

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

Monetary and Deliberate: Measuring Transmedia Narrative Design via an Analytical Tool

This thesis is presented for the degree of Master of Research (Fine Arts) of Curtin University

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other qualification in any university.

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Abstract

Transmedia is a mixed-medium mode of storytelling that has undergone much analysis in academia (Freeman, 2015; Edmond, 2015). This Master of Research thesis is an attempt to map the methodology and design choices of transmedia texts via a categorical framework. In doing so, the terms Monetary and Deliberate transmedia are offered (MT/DT). This theory is supported by a three-principled analytical tool that measures from texts: the introduction of content, the roles fulfilled by each piece of media (and the relationships between them), and the quality of experience offered to consumers and participants through transmedia's unique delivery. By applying such principles, a transmedia text's ability to perform as either Monetary or deliberate (or a mixture of both) further investigates its design choices and functions. Theorising MT/DT categorisation considers the works of Henry Jenkins (2006), as well as other theorists such as Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (2013), Marsha Kinder (1991a), Drew Davidson (2010), and Andrea Phillips (2012).

In this thesis, MT/DT is applied to two case studies: an original creative practice by the author, and the American television series *Nathan for You (NFY)* (2013). The creative practice, titled *Prism Girl*, was conducted throughout 2019 and consisted of: a narrative-focused music album (published on Spotify and YouTube), a videogame, and an interactive web story that shows similar design choices to an alternate reality game (Connolly, Stansfield & Hainey, 2011). Uniting *Prism Girl*'s album, videogame, and website presented a cohesive transmedia narrative. Mixed data was collected from participants, consisting of performance metrics (number of streams/downloads (Figures 7-10)) as well as a survey that collected free form answers. The second case study, *NFY*, was chosen for its unique quality of entertainment, as well as its lack of presence in published academic works. The author of

this thesis aims to offer a new perspective on the series through the context of transmedia analysis — asserting that *NFY*'s positive critical reception is owed to its self-reflexive process, at times made possible exclusively through transmedia storytelling.

After applying the three principles of transmedia design to both case studies, the author comments on each text's ability to operate as either Monetary or Deliberate transmedia. The author then makes an argument for MT/DT categorisation in the educational and professional settings, suggesting that artists and students alike can learn more of the design choices behind compelling transmedia stories by considering the three principles — content, the role of the pieces of media (and their relationships), and the quality of the unified experience — this thesis explores.

The creative practice component of this research is entirely digital. Its three components (video game, website, and music album) are linked below for accessibility purposes.

Website: <https://prismgrowth.wordpress.com/>

Videogame: <https://prismdevelopmentstudios.itch.io/prism-girl>

Album: <https://open.spotify.com/album/0j4wsGaDl1W3Rdbc5e29UD>

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is no surprise in the contemporary media landscape to see every film, book, comic, videogame, and television series, be pushed to the absolute limits of diversification. It is also no shock to consumers to know that the latest Marvel film, for example, would have its release accompanied by a special comic book issue, a tie-in videogame, and perhaps a myriad of online content to market the film. Years ago, such diversification of a franchise might have been an interesting event. The first time the *Ninja Turtles* characters were plastered onto a cereal box would have sent preteens into a fan-fuelled frenzy — a trend that may continue for *Ninja Turtles* themed arcade machines and lunch boxes. Such expansions, and new opportunities to forge relationships with consumers, were identified by theorist Marsha Kinder (1991a) as transmedia intertextuality. But this diversification has slowly become less an anomaly and more the norm for franchises, with consumers perhaps even building up an immunity to the onslaught of endorsed figurines, mobile phone apps, spinoff television shows, film adaptations, and videogames. Searching for Marvel on the Google Play app store, for example, provides an endless list of possibilities: action games, role playing games, comic dossiers, strategy games, puzzle games, trading card guides, Lego tie-ins, and more on the mobile phone platform alone. Marvel is not alone in this diversification either. For every possible option to expand a franchise, that opportunity has likely already been taken — including success from *Pokémon*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Sopranos*, DC Comics, Disney, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and many others. Spinoffs, adaptations, videogames, and merchandising abound.

These expansions by franchises are ostensibly aiming to capitalise on new and emerging industries. When you have existing fans of a comic book, why not introduce them to your

latest videogame? All it takes is a transplant or adaptation of your recognisable characters and you are on the path to profit, although financial success is not always the priority for such media diversification. Theorist Henry Jenkins (2006) has famously offered the term transmedia storytelling: combining the unique qualities of separate media platforms to create one unified, and coherent, experience across several outlets. Ideally, this asks storytellers to do more than just put Luke Skywalker on a cereal box — they need to use that presence to tell a new component of the story, placed inside the ongoing universe. Consider *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003): This roleplaying videogame does more than just give the player control over lightsabres so that they can be occupied with another *Star Wars* product — it builds upon the existing *Star Wars* universe with new characters, lore, history, and events. The instalment saw sweeping critical acclaim, and received several industry awards, mostly due to its compelling writing and additions to the *Star Wars* mythology (BAFTA, 2004). Ongoing expansions such as the aforementioned videogame, have influenced the forming of the Star Wars Story Group: a committee of 11 individuals who keep track of canonical *Star Wars* lore. This group was also formed in the wake of Disney's buyout of the *Star Wars* brand, posing a reorientation of the vast franchise lore and history — perhaps both an industrial and artistically motivated choice.

There are other franchises which apply transmedia storytelling to its best effect. Popular series *The Matrix* has pushed its presence across film, videogames, comics, and the Internet to not only fortify its mythology, but to also introduce elements of interactivity for consumers. Other pieces of media hinge inherently upon a diversified approach — including visual albums such as Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1982) and Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016). Sometimes the delivery of the content itself is part of the experience, such as singer

songwriter Björk's *Biophilia* (2011) — a music album published in segments across several interactive mobile phone apps. At times, an interactive piece of multimedia springs forth into the world, warranting the term alternate reality game (ARG) (Connolly, Stansfield and Hainey, 2011). ARGs typically mix real life elements of gameplay, with a digital product that corresponds to fan's actions throughout the interactive experience. Sometimes an ARG is used to virally market a product, including film *The Dark Knight* (2008) and the videogame *Halo 2* (2004). Other times, ARGs are used to influence a bigger piece of the text, such as the film *Pandemic* (2011), which used a digital and online scavenger hunt in tandem with the screened portion of the narrative.

