

The networked reception of transmedial universes an experience-centered approach

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Abstract

Building upon ten years of empirical work, this paper reflects on how to study increasingly complex user engagement with transmedial worlds. We examine our own analytical evolution from an initial aesthetic orientation to our current effort to incorporate the user's own perspective through qualitative and quantitative studies. We argue that mapping user experience requires a sophisticated and holistic analytical approach – particularly, due to the popularity of social media platforms. We conclude the article by developing the concept of “networked reception” to characterize new kinds of transmedial world experience afforded by social media, which allow users to distribute and communicate not only the content of media texts but also their own experience and reception of transmedial world “texts”.

Introduction: Transmedial worlds and communication across media

This paper is a methodological elaboration of more than ten years of sustained work on transmedial worlds, which began in 2004 when we published our paper on how to approach the study of transmedial worlds analytically (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004). The media ecology has changed dramatically since then, with increasing levels of user online participation across multiple platforms. Accordingly, our approach has evolved from a focus on aesthetic understanding and reception to an interest in capturing user experiences through

the study of what, in this paper, we describe as “networked reception”. What follows is both an illustration of our method and approach as we conceptualize it today and a brief account of how it came into existence. We believe that sharing the methodological challenges we went through will be useful for other researchers who embrace the complexity of user activity across media platforms.

Because of our cross-platform approach, we believe that our reflections are not only relevant in relation to transmedial worlds research but also generally to cross-media communication, understood in this context as the strategic planning of the use of a variety of media platforms to distribute and create engagement with (franchised) content (Sandvik, 2010; Indrek & Scolari, 2012). In general, approaches that deal with cross-media and/or transmedia communication and engagement tend to be consumer/audience/user-oriented (such as Kozinets, 1998; Green & Jenkins, 2011; Davis, 2013), production and innovation-oriented (such as Bruns, 2007; Indrek & Scolari, 2012), or media- and platform-oriented (such as Bechman Petersen, 2006; Sandvik & Evans 2011, 2015). While stress is laid on the importance of the exhaustive effort researchers make to cover different platforms when they investigate cross-media practises – often, also with a business focus (see, for instance, Feldman, 2005 or Spotts et al., 2014), little attention is usually paid to the aesthetic properties of the worlds or products themselves. However, we want to argue that a narrow focus on platforms or the concrete relations between users and particular platforms could drown researchers in seas of data while cause them to lose track of the core of the media experience. User engagement across platforms is not, in essence, about material platforms but about the kinds of personal or shared experiences users are constructing and re-enacting through them. For example, *Game of Thrones* fans can use several platforms (Facebook, fan websites) for the same kind of phatic exchange in relation to the launch of a new book, and a thorough investigation of each of the platforms would yield superfluous results. In this case, the crucial topic is how this phatic exchange is constructed in relation to the book experience across platforms.

In this article, therefore, we propose an experience-centric approach to the analysis of “user” engagement across media in which the users’ personal *experience* of cultural “objects” (in this case, transmedial worlds or transmedial characters) defines which platforms the researcher has to pay attention to and how to analyze them. We adopt here a phenomenological, pragmatic view of experience as “felt-life” with an emotional quality in the tradition of McCarthy and Wright (2004, p. 6), who, in turn, build on Dewey (1934). Lived experiences are a culmination of past events, present circumstances and future expectations. All experience has an aesthetic potential (ibid., 2004, p. 19), but aesthetic experiences occur when the point of the experience is to engage our mental capacities with extraordinary intensity in an encounter with an artwork, as Kant would say (Goldman, 2001, p. 262), or, as here, a cultural product. It is important to emphasize that experience is not just about the aesthetics of the moment. Experience is always informed by experiences in the past: in this case, for instance, prior engagements with the cultural product and interactions

with others around this product. In sum, we find that the cultural and aesthetic experience of transmedial objects is not fixed but in flux, platform-independent and essentially social. Obviously, the platform does play a role in that it affords certain types of experience rather than others. For instance, game worlds allow the users to enter and inhabit the world through their character, whereas other platforms represent the world *to* the user (Klastrup & Tosca, 2009).

