 2000). These trends have also entered the world of Literature leading to multi-layered, nonlinear, non-sequential, interactive and graphic- rich books that bear small to great differences from their handheld counterparts (Dresang, 1997).

As Koskimaa points out, “digital literature is very diffuse and very hard to define” (Koskimaa, 2000). He continues discerning three different instances. Firstly, he presents the digitalisations of print literature, as works which aim at digitalising as comprehensively as possible the old, mostly canonical, literature, with a lot of practical attributes such as conserving old texts physically deteriorating, making rare works available for the larger public, creating useful corporuses for researchers and students and enabling all kinds of statistical style analyses. He considers as a second type the digital publication of original literature, where texts do not employ any hypertextual techniques at all and literature conforms to the established conventions. Here, he argues that digital form is primarily used in the distribution of the texts. Last but not least, comes the literature using new techniques made possible by the digital format, including everything from hypernovels to interactive poetry and multimedia encyclopaedias (Koskimaa, 2000).

Later, Koskimaa goes on creating another categorisation of digital literature. He again distinguishes three different meanings but here he assigns totally different categorisations. First, comes Digital Publishing, which focuses on the production and marketing of literature, and books in general, with the aid of digital technology. It includes eBooks, Print on Demand, Audiobooks made available as MP3 files, etc. He considers it, content-wise, literature in the traditional sense, as digital technology mainly serves for packaging and distribution purposes. As a second category, Scholarly literary

hypertext editions for educational and research purposes are presented. This category includes hypertextually annotated literary works, as well as multimedia implementations of literary classics. Due to royalty rights, these are mainly older works. Finally, the third category comprises writing for Digital Media which he considers as programmed text, text based on computer code. This opens up a limitless field of literary play and experimentation, as texts can be programmed to behave in a more or less dynamic way. This perspective is called ‘cybertextuality’ and the works ‘cybertexts’, in accordance with Espen Aarseth (1997). Cybertextuality is an umbrella term for different types of digital texts, such as hypertexts, kinetic texts, generated texts, texts employing agent technologies, etc. There are also poetic works using interactivity and kinetic techniques. (Koskimaa, 2007). Moreover, there are digital games and its various genres. In addition to the mainstream game genres, such as action, adventure, sports, and puzzle games, the subfields of news games, political games, advergaming, edugames, and such, bring the game approach to cultural fields. These new kinds of works are characterised as ‘cybertexts’ or ‘technotexts’ (Aarseth 1997, Hayles, 2002). And then, an even richer textual – but, at the same time not- experience emerges: digital storytelling.

Digital Storytelling

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole (Jenkins, 2006). Although each component can be experienced individually, they all clearly exist in relation to each other in the larger transmedia story. The connections between different components mean that experiencing the other media forms will improve the experience as a whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling 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 (Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins insists on the term convergence, defined “as the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences” (Jenkins, 2006).

In parallel to the aforementioned definitions, there are also the characterisations of “media mix” by Ito (2007), the “multisensory stories told across two or more diverse media (film, print literature, web, video games, live performance, recorded music, etc.) (Ruppel, 2005) or differently worded characterisations as “cross media storytelling” (Dena 2004a, 2004b), “synergistic storytelling” (Jenkins, 2004), “intertextual commodity” (Marshall 2004), “transmedial worlds” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004), “distributed narration” (Walker, 2004), “transmedia practice” (Dena, 2009), and “multimedia storytelling” (Perryman, 2008).

Creative Writing

The term Creative Writing (C.W.) can cause confusion due to its multitude of definitions, functions (Ramet, 2011), purposes and educational roles (Harper, 2015, Donnelly, 2012, Harper and Kroll, 2007). Many identify Creative Writing with literary production, while others believe that Creative Writing is identical to producing an original written

composition (or re-composition). Some proponents of the teaching of Creative Writing want it to refer to any writing referred as “creative, e.g. original, unconventional, expressive and seemingly, sometimes, to oppose the official literature” (Dawson, 2005), not only a literary genre. Kotopoulos (2011) regards it as a quest for creativity that deviates from the traditional notion of writing as an elitist, solitary practice. It can also seem to conceptually refer to a series of meanings: literary activity field, art of literary production, emotive educational method for the teaching of literature and of literary writing through games, a form of mental relief (Donnelly, 2015) and a means of strengthening self-esteem, academic subject knowledge, etc. (Kotopoulos, 2012).