By forging your text in pursuit of transmedia storytelling, a can of worms can be opened. As the storyteller you must be clear with your purpose. Are you seeking profits by transplanting your recognisable brand like Marvel Comics does so often? Such diversification into film provided an important revenue stream for the comics brand after a decline of readership in the late 1990s — even described as “embracing licensing to emerge from bankruptcy” (Johnson, 2012, pg. 5). Or perhaps you are looking to create the newest genre bending experience that leaps between media like *Pandemic*. This essentially leads to the need to carefully consider design choices. How are you delivering the transmedia story? What platforms are you using? Who is the target audience? Are you seeking financial success, critical acclaim, or a mixture of both? Will you use elements of ARG design? How many fragments will the story be broken into? Is this a completely new fictional world, or building upon one that already exists? Is it even fiction? Such questions are virtually unavoidable, as beyond Jenkins' popular terminology of transmedia storytelling, offered definitions are lacking in precision. This is also exaggerated since transmedia storytelling speaks to a

complex phenomenon, utilising several ways of approaching narratives and media itself (Gambarato, 2013). Due to its enigmatic nature, transmedia theory is tempting to develop, to better understand its existing functions, roles, and relationships formed with consumers.

Transmedia analysis and theory therefore has a strong presence in academic writing. Jenkins himself frequently returns to the topic, offering new ideas to the foundations of his original thoughts (2010; 2011). Some theorists attempt to trace its origins (Freeman, 2015). Others offer categorisations for different types of transmedia texts (Davidson, 2010), and some try to trace its purpose and functions in the greater media landscape (Gambarato, 2013; Phillips, 2012). Transmedia theory is also observed in more abstract relations to media, being applied to journalism (Gambarato & Tárcia, 2016) and education (Tárcia, 2019). This thesis is yet another attempt to better understand the function of and purpose served by transmedia texts as I state a case for my own approach — the categorisation of Monetary and Deliberate transmedia (MT/DT).

My theory is offered to differentiate between transmedia texts that put financial gain and exposure at the forefront, and those that use transmedia storytelling for its potential to push the boundaries of entertainment and media. The categorisation is not intended as a definite binary, as some texts may share qualities of both MT and DT; instead, it functions as a pair of gradients. In tracing the qualities of MT and DT, I have also developed a complimentary analytical tool which proposes three principles of transmedia design. These three principles address: the introduction of new content, the unique roles fulfilled by each piece of content (and the relationship between them), and the unified experience attaining a certain quality unique to transmedia. I suggest that texts which fulfill all three principles generally represent DT, but even then, still pursue MT goals as well. In addition, the

principles can act as a guideline to assess where a text might perform better in terms of design. With my categorisation and complementary three-principled tool of analysis, I seek to address the research statement: my categorisation of MT/DT assists in unearthing the design choices and function of transmedia texts, with a purpose that can be applied in the professional and educational settings.

To demonstrate my theory, I analyse two case studies. The first, titled *Prism Girl*, is a transmedia creative practice that I produced and coordinated across 2019. The practice sought to address the impacts of transmedia storytelling on the music listening experience. *Prism Girl* consisted of a published album, videogame, and interactive web narrative — three components which unified for a dispersed and coherent story. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected from the practice, which showed the number of people engaging with the text, as well as their thoughts on the transmedia elements used in its design. The second case study is the television series *Nathan for You (NFY)* (2013). Academic analysis of *NFY* is present, although lacking in quantity (Finnegan, 2016; McLeod, 2018). As well, it seems that no works specifically address the series as a case of transmedia, which I argue it to be, generally because *NFY*, during its four-season run, utilised several media platforms existing outside of television to push its storytelling to unexpected, experimental heights for a unified experience.

In chapter two, I present a literature review where I assess the transmedia analysis and theory to date — highlighting possible gaps that I wish to fill with my work of MT/DT. In chapter three I assess the works of three transmedia theorists: Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (2013), Andrea Phillips (2012), and Drew Davidson (2010). Specifically, I synthesise approaches by these theorists that trace transmedia design and categorisations. Where I

see success in these theories, I apply them to my own MT/DT categorisation, to strengthen its use. As well, I contrast MT/DT with these theories to highlight how my thesis differs from previously published works. In chapters four and five, I introduce the case studies *Prism Girl* and *NFY*. After offering general critical analysis, I apply my MT/DT categorisation and three principles of design to demonstrate a better understanding of the texts as a result. Finally, in chapter six, I conclude my thesis by revisiting my research goal and addressing the strengths and weaknesses of my MT/DT theory, its possible future use, and its viability in professional and educational settings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Transmedia is a term increasingly discussed throughout media studies (Freeman, 2018; Edmond, 2015). The origin of the word appears in works by Marsha Kinder, who wrote of “transmedia intertextuality” (1991a, pg. 1). Kinder described transmedia as a franchising tool, one that assists the expansion of brands, characters, and content across mass entertainment — ultimately influencing consumer choices and knowledge of those brands. As an example, Kinder analysed the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* franchise — a brand that has seen its characters appear across comics, television, film, videogames, and even onto juice boxes and breakfast cereals. Kinder writes:

Even in the early days of radio and television, the purchase of a sponsor’s product or a program-related premium was frequently used to rate a show’s popularity, but by the 1980s this intertextuality and its commodification had been greatly elaborated and intensified (1991a, pg. 40).

By transplanting recognisable characters into new pieces of media and products, an association effect is had on the consumer — due to existing context from the other mediums. For example, a consumer may be more inclined to buy a certain cereal because it features the *Ninja Turtles* character Master Splinter, who is a recognisably good character presented in the comics and television series. Interviews conducted by Kinder (1991b) also found that numerous children identified with the *Ninja Turtles* characters, exhibiting parasocial relationships fortified by the media.