We would like to pursue the experience perspective more deeply by showing that the use of different media platforms is not necessarily about looking for new or extended experiences of a product distributed across a variety of platforms (such as a new instance of a serial narrative or the expansion of one or more narratives or, in other words, “transmedial storytelling” in the sense Jenkins has defined it (Jenkins, 2006; Inbrus & Scolari, 2012). Rather, user engagement with transmedial worlds is about reliving and recapturing particular experiences over and over again – for instance, the emotional or narrative “shock” of experiencing a beloved character die. In this context, digital media platforms – in particular, social network sites – enable users not only to share or circulate their own experiences (cf. Green & Jenkins, 2011 and later) but also to watch, enjoy and engage with other users’ similar experiences. Thus, we will draw on examples from our empirical studies of transmedial worlds and serials (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, 2009, 2011, 2014), and zoom in on two cases from the *Game of Thrones* and the *Sherlock Holmes* universe, while advocating a holistic and integrated approach to the study of transmedial user engagement that is attentive to *both* the aesthetic qualities of cultural products, their reception contexts and the platforms on which users engage with them.

Theoretical foundation and framework

Our ongoing study of transmedial worlds is, as a starting point, situated in relation to audience research. We have from the outset clearly been inspired by traditional reception studies (Eco, 1979; Iser, 1980; Jauss, 1982), whose standpoint was the aesthetic analysis of the literary objects as triggers of experience. Thus, we take our departure in an attempt to examine the relation between the “work” (the transmedial world) and the (individual) reader of the work. We have extended this perspective, following the lead of Stuart Hall in investigating the gap between encoding and decoding (Hall, 1979), and we are also inspired by cultural studies methodologies that make sense of audience practices in the form of qualitative empirical studies and consider audiences as active in shaping “texts”. This is one reason we also prefer to use the word “user” and “users” rather than “audience” – to signify their role as people actively engaging with media products in a variety of ways both as interpreters and makers (of, for instance, reviews and fan fiction). However, we differ from a traditional cultural studies perspective in that our project is not so much concerned with ideology or identity as with lived experience. What happens in the encounter between the object and the user? It should, therefore, be quite clear that our approach is not related

to media effects theories or use and gratification theories. We have not dealt with how transmedial world products concretely influence users, the demographic data on users, or the particular personal needs the user meets by engaging with a transmedial world. We focus, instead, on what we perceive as the general experiential intentionality of an active user who seeks and actually constructs the experience herself (McCarthy & Wright, 2004).

Comparing our project against other transmedial research, we consider ourselves to have the same holistic ambition as such salient theorists as the above-mentioned Henry Jenkins (2006) (with the difference that Jenkins appears to be more interested in user production than the aesthetic objects themselves. Other researchers, such as Marie-Laure Ryan (2013), have focused exclusively on aesthetics (in her case, from a narratological perspective) with little interest for empirical data. We are interested in the encounter of aesthetic objects and users in the moment of *experience* and, therefore, adopt a mixed method approach.

Generally, we have found that many users of transmedial worlds are, indeed, dedicated *fans* of those worlds; and, in our previous work, we have often drawn on insights from fan culture studies (such as Klastrup & Tosca, 2011). In this light, we have found Cornel Sandvoss' concept of (fan) productivity useful. In his description of fandom and fan activity online, Sandvoss (2011) has applied John Fiske's concept of fan *productivity* to an online context in order to discuss what, in particular, characterizes online fandom. He uses Fiske's distinction between semiotic productivity (reading and interpreting the objects of fandom, "texts"), enunciative productivity (talking about the texts with other fans) and, finally, textual productivity (producing texts inspired by the fandom object). Online, the fans' own texts become easily accessible to both media producers¹ and other fans, and many new venues emerge in which they can talk to each other and discuss both the original media products and fan products, such as fan fora or YouTube. However, in line with Matt Hills, we think that Fiske's three kinds of productivity need nuance in the digital world (Hills, 2013) since all three forms of engagement often take place at the same time or collapse altogether. We would like to expand his understanding of fan engagement proposing the hybrid concept of "networked reception".

