

Transmedia Narratives: Definition and Social Transformations in the Consumption of Media Content in the Globalized World

Kalin Kalinov*

The article provides a wide theoretical analysis of the relatively new phenomenon - the transmedia narrative. The work starts with a broader overview of the historical and social aspects related with the narrative structures. Subsequently, it reviews the wide spectrum of literature outlining the very concept of “narrative”. Towards the end, the most prominent scholar definitions of the term “transmedia narrative” are examined and analyzed. As a result, a coherent definition is offered in order to serve as a basis for further research into the diminishing attention spans of the modern audience, the media convergence and the applications of user-generated content.

Key words: transmedia, definition, transmedia narrative, defining transmedia, what is transmedia.

Introduction

Historical and Social Aspects of the Narrative

Narratives have played a significant role throughout human history. Depending on the adopted definition we could consider different starting points for the first instances of their use. Some accept the Homeric epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to be among the first examples of recorded narratives. They refer to the Homeric epic of the 8th century BC as “the oldest ancient narrative” (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2004, p. 66). However, a broader definition could take us as far back as

the Early Bronze Age (approx. 2600 BC) and the classical Sumerian texts (e.g. *The Instructions of Shuruppak*) which are considered the earliest examples of “written literature” (Grimbly, 2000, p. 216). Or we could go even further and claim that long before the tradition of written text, stories were told around camp fires and the oral transfer of information was in fact a narrative form. As Zipes points out, “It is impossible to locate and study the history of stories and the evolution of genres because people began speaking and told stories thousands of years before they learned to read, write and keep records” (Zipes, 2012, p. 4).

Regardless of the starting point, the narrative as a concept has been an integral piece for the human civilization for thousands of years. Within this time, the narratives have evolved alongside the technical means available to the storytellers. Probably the most important of all technological developments from the narrative perspective was the appearance of mass media and particularly the printing press in 1456 (Lee, 2002). Its significance lies in the opportunity to reach large number of people with a single text/narrative which was impossible with earlier books. They remained limited in reach due to the complicated process of their production. Fang refers to printing as “the second information revolution” while acknowledging the fact that its effects grew once the obstacles of limited paper supply, slow production process and mass illiteracy were resolved (Fang, 1997).

The initial limits of the narrative form have been significantly altered with the development of technologies capable to transfer audio and video content. Thus, the narrative was no longer constrained within a textual form and could be transmitted and received as an audiovisual product, appealing to a larger portion of the human senses and allowing a better immersion in the world it presents while requiring less effort on behalf of the audience. Thus, the modern narratives have a significantly wider palette of forms with which to reach their audience. Nevertheless, their original role within our society has not changed extremely.

“There is support for the notion that narratives accurately reflect a broad-range of social perceptions [...] of storytellers ...” (Salzer, 1998, p. 577).

However, the narration is not a unidirectional process and as such it has always depended heavily on the audience and its reaction. Thus, one could argue that a functioning narrative could reflect not only the storytellers’ perceptions but also the perceptions of their audiences. This

statement could be supported through the wide range of academic literature investigating different aspects of society through the prism of the narrative forms. Such examples are the political (Shenhav, 2006), cultural (Zipes, 2012), psychological (Sommers, 1994) and other narratives which play a significant role in the reflection and formation of their respective discourses. As a result, investigating the narrative and its specifics in a particular context could uncover societal perceptions within a group, community or a particular individual which makes it a valuable tool for academic research.

What is “narrative”?

While the question may sound quite simple, the definition of “narrative” is severely contested academically and has been so for many years. Broadly, the contest can be reviewed in two main directions – scope and approach. Within the field of scope, the main question is whether the narrative can consist of a single event or requires at least two such instances. Some notable academics insist on the former (Barthes, 1982). An example of the latter can be found in the work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith as she states: “[...] we might conceive of narrative discourse [...] as verbal acts consisting of *someone telling someone else that something happened*” (Smith, 1980, p. 232). In terms of approach, the main categories of narrative definition can be outlined as temporal, causal, minimal and transactional (Richardson, 2000, p. 169). The temporal approach focuses on the presentation of events situated in time. The causal stresses the causal connection between at least two such instances in order to form a narrative (Bal, 1997). The less popular notion of the minimalists suggests that each statement of an action or event is a narrative as a result of its implication of a transition from an earlier state (Genette, 1988). Last but not least, the transactional approach suggests that the narrative is a way of reading a text and not a feature within the text itself.