Although the term transmedia originated in Kinder’s work, the topic was further popularised by theorist Henry Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media*

Collide (2006). Jenkins offered the term transmedia storytelling — diverging from Kinder's interest in consumerism and commercial gain, and instead focusing on the quality of experience made possible by combining media. Jenkins writes:

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—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction (2006, pg. 95-96).

The action of diversifying the content itself is where Jenkins' theory diverges from Kinder's. Plainly, a cereal box featuring Master Splinter does nothing for the continued story of the franchise. However, perhaps Master Splinter's appearance in a *Ninja Turtles* videogame may directly relate to his character's experiences in the television series or comic. His appearance in the game may even provide context for a plot explored in the cartoon. Therefore, both the videogame and the television series would play their parts in telling a diverse, but cohesive, transmedia story. Such a delivery would also encourage consumers to experience every media component used so that they can understand the entire narrative. Jenkins' emphasis on transmedia's effect on narrative, rather than industrial gain as Kinder suggests, has had greater uptake in discourse about the subject. Jenkins continues to emphasise this characteristic, more recently stating: "Transmedia is an adjective, not a noun. Transmedia needs to modify something. [Transmedia] implies some kind of structured or systematic relationship between multiple media platforms and practices" (2016, pg. 220). Jenkins' transmedia research continues to be cited in a variety of academic writing, perhaps receiving more coverage than Kinder's work on the topic (Menke et al.,

2016; Aharoni, 2019). Jenkins' work has also been appropriated across a broader variety of contexts including journalism (Gambarato & Tárcia, 2016), marketing (Zeiser, 2015), and education (Tárcia, 2019).

Jenkins' theories on transmedia were indicative of a changing media landscape and the content-consumer relations that would flourish. As an example, he analysed the use of multimedia through *The Matrix* franchise. *The Matrix* series has been delivered across film, comics, animation, video games, and the Internet, creating a sprawling fictional world that ties each instalment together for a rich cohesive story. In particular, the second film *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), was released in tandem with the videogame *Enter the Matrix* (2003), to convey an experience both watched and played by the audience. Emphasising canonical importance, the videogame featured an hour of exclusive live action content, intersecting its story with that of the film. As Jenkins says, "The Matrix is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium" (2006, pg. 95). This quote holds relevancy today, as the average media consumer continues to be conditioned to develop new skills in experiencing texts that demand more than one medium to convey their narratives. No longer do consumers just passively watch or read, they are expected to seek out and play the video game expansion, discuss the story online, scour the Internet for answers to a plot point, or follow the official social media page.

As Jenkins' comments on *Enter the Matrix* continue to be relevant, so do the design choices behind the text itself. Part of the reason why *Enter the Matrix* impressed audiences, was its ability to intertwine videogame storytelling directly with the film. Although videogames were by no means a new concept, their place alongside more traditional media, such as film,

was open to question. This contrasts with the matured artistic integrity and ambition with which they are associated today (Bourgonjon, Vandermeersche & Rutten, 2017). Now consider the contrast of design between *Enter the Matrix* to an older transmedia text — *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). The novel used a transmedia marketing campaign through mock newspapers (Freeman, 2015). As well, the greater franchise soon saw musicals, radio plays, comics, and film (Wolf, 2012). Thus, Transmedia toolsets have since grown from traditional formats like literature, theatre, radio, television, and film, to emerging formats such as the Internet, social media, visual and audio streaming, videogames, augmented reality, and virtual reality (Billings, 2011; Norman, 2010). This ongoing growth influences ambitions in storytelling, with some transmedia texts even making their way into the real world — utilising performance.

The film *The Dark Knight* (2008) did just that, using a viral Internet marketing campaign that placed its audience's actions in the real world. Fans visited designated locations advertised through websites, donning costumes to signify their participation, and undertaking the roles of players solving clues. This mode of mixed gameplay is referred to as an alternate reality game (ARG), "a form of narrative often involving multiple media and gaming elements to tell a story that might be affected by participants' actions" (Connolly, Stansfield & Hainey, 2011, p. 1389). ARGs typically place immersion at the forefront, while using team-based objectives and player collaboration for shared rewards (Dondlinger & McLeod, 2015). The term is attributed to Internet forum moderator Sean Stacey (O'Flynn, 2017), after Steven Spielberg's film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) used such a marketing campaign (it should be acknowledged that *A.I.*'s ARG only served to market the film and had no bearing on the film's narrative or delivery, as a transmedia experience would). While often being referred

to separately, and predating Jenkins' popularisation of transmedia terminology, ARGs visibly thrive on mixed media storytelling. Therefore, an overlap exists between the practice of transmedia and ARGs despite the separate terminology, with the main difference being that ARGs are directly affected by player input in the form of real-world actions.

While *The Matrix* and *The Dark Knight* created critically successful transmedia experiences, not every use of mixed media is met with the same praise. In fact, some commandeer the traits of transmedia for pragmatic commercial success — operating more like Kinder's idea of transmedia intertextuality, while aesthetically appearing to be Jenkins' form of transmedia storytelling. One franchise I associate with this is the Marvel Comics brand after its purchase by Disney. Superheroes first popularised in the comic book world, such as Iron Man, Spiderman, Captain America, and more, continue to have their escapades extended, transplanted, and adapted into film — a business model dubbed the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) (Scott, 2017). These characters and their stories also continue to spill out across a variety of media outside of cinema, including videogames, merchandising, television, and web-based content. With each of these expansions, the mythologies behind the superhero characters are further explored. By August of 2019, the MCU business model grossed over \$5 billion USD (Bean, 2019), making it possibly one of those most lucrative examples of transmedia design today. However, it should be noted that MCU films do not exclusively seek to be an example of ideal transmedia, and often use the original comics as a foundation for completely new narratives. Not only does the MCU rake in profits, its use of licensing also contributes to a large and dedicated fanbase. Suzanne Scott writes:

The Marvel Cinematic Universe might be cited as prime evidence that we have reached peak fan-centric transmedia planning. [...] the MCU did not invent the concept of

transmedia franchising, but it has undeniably popularized it and proved the most prolific and profitable textual example of it (2017, pg. 1045).