As we define it, the study of networked reception centers on *how transmedial world users share and recapture their experiences online in multi-platform networks² that connect them to each other in distributed forms of semiotic, enunciative and textual productivity*. Through social media, through the use of dedicated hashtags or by following particular fan experts, for instance, users will often experience input from many places in an ongoing conversation that allows them both individually and socially to engage with the transmedial world again and again. For example, an act of networked reception might be participating in a Twitter stream that runs a "meta"-discussion about how a TV series differs from the books on which it is based. Accordingly, as Evans (2015) has argued, the reception of and engagement with transmedial worlds today often take place simultaneously on several platforms rather than unfolding as a linear progression from platform to platform. Fans of a transmedial world need not know each other or have many common interactions but

can vicariously share the pleasures of understanding the world with each other in fleeting moments of discussion and consumption on a variety of platforms.

We would also like to note that we see our concept of “networked reception” as significantly different from Danah Boyd’s notion of “networked publics”, which she understands both as “a space and a collection of people” (Boyd, 2008, p. 41). Hence, “publics”, in the sense she uses it, are to be considered as both the “imagined audience” of the individual user of the social network and the masses of people congregated to engage with each other and each other’s content on these sites. We, on the contrary, are not interested in the general social affordances of particular platforms or users as media-supported “publics”. Rather, when we talk about “networked reception”, we use it to describe how individual users “optimize” their affective engagement with their favorite transmedial worlds through networked activities that connect them to other users. In this sense, we align ourselves to a certain degree with Mizuko Ito, who originally described networked publics as people “engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception” (Ito, 2008, p. 3).

The reception of transmedial worlds 2004-2014: Expanding the analytical scope

The concept of networked reception has arisen in the course of our studies of transmedial world users. It is a cumulative concept that is the result of a progressive refining of our understanding of transmedial reception. We would not have reached this endpoint without all the intermediary phases, which have allowed us to explore the interplay between content, users and the platforms at different points in time.

From the beginning, our approach to transmedial worlds (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004) has been phenomenological. We have argued that experiencing the transmedial world realizes the fiction itself – that is, the transmedial world comes into existence every time someone engages in an act of interpretation, interaction, or creation – or, in other words, in acts of semiotic, enunciative or textual productivity in relation to the world. In 2004, we proposed the following definition of transmedial worlds: “Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the ‘worldness’ (a number of distinguishing features of its universe).” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004). In our definition, we emphasize the ideas of “abstract content system” and “mental image” to insist on the fact that we consider the act of reception and the aesthetic experience as defining for the existence of transmedial worlds. In other words, a group of interconnected fictions does not become a transmedial world until people begin to perceive it as such and are able to make an abstraction of the world features that are not exclusively tied to any particular plot. In our framework, these distinguishing features are “mythos, topos and ethos” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004). In brief,

mythos, to a degree, is the “back story” of the world; topos relates to the setting of the world (for instance, a fantasy or a science-fiction universe); and ethos relates to the morality of the world: what is perceived as acceptable (good) or bad (evil) behavior.

We claim that a transmedial world can originate in any medium: the *Lord of the Rings* world originated from novels, the *Star Wars* world from films and the *Pokemon* world from a *Nintendo Gameboy* game. It can be orchestrated by a corporation that controls the different media incarnations (and, thus, become a franchise) or appear spontaneously due to fan activity and independent incarnations like the Cthulu Mythos universe. In our studies, we have paid attention to the different instantiations of these worlds, investigating how fans engage with them at different levels. For example, in our study of *Lord of the Rings Online*, we were interested in “entry points” into the transmedial universe – that is, what instantiation people had experienced first (for example, the Tolkien books or the Peter Jackson movies) – and in understanding how this entry point affected their idea of the mythos, topos and ethos of this universe (Klastrup & Tosca, 2009).