An interesting example of the academic dialogue in the field can be found in the exchange between Rudrum and Ryan. In a series of dialogue articles, the two discuss the very notion of defining a narrative as a phenomenon and whether it is in fact necessary. Rudrum advocates the idea that “[a]s long as narratology remains tied to [a conception of narrative as representation], and tied to a philosophy of language that foregrounds signification above and before questions of use and practice, it seems that a satisfactory way of defining and classifying its subject matter will continue to elude it” (Rudrum, 2005, p. 203). Thus he stresses the

importance of the context within which a particular narrative is executed. In return, Ryan questions the “need for a watertight definition” of the phenomenon and thus adds yet another viewpoint in an already wide palette of academic work (Ryan, 2006, p. 193).

Having noted the main issues facing the scholars of narratology, we have to adopt at least a working definition of the phenomenon in order to continue our academic search towards “transmedia narratives”. Subsequently, we will look at authors like Abbott who states the following: “[...] the field of narrative is so rich that it would be a mistake to become invested in a more restrictive definition that requires either more than one event or the sense of causal connection between events” (Abbott, 2008, p. 13).

Thus, we can assume the stance of Felman and Laub: “That “something happened” in itself is history; that “someone is telling someone else that something happened” is narrative” (Felman & Laub, 1991, p. 93). For the purposes of the present work we adopt the widest possible definition of narrative constructed by Barbara Herrnstein Smith and cited above. Nevertheless, as we move towards the realm of the “transmedia narrative”, we will quickly find that most of the academic questions and disputes are simply inapplicable due to the nature of the phenomenon and as a result we have a paradoxically clearer definition of the term than the one we can provide for its main component – the “narrative”.

Defining the Transmedia Narrative

Moving towards a definition of the phenomenon presents a few threats which should be accounted for. Most of all, the term itself and its applications are a relatively new matter for academic investigation. Thus, the body of literature written by scholars in the field is limited. However, the concept of transmediality of a narrative pre-dates the academic research by centuries. Some scholars argue that a prime example in this regard is the narrative of Jesus Christ which is in fact a multi-platform storytelling experience including books, drama and visual art (e.g. stained glass in churches) to represent the story (Pearson, 2009). If we assume this stance, then the rich history of the transmedia narrative would include other interesting instances like Sherlock Holmes and the myths for King Arthur, for example.

“A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia

storytelling, each medium does what it does best [...] Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained [...]" (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95–96).

This is perhaps the most cited definition of “transmedia narrative” available to date and while it has some significant advantages over other attempts to outline the phenomenon, it also poses limitations which are not completely necessary. We should note that Jenkins never explicitly states that this is his definition of the term, albeit its wide distribution within the academic community. The main issue with the definition lies in the assumption that a modern transmedia narrative could or should function in an “ideal form”. Subsequently, assuming that each franchise entry needs to be self-contained is a possibility but should hardly be the norm. It might even be worth arguing that the opposite will become the transmedia standard in the future. Jenkins provides another attempt at defining the phenomenon about an year later:

“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 [...]" (Jenkins, 2007).

The definition is mostly in line with his previous view and also looking at an ideal situation in which the narrative functions. Additionally, the notion of systematic dispersion hints at an inorganic positioning of the narrative elements which is opposing to the view that a narrative should be organically predisposed to a multiplatform distribution in order to be successful on a transmedia level. Another issue is the fact that Jenkins refers to “fiction” but there are numerous examples of non-fiction transmedia narratives that should be accounted for in a clear academic definition of the phenomenon.