Marvel's popular transmedia worldbuilding is not alone in the mainstream. Other franchises are transplanting their characters through a myriad of media, such as HBO's treatment of *Watchmen* (2019), *Pokémon*, the *Harry Potter* series, *Game of Thrones* (2011), and many more. All these franchises are pushed from one media realm to another — often for strong commercial, and sometimes critical, success.

While the MCU does take advantage of transmedia design, perhaps it does not always realise its full potential in the same terms as Henry Jenkins spoke of *The Matrix* franchise. While just like *The Matrix*, the MCU does thrust its cinema-successful characters into the format of videogames, it is perhaps done in a manner that only seeks to licence already proven, successful characters into a new platform for further profit — putting the potential of transmedia storytelling in the background. This contrasts with the self-reflexive and ambitious storytelling executed through *Enter the Matrix*, which sought to create a dispersed and intersecting story, wielding the best capabilities of each medium for a stronger and unified experience. For example, the latest MCU videogame: *Marvel's Avengers* (2020), invited fans to experience what it is like to assume the control of characters such as Iron Man and Captain America. The release was even prefaced with tie-in novels and comics. However, *Marvel's Avengers* has been criticised for poor design choices as a videogame, piggy-backing its effort off the successful MCU films (Carter, 2020). Josh Harmon (2020) writes:

There are plenty of games I would be happy to play and replay forever, but that's because those games are innately fun and varied in their gameplay loops, not because

designers and in-game economists and moneymen from the publishers have all worked together to give me an infinite checklist designed to maximize engagement statistics and per-player spend on cosmetics (2020, para. 19).

Perhaps the content itself was not best suited as a game. In addition, other than bearing the MCU characters, *Marvel's Avengers* plot has little impact on its respective franchise — making it an isolated experience unlike the deliberated *Enter the Matrix*, which impacted its respective franchise's canonical lore. This Marvel expansion is unlike the innovative Marvel Cinematic Universe brand of storytelling, which pushed the boundaries of the established lore and characters for a cohesive experience across multiple titles for brand synergy (Johnson, 2012). This encourages a viewer to critically assess what purpose the videogame *Marvel's Avengers* serves for the brand's synergy.

Comparing criticism of *Marvel's Avengers* with the praise of *Enter the Matrix*, emphasises the latter's deliberate and coordinated effort to service the franchise as a whole — rather than prioritise profit. Like *Marvel's Avengers*, *Enter the Matrix* received some criticism for its gameplay elements. However, its ambitious transmedia storytelling meant the praise generally outweighed such criticism (Saltzman, 2003). Alex Porter (2003) emphasises the game's deliberate purpose in the franchise, describing the universe as fully realised:

The game is by no means a weak attempt to cash in on a franchise: Matrix creators [the Wachowskis] made sure its plot line connected to and expanded on the movies [...] The action runs parallel to the movies (2003, para. 2).

Enter the Matrix is not the only videogame to be so ambitious with its delivery. *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017), for example, diversified its content outside of the game itself, placing

narrative sensitive material throughout the player's personal computer as accessible files. This meant that players could scour their documents to find information on characters in the story. Another videogame, *Capsule Silence XXIV* (2016), was used to covertly release the music album of the same name by American band Anamanaguchi. In-game objectives which amounted to collecting virtual cassette tapes eventually gifted the player a free download of the band's new album. Such transmedia storytelling through videogames contrasts greatly with the role *Marvel's Avengers* served for its own franchise. Although it should be acknowledged that the Marvel franchise has had better received transmedia elements than the aforementioned videogame, such as the television series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013) — likewise to *The Matrix* franchise having critically-mediocre entries such as *The Matrix: Path of Neo* (2005) (Navarro, 2005). Regardless, this begs the question: Do texts like *Marvel's Avengers* push transmedia storytelling to its full potential? And this question can also be asked of many other commercially successful multimedia franchises such as *Pokémon*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Watchmen*. Perhaps investigating the contrasting design choices and functionality of such texts can exhibit trends in experiences that are either critically or commercially successful, or even a mixture of both.

Such attempts into assessing transmedia design has been made. For example, theorist Andrea Phillips (2012) speaks of West Coast and East Coast transmedia in the United States. She writes:

West Coast-style transmedia, more commonly called Hollywood or franchise transmedia, consists of multiple big pieces of media: feature films, video games, [...] On the other end of the spectrum, East Coast transmedia tends to be more interactive, and much more

web-centric. It overlaps heavily with the traditions of independent film, theatre, and interactive art (2012, pgs. 13-14).

Not only does Phillips stipulate which media and industries are more likely to represent either category, but also their expected limitations and possibilities. Phillips argues that iterations of West Coast transmedia are understandable and consumable on their own, while East Coast transmedia is a narrative woven between each release of the story — encouraging the consumer to experience each component to truly understand the narrative (more faithful to Jenkins' ideal transmedia storytelling). In this case, Phillips' reading of West Coast style aligns quite well with the *Marvel's Avengers* game. However, later in this thesis I will introduce more examples of texts that show a clash with Phillips' binary reading, arguing that more nuance is required to truly make an assessment.

Another reading of transmedia design offered is Drew Davidson's "pro-active and retro-active transmedia" (2010, pg. 10). This template seeks to differentiate between transmedia texts that are born outright with the goal of diversifying its narrative (*Enter the Matrix*) or those that are done as an afterthought (*Star Wars*, or *Harry Potter*). Davidson does not refer to either pro-active or retro-active transmedia as being bad or good, per se, just as a design choice consideration. Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (2013) links Davidson's theory to *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The independent film's narrative was supported with a televised (although entirely false) news feature of supposed true accounts. This helped to sell the sincerity of the deceiving found footage-genre film. This transmedia approach blurred reality surrounding the text, both fooling viewers and creating a sprawling experience through viral marketing. Upon release of the film, the transmedia elements outside of the

traditional screening supported an enriched viewing experience. Many were tricked into believing they were watching a true account.