At the onset of our studies, we were very interested in the aesthetics of these worlds (their so-called “worldness”) and how the online embodiments succeeded in creating an inhabitable space for fans to perform in. Our initial approach was also rather media-centric in that we dwelled on questions of how a particular instantiation of the world related to the original mythos, topos and ethos – in particular, we analyzed the strength of the video-game medium as a transmedial platform (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, 2009). However, we found that, in order to understand how users engaged with the game worlds, we needed to look at their engagement not as an isolated activity but as one that involved the users’ transmedial world repertoire. Thus, we found we needed to understand each (user’s) act of interpretation as going beyond the game’s border and into the wider realms of the transmedial world. We discovered that players enter the game, activate their transmedial world repertoire, and contextualize the actions they are required to perform in relation to a much wider background that makes their actions more meaningful and engaging. Perhaps, the most notable aspect of this approach is that it expands the traditional conceptualization of reception (as understood by authors such as Iser, Jauss or Eco) beyond interpretation and into the realm of user/player performance.

From the mid-2000s and onwards, the patterns of online user activity slowly changed. From dedicated interactions in specialized fora, we saw that users began to incorporate their engagement with transmedial worlds into their everyday social media activity. We realized that, in order to account for the importance of the transmedial world in their lives, we also had to investigate this factor. We analyzed a game (made by Campfire) that HBO launched to advertise their upcoming television series, *Game of Thrones*, based on the epic novel series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin. The game consisted of a series of “missions” in which players had to solve puzzles related to the transmedial world, each of which had something to do with one of the five senses. Solving a puzzle provided access to a preview trailer from the television series. To kick-start the hype around the game, the

campaign producers started by sending a mysterious “scent box” to select and well-known “influencers” – notably, bloggers (this item obviously related to the sense of smell). This game also integrated with Facebook in such a way that it posted the progress of players through the game and encouraged players to recruit their friends to play.

Our studies showed that the online game had a porous border with the television series since they both shared the same interpretation of “worldness” and, at the same time, evoked (and embodied) notable aspects of the wider universe inaugurated by the books (which, at that point in time, acted as the general framework). Choosing the five senses as entry points was a very literal way of embodying the transmedial world and giving fans an aesthetic experience that was at once new and nostalgic, creating a longing for inhabiting a world that never was. At the same time, the game made the five missions into units of meaning that spilled out of the game by giving them Facebook progress status, which had some currency in the real world since the number of shares inside Facebook became a measure of the success in the campaign (in terms of potential audience reached). The game also tried to force its players to act as evangelists who would bring their friends into the transmedial world since the last puzzle required others to be invited to participate in the game in order to unlock the last reward: a video message from George Martin himself. We have commented critically on this practice in our 2014 article. The main conclusion of our research was that social media sharing had become a defining factor of transmedial engagement (and, in this case, also the campaign strategy), so that users moved between consumption of the different texts and new engagement practices, which could not be explained with aesthetic reception processes or analysis alone.

We want in this paper to expand on this insight by arguing that a theoretical framework that describes why and how users engage with transmedial worlds needs to incorporate the connectivity enabled by social media or, as we have called it, “networked reception”. Social media engagement is not only initiated by corporations/producers. Further development occurs when users initiate the exchange. In the next section, we shall present two examples that illustrate how networked reception is different from traditional reception practices, when users engage with other users in creating new kinds of experience related to the transmedial worlds they share.

Case study 1: The “Red Wedding”

The first case relates to the universe of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, created by author George R.R. Martin – now, most often, just referred to as *Game of Thrones* thanks to the immensely popular HBO TV series by this name. This universe has spawned a huge number of fan-produced productions in every possible media form: fan fiction, graphic art, game-related activities and, of course, videos, among other things. Originally, the novels had more of a cult following but, later, became bestsellers and, finally, entered the mainstream in their own right with the international hit that is the television show, creating a global audience

of “mainstream” fans and followers. What characterizes this particular transmedial world is that the original author has not yet finished writing the story, and he progresses at a very slow pace. The book series is supposed to consist of seven volumes.