Creative Writing (Harper, 2013) is cross-disciplinary because it is incorporated in the field of literature (as literary writing, the art of writing and as literary theory of reading), in the area of pedagogy (as an educational method of teaching language and literature) and in the field of psychology (as a therapeutic method). At the same time though, it constitutes an independent discipline dealing with the art of writing and its implications. Gianni Rodari describes creativity as a synonym of “divergent thought” that has the ability of “continually breaking the schemes of experience” (Rodari, 1973).

Research on Creative Writing practice in Greece suggests that support of creativity increases exponentially with the implementation of various writing techniques (Kotopoulos, 2011). Creative Writing as an art uses all known writing techniques and experiments with new ones. It is based on dialogue, blending different styles, while leaving free the “subconscious flow” of writing. It also uses both linguistic and emotional elements in order to activate the creative function and support an increase in the brain’s potential (Kallas-Kalogeropoulou, 2006).

Having creativity at its core, Creative Writing is considered to be any fiction or non-fiction writing, whether prose or poetry, that exceeds the limits of standard professional, journalistic or academic writing and, in general, any writing that uses certain speech techniques (Kotopoulos, 2011). In Jacobson’s terms, Creative Writing refers to texts exemplifying the poetic function of language (Kotopoulos, 2011). At the same time, the term Creative Writing represents the art of writing literature. Literary art belongs to the broader category of “the arts”, which includes music, theatre, dance, painting, etc. and it can be taught. It incorporates the ways and means, the tools and the techniques, that are used consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally by the authors for the creation of a literary work. The poetics of Creative Writing aim to provide an emotional and aesthetic stimulation for the reader, but also to the expression of the writer. As a term therefore, it refers to an act, to a set of acts but also to the combination of an act and its outcome (Harper and Kroll, 2007).

Combining the two fields

By considering these two seemingly unrelated fields, a common thread can be traced, that of narration. Having at their core the basic element of narrating a story, they provide with an interesting question: could a combination of both digital storytelling and creative writing create an equally interesting and exponentially challenging new product?

In order to attempt answering such a question, Roland Barthes provides the

underlying inherent links. In his text *Le Plaisir du Texte* (1973) he sets out some of his ideas for a literary theory, characterising texts as *scriptible*, that is writerly texts that rely heavily upon the audiences to provide any semblance of meaning and *lisible* or readerly texts that require very little work on the part of the audience and afford very little room for individual interpretation. Digital storytelling can be seen as a writerly

text, where the audience follows narratives across multiple platforms. These narratives can be created in ways and modes presented in the field of creative writing.

Moreover, creative writing techniques can make their way and be incorporated into the whole process of creation of a transmedia story. From its initial crafting to the crafting of the whole storytelling universe, from the insertion of references and allusions, that may function as connecting devices through the different media to the creation of ambiguity, suspense and uncertainty with the incorporation of migratory cues, from the creation of a core story to the limitless expansion of new media, creative writing techniques may infuse, enhance, enrich and provide with different alternative throughout the whole construction of a digital storytelling project. A wholly new universe can be created, by letting the text speak for itself. Either the original writer or other participants can creatively construct interconnected stories, bearing different characteristics, elements, modes and tropes, incorporating migratory cues and creating allusions. The final product? A whole new universe as a writerly text.

Conclusion

Even though digital storytelling and creative writing seem to embark from totally different perspectives of the notion of text, they have one common streak: the desire to narrate a story. Thus, by incorporating creative writing techniques, modes and styles into the digital storytelling process, media convergence can propagate itself into the field of literature and vice versa creating a contingent new literary field.

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