While Davidson's interest in the timing of a transmedia story's inception is an interesting direction for analysis, it does little to indicate expected qualities or experiences. On the surface, a pro-active transmedia text may seem more likely to be genuine in the pursuit of storytelling, rather than wholly concerned with commercial gain. However, I argue that a compelling transmedia story can still be delivered through a retro-active process. For example, Alan Moore's critically acclaimed comic *Watchmen* (1986) is a text that has often been expanded and adapted, generally to the disgust of purist fans. Perhaps most infamously, director Zack Snyder's almost too-faithful film adaptation of the comic, *Watchmen* (2009), polarised the fanbase. More recently, HBO produced a sequel television series to the comic book's original events, now taking place in contemporary America. The series, *Watchmen* (2019), gained overwhelming critical acclaim, several Emmy Awards wins, and many other accolades (Variety Staff, 2020). A contributor to this acclaim is the sequel's added layers of cultural context to the original source material, cleverly building upon the comic's content (Rotten Tomatoes, 2019). Beyond delivering its narrative through television, the series was also promoted through the internet, using intertextual elements to expand upon characters and lore. This echoed the literary choices of the original *Watchmen* comic, which bookended chapters with fake newspaper articles, government documents, and character interviews to enrich its universe.

I have synthesised the theories on transmedia by Gambarato, Davidson, and Phillips, in pursuit of my own categorical theory: Monetary and Deliberate transmedia (MT/DT). MT/DT seeks to differentiate between texts that utilise transmedia to its full potential, and those

which wield it with pragmatic, calculated financial success as priority. I suggest MT is most frequently observable among major media franchises which tentpole content from an originally successful text — such as *Pokémon*, *Game of Thrones*, the MCU, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. These franchises generally utilise qualities of transmedia, such as dispersing characters or settings, but I suggest do not always realise the full potential of transmedia storytelling. In contrast, texts that are DT fulfil an experience closer to Jenkins' ideal view of transmedia storytelling. Such examples, I assert make the most of opportunities only possible through transmedia, and ultimately deliver an experience that can only be realised through transmedia design. For example, I have investigated the ways in which videogames *Marvel's Avengers* and *Enter the Matrix* differ in design choices, narrative functions, and roles held in their respective franchises above. Considering these examples again, *Enter the Matrix* not only functions as a transmedia text, but it also delivers an experience perhaps only possible through combined media — warranting its design philosophy. Meanwhile, *Marvel's Avengers* does function as a transmedia text in several ways, appropriating characters from the comics and films into a videogame but tells a story that perhaps didn't require a dispersed narrative to do so — acting less as a coordinated transmedia narrative and more as a franchised method to take advantage of the videogame market. Therefore, I would categorise *Enter the Matrix* as DT and *Marvel's Avengers* as MT.

At surface level my theory may seem very similar to existing categorisations, such as those offered by Andrea Phillips — namely MT bearing a resemblance to West Coast transmedia, which favours mainstream media platforms and the Hollywood treatment. However, MT/DT is not so much concerned with origins, intentions, or chosen platforms to disperse the media, rather with the design choices served for the greater story. To illustrate, consider

Marvels' *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013) (*AoS*) television series. Distributed by Walt Disney Television, and produced by ABC and Marvel Television, *AoS* would seem to fulfill a role like the *Marvel's Avengers* videogame: using the aesthetics of transmedia storytelling to diversify a recognisably profitable brand. Such production and mainstream release would warrant *AoS* the label of West Coast transmedia, as would *Marvel's Avengers*. However, I would categorise *AoS* as DT, unlike my MT labelling of *Marvel's Avengers*. *AoS* was not merely a new coat of paint on already popular characters — it cleverly utilised the existing and new lore from both the comics and the films, as well as allowing ongoing additions to the MCU, to affect the show. "Of all the creative and genre-expanding shows to debut in the last few years, none have been quite so fascinating to watch as the wildly ambitious narrative experiment of ABC's [*AoS*]" writes critic Mary McNamara (2014, para. 1). "[*AoS*] created a whole new sort of television show: One that must support, and change with, the plot twists of its film family" (McNamara, 2014, Para. 4). Plot points that would bookend Marvel blockbusters such as *The Avengers* (2012) would directly set up opening storylines for *AoS*. For example, a downtrodden city lying decimated after the climax battles of the film would have to be cleaned up and cared for by the characters of the television series. The films posed ramifications for the television show. Sharing not only a close relationship with the films, but also being directly affected by them, shows to me storytelling that attempts to execute what is perhaps only possible through transmedia means — a unique harmony between two different media platforms. This analysis points towards the overall analytical framework I adopt to analyse the two case studies in this dissertation in depth.

Three principles of transmedia design

These three principles of transmedia design serve as a complementary tool to Fraser Palamara's theory of Capitalist and Deliberate transmedia.

Storytellers are encouraged to consider the impacts of design choices on transmedia narratives that can effect: (1) the use of multimedia content, (2) the roles served by each piece of media and the relationships between them, and (3) to what extent the unified experience makes use of transmedia's unique qualities.

- (1) **The introduction of new content (characters, participants, plot, lore, etc)**
- (2) **Each piece of media fulfils a unique purpose and poses a synergetic relationship with the other platforms of media**
- (3) **An achieved experience only possible through the unique qualities of transmedia design**