The fact that the TV series has a larger public than the original readers of the books means that many spectators have encountered the universe for the first time on TV. George R.R. Martin is famous for his shocking plot twists, which sometimes kill important characters to whom fans are very attached. This has spawned a curious phenomenon in which readers of the book have videotaped the reactions of unsuspecting “newbie” viewers of the TV show when they watch episodes with shocking plot turns – a phenomenon made possible by the fact that, up until season 5, the TV series followed the plots of the books very closely. An example of a shocking plot turn took place during the ninth episode of the third season, titled “The Rains of Castamere”. In this episode, described in detail in the third book in the series, the infamous “red wedding” scene takes place. In this pivotal plot moment, several main characters have been tricked into attending a wedding in the castle of a foe and are then assassinated in a horrific way. The plot twist is written (and filmed) in such a way that newcomers to the world could not predict what was coming. Following the airing of the episode with the “red wedding”, videos of shocked and unsuspecting “newbie” viewers reacting to the murders proliferated on YouTube and the Internet generally. They became quite popular – particularly, among more seasoned fans of the transmedial world. At the time of this writing, the video “Game of Thrones: Red Wedding Reactions Compilation” has amassed more than 12 million views³.



Image 1: Game of Thrones fan reactions to the “red wedding”

In these videos, book readers, who knew what was coming, ambushed their unsuspecting friends or partners and recorded their reactions without them knowing it in order, then,

to share it with other “veterans” online. These short videos, in turn, have been made into long chains of reaction videos. What we surmise is that “the veterans”, people who have known about the “red wedding” and what happened for 13 years (the book in which it takes place was originally published in 2000), remember so well the shock they themselves felt when they read the scene for the first time that they feel the need to record other people’s reaction in order to indulge in the experience of capturing and making fun of the neophytes and their “in the moment” shock. The aesthetic object (the transmedial world *Game of Thrones*) is, thus, totally interwoven with the personal history of the fans, with certain events becoming re-actualized events worth waiting for, enabling, in turn, we surmise, a sort of nostalgic return to the first time the user experienced the world unfold. As we watched these videos, we were struck that what is at play here is also a sort of emotional reenactment by proxy; the book readers could feel a tinge of their old emotions, vicariously re-living them through others and re-connecting to the experience again and again by watching the videos of shocked neophytes shared by other veteran book readers. So, recording and sharing the “red wedding” episode is both a question of re-connecting to certain pleasurable (or, in this case, perversely pleasurable) experiences related to the mythos of the world and of connecting (indirectly) with other veterans or “senior fans” (book readers) online. They also connect to the entire *Game of Thrones* online fan community. In addition, once the TV viewers have also experienced the shocking truth, they can be introduced to the community of those in the know, so the videos mark a rite of passage, welcoming new fans into the inner circle of fandom.

It is impossible to explain this phenomenon from a single perspective (be it aesthetic or user-centered) since it involves an understanding of the transmedial world and its workings, a sensitivity to modes of reception and an analytical questioning of the experiential intentionality at stake: In this case, the re-living of a particular, powerful moment in the transmedial world’s history and the act of injecting the recording of other users’ experiences into a network of social media texts to be accessed and experienced by oneself and thousands of other fans. This case illustrates how Fiske’s separate categories are not so useful in an online context because, here, semiotic and enunciative productivity takes on a new dimension and is closely interwoven with textual productivity: some fans watch and record other fans’ immediate interpretation of the “text” and make this moment into a new “text” in itself. In classic reception, the study would stop at the individual users (or a mental idea of a user); but, in our networked world, new forms of pleasures are made possible of which we need to be aware and study. In this case, the users are not communicating about the work; they are elaborating on the act of reception itself.