Evans takes a different perspective regarding the definition of what she refers to as “contemporary transmedia television text” by outlining 3 key features: *narrative*, *authorship* and *temporalities* (Evans, 2011). According to Evans, the narrative of a transmedia project is key as it makes the world of the story so large that it is necessary to spread it over several platforms. Other prominent researchers have supported similar arguments referring to the impossibility to contain a narrative within a single medium (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95). However, it might be worth arguing that the spreading over several platforms is not so much a characteristic of the narrative

itself but rather an adaptation of the work to meet the demands of modern audiences. Regarding the notion of *authorship*, Evans refers to the idea of a “unified author” behind the transmedia narrative but this is not always the case and it severely disrupts the notion of authorship. While creative collaborations are a standard practice in transmedia production, they cannot be considered completely the work of a single author. For example, the Animatrix (2003) is in fact produced and co-written by the Wachowski siblings, directors of The Matrix (1999). And while the former plays a significant role in the transmedia mix which centers around the later, we cannot undermine the work of the 7 directors of the Animatrix, none of whom carries the Wachowski surname. Such a stance would completely disregard the academic and practical works of the *auteur theory* which holds that a film reflects the director’s personal creative vision (Thompson & Bordwell, 2009). Last but not least, Evans notes that “within specific moments of transmedia storytelling, the various production schedules are aligned to ensure a coherent temporality across the various platforms involved” (Evans, 2011, p. 36).

Pratten offers two definitions of the phenomenon. One which he refers to as “traditional” consisting of: “[...] telling a story across multiple platforms, preferably allowing audience participation, such that each successive platform heightens the audience’ enjoyment” (Pratten, 2015, p. 2). Just as with the previous attempts, the multiple platforms are in the center of the interpretation, however the author puts the focus towards audience participation. Subsequently, he offers a second definition which “places the audience at the center”: “[...]taking the audience on an emotional journey that goes from moment-to-moment” (Pratten, 2015, p. 2). Looking at transmedia storytelling as a design philosophy is an interesting perspective. However, the definition is too broad and could include a number of things which are not in fact transmedia narratives, including a simple book, for example.

There is a limited range of authors who have offered definitions of their own which have not been met with the academic acclaim of the ones mentioned above. Nevertheless, the phenomenon does not seem to be clearly defined. This complicates the work of both the academics and practitioners in the field of transmedia narratives. Part of the problem is the refusal of scholars to stick to their own definitions and their desire to redefine the phenomenon in subsequent publications (e.g. Jenkins) or their refusal to provide a clear-cut explanation of what is and what is not a “transmedia narrative” (e.g. Evans). In order to escape both of these

situations, in the present article we would adopt the definition provided by Kalinov and Markova:

“A transmedia narrative is a multimedia product which communicates its narrative through a multitude of integrated media channels” (Kalinov & Markova, 2016).

In this instance “multitude” should be considered to mean “two or more”. The definition escapes the traps of non-commitment and is clear enough. At the same time, it is also broad enough without limiting the scope of the transmedia narrative and its applications. Idealistic elements and audience focus are implied but cannot be a part of a clear academic definition. Additionally, it solves some of the debates regarding the very nature of what constitutes a narrative. The minimalist approach is clearly inapplicable in a transmedia product as it requires at least two platforms communicating the message which as a result requires at least two events. Communicating the same event over two platforms is possible but it should be considered an example of cross-media storytelling which is a distinctively different phenomenon. Also, the intertextuality between the channels implies at least a basic form of causal connection which supports the widely accepted definitions of a narrative provided by Barthes, Bal and others. As a result, using this definition not only can serve as a basis for further academic discussion but also in solving the inherent problem of having to define the “transmedia narrative” without existence of a wide academic consensus on the idea of “narrative” itself.

Conclusion

The transmedia narrative is a relatively new phenomenon and is not yet widely researched. However, as it is slowly becoming the norm for reaching the audiences around the globe, both professional and academic interest in the field would grow exponentially. As a result, it would be beneficial for scholars to agree upon a single definition which is neutral enough in order to allow deeper research in the future. The present article offers such a definition which can be considered a starting point for further academic dialogue. Reaching an agreement on the framework of the phenomenon can be applied in researching wider social transformations through the prism of the transmedia narrative like the diminishing attention span of the audience, the media convergence and the applications of user-generated content in modern fiction and marketing.

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* Kalin Kalinov is a PhD candidate in Crisis Communication at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of the Sofia University. He is a lecturer in “Transmedia Narratives and Marketing” and “Communication Management.