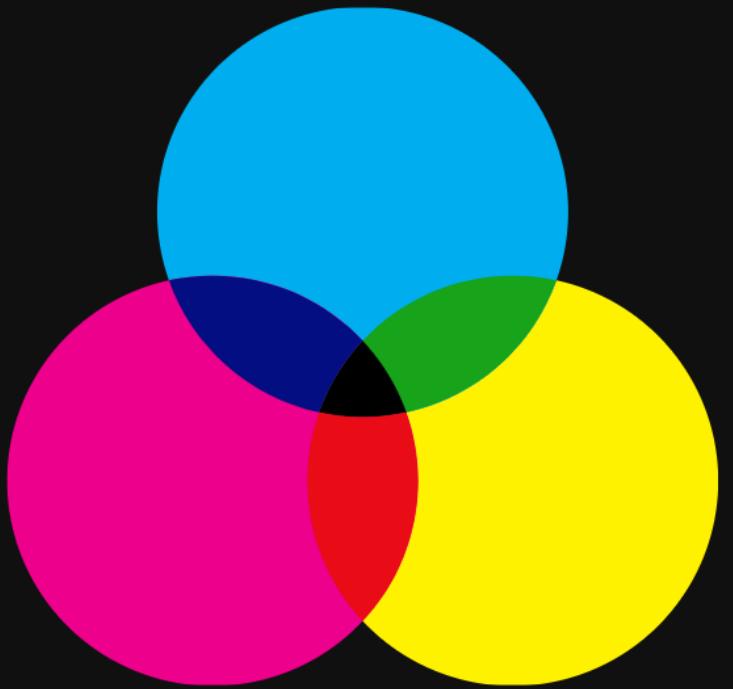


Figure 1. The complimentary three principles of transmedia design, used to assist MT/DT categorisation

In support of my MT/DT theory, I have constructed three principles of design (Figure 1) to locate the heartbeat of transmedia narratives. This design philosophy echoes the sentiments of Jenkins (2016), who stresses the effect of transmedia to modify relationships and functions of texts as part of the larger scheme. These principles address: (1) the introduction of content, (2) the role each piece of content plays (as well as the relationship between them), and (3) the unified unique quality of experience only achievable through transmedia means. These three principles are not separate from MT/DT categorisation, but

act as a complementary framework to assist in the categorisation process. I suggest transmedia texts that generally fulfill all three principles are likely to be a case of DT — while those that fail to excel simultaneously in all three usually fall under the MT category. I encourage those who apply the framework to consider to what extent the text excels under each principle, bearing in mind that the text may show qualities consistent with both MT and DT at varying levels — the categorisation acts like a gradient. While a text may fulfill all three principles as a case of DT to some extent, it may still be lacking in certain areas. Thus, the three principles can assist in considering how to better the text's delivery. This is also a useful perspective to apply as the storyteller yourself, assisting you to critique your own work through the lens of the three principles. Unlike the aforementioned theories Davidson (2010) and Phillips (2012), MT/DT and its supporting three principles make no reference to the types of media used, the identity of story makers, the origins of the text, or the timing of when the text was made to be a transmedia story. It is wholly based present design choices.

The reasoning behind my MT/DT categorisation, as well as the supporting three principles of design, have been synthesised from the theories of Davidson, Phillips, Gambarato, Jenkins, and Kinder. I suggest that current transmedia analysis is lacking in an approach that properly considers the nuance involved with the design of such texts. In the next chapter, I will explain my process behind theorising MT/DT, and illuminate which gaps in research I intend to address. I address the purpose of categorisations by Davidson, Phillips, and Gambarato that I agree and disagree with. Ultimately, my assessment of such categories is used to sharpen the language and purpose of my own transmedia categorisation, as well as its supporting three principles of design.

Chapter 3: Theorising MT/DT and The Supporting Three Principles of Design

My categorisation of Monetary and Deliberate transmedia has been synthesised over the course of roughly a two-year period, which began while developing my *Prism Girl* creative practice. Early ideas of my theory were influenced Henry Jenkins' (2006) idea of a Convergence Culture:

[Convergence Culture is the] flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want (2006, pg. 2-3).

Jenkins applies this definition to represent the contemporary media landscape. To help make sense of this, Jenkins also offers a way into discerning between participants existing within it. He states:

[Convergence] is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process [...] Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers (2006, pg. 18).

It was also in this same publication that Jenkins famously offered his extended thoughts on transmedia storytelling. This raises the question, if transmedia storytelling exists within this convergent landscape, and the convergence is mainly driven by parties either top-down or bottom-up, then what different kinds of transmedia experiences may arise from movement

in these two directions? What differing qualities may be seen in a transmedia text that could be classified as top-down, as opposed to bottom-up? Perhaps addressing such questions can illuminate the design choices behind critically acclaimed and compelling transmedia texts.

An attempt to answer these questions led me to develop my own reading of Monetary and Deliberate transmedia (MT and DT). I sought to categorise transmedia texts based on design choices and delivered experiences — particularly texts either born from financial priority and entertainment corporations (monetary), or from boundary pushing storytellers that utilise transmedia for its unique possibilities (deliberate). This argument hinges on the way that MT texts generally exist for purely economic opportunities and do not utilise transmedia storytelling to its full potential — playing into a popular perception of franchised media “promoting conformity and creating legions of consumer zombies who will follow wherever the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, Pokemon, or HeMan may lead” (Askwith & Gray, 2008, pg. 523). This meant that such texts may have qualified as transmedia by dispersing their content across multiple platforms (usually to further the franchise) but did not utilise integral qualities of transmedia that deliberately unify each medium for a fully realised transmedia experience (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004). I find such examples abundant amongst (although not exclusive to) big-budget adaptations from existing texts that previously thrived in their original medium. I argue there is no warranted creative reasoning for extending the franchise via transmedia means in such cases — aside from commercial gain.

A specific example MT would be the film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), an adaptation of the videogame *Tomb Raider* (1996). The game was critically well received for reasons that were unique to its media platform: player control, graphics, game design choices, and

atmospheric immersion for players. The game was also a major commercial success, making the option to adapt it into a film financially viable. However, whereas the videogame was ambitious and earned positive recognition, the same cannot be said for the film adaptation. Generally, the film reconfigured existing iconography, settings, storylines, and characters, from the cult classic game now starring the established and popular film star: Angelina Jolie. Thus, the critically acclaimed aspects exclusive to videogame design were left behind: gameplay, graphics, level design, player immersion, and so on. The film was poorly critically received, and drawbacks to its design showcased a loss of quality through adaptation. Film critic Todd McCarthy (2001) wrote: "*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* has the distinction of being a major motion picture that's far less imaginative, and quite a bit more stupid, than the interactive game it's based on" (2001, para. 1). Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2014) also makes mention of the sexualised presence of Jolie's version of the character:

The casting of Angelina Jolie in the two movie adaptations of *Tomb Raider* (2001, 2003) meant that each film focussed overtly on the male gaze (for example, via cinematic shots of Jolie climbing out of water, wearing skintight clothing or showering) (para. 12). MacCallum-Stewart acknowledges that Croft's original overtly feminine appearance (notably her infamous large breasts) can be interpreted as both sexualised but also empowering for female gamers when combined with her world-trekking and death-defying stunts. For many, assuming control of her through the videogame titles evokes a sense of empowerment in the traditionally male-dominated and servicing videogame industry. However, discourse around her as a character and purpose served in videogames and film adaptations instigates the discussion of negative sexualisation and effects of the male-gaze objectifying the character.