Case study 2: The “Reichenbach Fall”

The second case to illustrate the current practices of networked reception is the user reception and engagement with “The Reichenbach Fall”, the third and final episode of the second

season of the BBC series *Sherlock*, which aired in January 2012. *Sherlock* is just the latest in a succession of TV series based on the characters of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, who solve crime puzzles. These characters were originally created by Arthur Conan Doyle in a series of novels and short stories published from 1887 to 1927. While the focus of the original short stories was primarily the two main characters, the text also conjured up an imaginary Victorian “London world” that we could call the “Sherlock Holmes Universe”, an early and formative example of a transmedial world, which has so far been instantiated and expanded in numerous media formats. Contrary to the many other transmedial worlds, however, the topos is somewhat flexible – Sherlock Holmes and Watson, as a rule, always live in London, but it does not have to be the Victorian London. Thus, while the central traits of the characters remain more or less the same across media formats, the stories can unfold in different time periods. As an example, the BBC series we reference takes place in a contemporary London, and modern technology plays a pivotal role in the plots.

The episode we analyze here ends with a dramatic scene in which Sherlock Holmes has a final confrontation with his evil arch-enemy, Moriarty on the top of a building. Dr. Watson witnesses Holmes’ apparent suicide as he jumps off the building at the end of their confrontation. The poor doctor, stunned after a cyclist hits him, sees Holmes body being carried away, and the episode closes with Watson at Holmes’ grave, begging aloud for him not to be dead. The last thing we see is Sherlock Holmes observing the scene from behind a tree. The episode reinterprets Conan Doyle’s short story “The Final Problem” in which he kills off Sherlock Holmes, only to resurrect him again a few years later by popular demand.

The audience has seen that Sherlock Holmes is not dead, and we know – also from Conan Doyle’s original text – that the detective will come back. The big mystery, therefore, is not “what happened to Sherlock?” but, rather, “how did Holmes jump off a building and survive?” and “why did Moriarty kill himself?” These open questions kept the fans busy for two entire years until the third series aired in 2014, entailing constant speculation on websites, personal blogs and social media, which spilled over into cult websites and into the mainstream media as well. Fans discussed the episode and offered theories about what might have happened: a body double, a big mattress on the ground, an optical illusion? The intensity of their sustained engagement for such a long period of time was intriguing, so we set out to unravel why this intellectual puzzle held so much fascination.

One of the fan phenomena we followed was the spread of the tag #BelieveInSherlock across several social media platforms. The tag refers to the plot of the episode in which Moriarty tries to expose Holmes as a fraud (with a complex subplot of Moriarty himself being an invention) and, thus, cause the detective’s “suicide”. The fans responded to this by showing their public support for Sherlock Holmes; they believed in him and not Moriarty. Moriarty was real, and Sherlock’s efforts to catch him were real, too.



Image 2: Examples of posters #BelieveInSherlock⁴

The fans not only shared their support and hypotheses through the hashtag but also produced posters and other materials that they put on display in the real world. These posters were then photographed (by others?) and shared online in their social media networks. In this example, the emotional engagement of fans transcends the online world to become physical artifacts that can be found on street lamps or pasted onto walls all over the world. It is a reenactment that cannot be explained by aesthetic analysis alone or by a traditional reception analysis. Once more, we need to apply a more complex experiential framework to explain what is going on.