Content is removed for copyright reasons. The figure was an image of a *PC Gamer* magazine cover, Volume 4, No. 8, August 1997. The image featured the headline “Lara’s Back!” with the videogame character (Lara Croft) posing in a black bikini and holding a gun.

Figure 2. Lara Croft was heavily sexualised in media outside of the original game series, especially in magazines aimed at the male dominated gaming scene of the late 90s (*PC Gamer*, 1997)

I argue that the film adaptations of the Lara Croft character remove the agency and empowerment offered in the videogame playing experience, and are instead replaced with observation of Jolie’s sexualisation on screen. I suggest this transformation of the character not only removes her videogame-unique skillset of offering a powerful experience to gamers, but also redefines her on screen much more as male-driven eye candy. Although Croft was always recognised as physically attractive in the original videogame series, much of her sexualisation came from extracurricular media coverage such as magazine covers (figure 2) and even a *Playboy* issue. I argue these film adaptations sought to capitalise on the sexualised appearance of Croft popularised in such magazines, providing little unification with the mothership videogame texts for transmedial benefit. In this case, the *Tomb Raider* film fails to utilise the qualities unique to transmedia storytelling, and virtually reappropriated already existing (and successful) iconography for purely financial gain, with little thought given to how the boundaries of storytelling could be pushed through multimedia opportunities offered by the move from game to film. Unlike the videogame *Enter the Matrix* (2003), there were no meaningful links or convergence of story between the *Tomb Raider* film and game. The viewing experience of the film does nothing to impact the videogame, and vice versa. Thus, it is an example of MT with little to warrant any level of DT classification.

While MT appropriates the presence of transmedia for franchising, brand building, and commercial gain — DT represents texts that use dispersed media to wholly push the boundaries of storytelling and create unique experiences only possible through such means. While such texts are not exempt from seeking commercial success, I suggest their design places the storytelling itself as priority. In 2010, record producer Kanye West released his latest album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, across more than just the music listening experience. The instalment was delivered in tandem with a short film titled *Runaway* (2010). *Runaway* presented an entirely original narrative, accompanied by tracks from *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Themes originally delivered through the music alone, were expanded and reconceptualised through the film's use of visuals to accompany the original listening experience: like Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) or Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1982). Antero Garcia (2013) identifies West's unique album releases and interactivity with fans as being a transmedia landmark in rapidly evolving hip-hop culture. *Wall Street Journal* writer Jozan Cummings (2010), reviewing the film, said it brought the album's music to life. I find such a statement telling of transmedia engagement that can elicit an emotional or otherwise positive response through diversified media — as well as the film instalment fortifying the music listening experience. In this case, West expands the storytelling of the album by utilising the traits often exclusive to visual media, including acting, screenplay, cinematography, choreography, editing, and directing. Therefore, I suggest this text is an example of DT — delivering an experience that may only be possible through transmedia, warranting such design choices. Importantly, given West's commercial success, this text demonstrates how transmedia can be DT while also achieving MT goals.

As the founding of my MT/DT theory was influenced by Jenkins' theory of the top-down bottom-up media paradigm, some likeness can be drawn between the two. For example, just like Jenkins, I recognise perhaps some design choices that present a correlation between transmedia texts either made by media conglomerates, or more independent artists. Plainly, MT may seem like top-down media, as DT is to bottom-up media. However, I do insist there are several properties of MT/DT theory that separate it from Jenkins' ideas. Most obviously, Jenkins is mainly concerned with the origins of texts and who is making them. While often there can be an overlap between the drivers of say bottom-up media and what I recognise as DT — they are not mutually exclusive. I contend that media entities, and artists working under their supervision, still have the agency to create compelling DT (one such example is *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* outlined in the literature review). I am not concerned with the origins of texts, but rather the experience they deliver, and the design choices that led to that delivery.

As explained above, alongside the MT/DT categorisation, I am introducing a framework to analyse transmedia texts across three principles. In developing this framework, I have considered the works of other theorists who have also applied frameworks when considering the design of transmedia. Significant contributions have been made by Andrea Philips (2012), Drew Davidson (2010), and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (2013). The review below shows the reasoning for my own approach, which synthesises aspects of their ideas and sets aside others.

Renira Rampazzo Gambarato

Gamabratto (2013) has written extensively on design choices behind transmedia texts.

Gambarato cites the importance for doing so, in reference to the subjectivity of transmedia language:

Theoretical and analytical considerations around the development of transmedia projects are evolving, but are still widely open, probably because transmedia storytelling is a relatively new subject that does not yet have its own specific methods and methodology of analysis. Moreover, transmedia projects are complex phenomena involving multiple dimensions, such as narrative, cultural context, marketing, business models, and legal framework (2013, pg. 81).

This belief in transmedia's liberal use and language, is one held by other theorists as well (Magro, 2014). During the early formation of my MT/DT theory, I was interested in seeking an absolute and objective binary categorisation for texts. Instead, I now see the benefit of regarding MT and DT as axes on a graph — texts may perform in several ways that represent either MT, DT, that is, operating as a mixture of both. This level of nuance resonates with Gambarato's view that transmedia texts are complex and involve several dimensions. This understanding is also echoed through my complementary analytical framework addressing three principles of transmedia design.