First, the clever twist of this episode (in relation to user engagement) was that fans were actually invited to “become Sherlock” in the last episode, to take the clues laid out by the producers of the show and follow similar inductive procedures to solve the mystery of his “suicide”. A simple Google search of the phrase “Reichenbach Fall solution” yields thousands and thousands of hits in which fans rhetorically try to convince each other that they have found the best explanation. In this respect, the puzzle of Holmes’ suicide is a perfect game for fans, a procedural embodiment of the detective’s abilities – arguably, one of the most important cornerstones in this transmedial world. Using the #BelieveInSherlock tag not only gave fans an opportunity to show that they were fans of the show, but it also enabled them to announce that they adhered to a particular interpretation of what really happened – and it enabled them to engage in a continuous, enunciative productivity. So,

in general, the combination of a clever move by the producers (ending the last episode not with a cliffhanger, but a cliff dive...) and the emergence of the fan-driven hashtag served the purpose of giving rise to communal experiences that could fill the void until the new series was aired. In addition, apart from discussing possible solutions on a variety of social networks, the Sherlock fans turned their interpretation of what happened in the episode into physical artifacts to be displayed in the real world (a poster, a T-shirt, a badge), artifacts that were then incorporated into the online fan networks by other fans. These objects were a way of turning their aesthetic experience into a networked public performance of textual productivity and opening a door to let the transmedial universe into the real world.

It has to be mentioned that the show's creators do not actually solve the mystery in the first episode of the next season, two years later. That is, they do not offer any definite explanation but incorporate fan theories into the structure of the episode in a rather spectacular metalepsis in which a group of Sherlock fans is depicted as reuniting to discuss the different possibilities, but none is chosen as "the right one". The show refuses closure, leaving the door open for each fan to believe that her solution might still be the best. Many fans did not experience this as frustrating but as liberating because their solutions got to live a life of their own. In other words (as one fan put it), they were "still within the realm of possibility". This example also shows how the borders between different media formats are permeable. The fact that the TV show producers can easily access fan reception networks online makes it both possible – and, perhaps, even tempting – to incorporate fan productivity into their own media products.

In sum, we conceive of these two cases as examples of new kinds of engagement in which fans relate to the experiences of other fans through social media and a whole new range of possibilities emerge. Traditional reception or communication analysis can no longer suffice when we want to understand the life of transmedial worlds online. Transmedial fans are not only watching. They are sharing their emotional experiences and engaging in complex exchanges of meta-appreciation across multiple channels, both off- and online.

Conclusion: Networked reception

This paper has shown how we have consistently chased the elusive "user experience" in our work with transmedial worlds, a task that continues to be increasingly complex. We began by problematizing the "single approach" strategy to the study of transmedial worlds, arguing that considering aesthetics alone would not take us very far in understanding the "users" and likewise, that looking only at the users would not be productive because we would not be able to understand the worlds they are passionate about. Thus, we went from studying the worlds themselves to incorporating user perspectives through the investigation of acts of consumption, interpretation, communication, production and collection. We have argued that even this approach is not enough in a networked world in which users engage with each other in novel forms of emotional and intellectual reenactments – both alone

and in groups. The conclusion must be that the most productive approach is to study *user experience in a networked world* or, as we propose to call it, networked reception, including the study of how social media can amalgamate aesthetic and productive fandom aspects as the two chosen cases illustrate.

We would also like to remark that the concept of transmedial storytelling as introduced by Henry Jenkins seems to privilege expansions of transmedial worlds over other kinds of fan engagement. In this article, we have described some performative acts that have to do with the reenactment of emotionally loaded moments and a preoccupation with the subtleties of plot devices – both examples of acts that do not expand the transmedial world in any way but instead add new emotional dimensions to an already existing engagement with them. Through the revisitation of our own work and the discoveries we have made along the way, we want to argue that users relate to their own fan engagement in complex and meta-reflexive ways that are not necessarily, or solely, related to expansion, consumption or evaluation. Rather, their practices also reflect a sort of playful desire to re-live certain experiences, prolong them and give them a manifestation in the real world.

We would like to propose a model that incorporates networked reception in our understanding of how users relate to transmedial worlds and includes all the aspects that we have identified in the course of our investigations: The aesthetics/worldness of the transmedial world, the drive of “users”/fans towards different forms of experience and different modes of consumption (also based on the mental image individual users have of the transmedial world), and the specific affordances of the platforms on which they engage with the world (for instance, books: personal interpretation and individual consumption; game worlds: inhabiting the world, social experience).

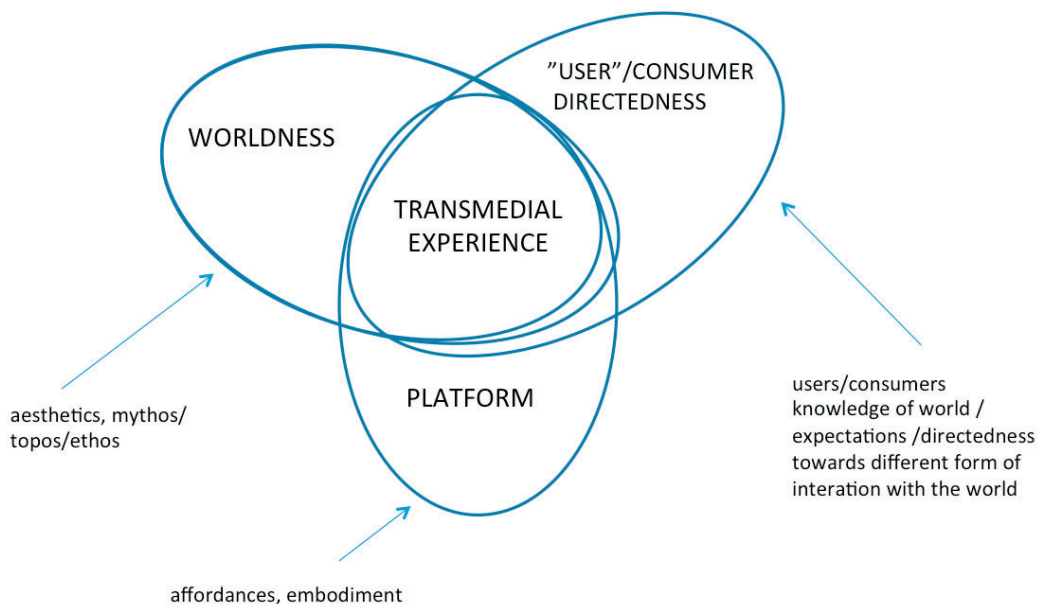


Fig 1: A transmedial experience model (individual perspective)

The second insight is that most individuals are no longer isolated in their engagement with a transmedial world. In a world of constant “second screening”, it only takes a click and a few strokes on the keypad to connect to other users. Acts of reception in a networked world are nearly always related to other people’s experience of the same media products as we have demonstrated with our two cases. We can zoom out from our single user and consider that a lot of contemporary reception happens in a networked way with other users, be it related to a transmedial world or popular media products in general. However, transmedial worlds (which, by definition, span several platforms and formats) provide users with the possibility not only of sharing reception but also producing texts that reflect and capture other users’ engagements on their platform of choice. Thus, we need to understand both the elements that feed into the single user transmedial experience and the power of the reception network to comprehend fully the acts of social exchange (such as the *Game of Thrones* reaction videos or the #IbelieveinSherlock tag), which are becoming an integral part of many users’ transmedial world engagement. Living in a world of networked reception practices means that users adopt a reflexive attitude and are prone to turn their own experiences (or acts of aesthetic reception) of transmedial worlds into something to be shared and re-experienced by other fans in loose communities of independent individuals. Distant from each other in the real world, they are all together in the imaginary universe of the transmedial world even if only for a moment.

Notes

- 1 We shall illustrate how media producers are also inspired by fans in the second of our cases, *Sherlock*.
- 2 We understand networks through the lens of “networked individualism” in the sense that Rainie and Wellman (2011) have described it – that is, we believe that contemporary society is made of millions of small networks with an individual user at their center, a user who interacts with many other users simultaneously, connected to them through loosely-knit and fragmented networks.
- 3 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78juOpTM3tE>
- 4 Found in <http://believeinsherlock.tumblr.com>, which is a huge repository of fan creations.

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