It is common for transmedia theory to stress the relationship between the text and the consumer. Gambarato investigates this through the lens of opportunities of interactivity.

She writes:

A crucial component of [transmedia] is interaction, but moreover participation. An interactive project allows the audience to relate to it somehow, for instance, by pressing

a button or control, deciding the path to experiencing it, but not being able to co-create and change the story; a participatory project invites the audience to engage in a way that expresses their creativity in a unique, and surprising manner, allowing them to influence the final result (2013, pg. 87).

Thus, Gambarato offers a binary view of such a design choice on interactivity: “open and closed” systems (2013, pg. 87). Open systems allow for player control and influence over a story, while closed systems cannot be directly affected by audiences, but may still be interactive to a degree. As an example of an open system, Gambarato cites the multi-platform live-action-drama series *Sofia’s Diary* (2003). *Sofia’s Diary* allowed for audiences to email and text message with the fictional protagonist of the story — voting for choices that affect its unfolding plot. While Gambarato offers an interesting viewpoint on interactivity, I would suggest this level of interactivity is more applicable to the definition of an alternate reality game (ARG) (Conolly, Stansfield & Hainey, 2011). The qualities of *Sofia’s Diary* that points to ARGs perhaps presents Gambarato’s definition of open and closed systems in relation to transmedia is not needed when existing literature concerning ARGs can be referred to.

In addition, Gambarato’s approach only asks one question: can the participant interact with the story and impact the unfolding experience? By framing the content through such a question, you are only illuminating the binary result: yes (open) or no (closed). This can be problematic when addressing the interactivity offered with more ambitious texts, that delve into a deeper and more varied relationship with the consumer — progressing past simply selecting pre-made choices that affect the story. Consider the television series *Defiance* (2013). The live-action science-fiction series was like many other in the genre: showcasing

aliens, taking place in the future, and featuring action sequences to underscore a larger theme of warfare and politics. However, *Defiance* took on the ambitious role of being part of something larger than just a television show — it was one component in an interactive experiment. Also released in 2013, came the videogame of the same name. This online game not only took place in the same universe as the television series, but also shared characters in a canonically consistent manner — characters who left the show begin to appear in the game, and vice versa. As well, events unfolding in the game between seasons of the television show, such as battles between opposing factions (fought by players), would impact the storylines in the live-action drama. Unlike *Sofia's Diary*, players were not simply picking pre-made choices presented to them — they were living experiences as fictional characters within a colourful and shared virtual world, one that flourished further in the television series. Eventually the show was cancelled in 2016, but the videogame has lived on — including a rebooted product: *Defiance 2050* (2018).

Now consider analysis of *Defiance* (the combined videogame and television series) through Gambarato's theory and my own. Like *Sofia's Diary*, Gambarato's analysis would unearth a single factor, asking the question "Is it an open or closed system?". The answer to this is yes, since: *Defiance* offered an interactive experience that allowed players of the videogame to affect ongoing storylines in the accompanying television series. From my perspective though, there are many other factors revealing a compelling experience that this analysis misses. Through the second principle of my analytical tool, a different set of questions are posed: What role does each piece of media in the *Defiance* text fulfill, does every piece fulfill something unique, and what relationships are there between them? From my perspective I would argue that *Defiance* pushes transmedia storytelling to a new level assisted by the

possibilities unique to the mixed-media mode of delivery. While interactivity is nothing new to transmedia (notably *The Matrix* videogames), *Defiance* frames this interactivity in a way that gives players new agency and immersion — the ability to affect an ongoing television show via multiplayer gameplay. This symbiotic relationship between the components of what is largely an ambitious interactive experiment, fortifies the content of the television show through the lived (although virtual) experiences of the players, who hold a level of control over the story via the unified experience. Not only are these players affecting the unfolding plot of the television series, but they are also sharing that fictional universe via gameplay, contextualising the live-action drama with their personal experiences within the videogame. Perhaps such a unity of content also means players of the game feel a closer relationship with the characters and settings on the television screen. Plainly, the videogame and television series share a symbiotic relationship that benefits both of them, with each producing unique experiences to the best of their given medium.

This analysis framed by the second principle of my analytical tool progresses further, as it is one building block in the larger context of my MT/DT theory. When applying the other two principles of analysis, *Defiance* is likely to represent DT, but with some aspects of MT — a label that opens up many more qualities for discussion. This approach, in comparison to Gambarato's theory of open and closed systems, provides a more nuanced viewpoint on and the relationship consumers have with the transmedia texts.

Andrea Phillips

Phillips (2012) also provides a binary view on types of transmedia texts. As discussed in some detail above, in the context of the United States, she offers ideas of “East Coast and West Coast” transmedia (2012, pg. 16). Phillips theorised this categorisation to splinter the

broad terms of transmedia originally offered by Kinder (1991) and Jenkins (2006). In her work, Phillips compares the *Star Wars* franchise as an example of West Coast transmedia with independent short film, *Pandemic* (2011), an East Coast example. *Pandemic* was a transmedia experience delivered through film, mobile phones, the Internet, real life, and print literature. The ambitious project was more of a real time story with almost seamless boundaries — rather than a passive viewing experience. *Pandemic* was also a timed project, inviting players to interact with the digital and real-world scavenger hunt that took place over a specified number of days. This differs from the timelessness of traditional franchises building exponentially via transmedia expansions — such as *Star Wars* (both before and after Disney's acquisition of the brand) that has ventured into merchandising, videogames, television series, comic books, and so on, designed to be consumed indefinitely. As Phillips asks, what is different between *Star Wars* and *Pandemic*? Technically they are both transmedia, but their makeup and design choices are completely different. This mode of thinking is similar to my goal of identifying texts via MT/DT.

Phillips furthers her approach to differentiating transmedia stories by considering the scale of fragmentation. She states that the inception of the text happens through one of two ways: "Either you take a single story and you splinter it across multiple media, or you start with one story and you keep adding pieces on to it ad infinitum" (Phillips, 2012, pg. 17). Already, one can easily tell the differences — *Star Wars* is building upon one original text (the breakout film), while *Pandemic* was born outright to be splintered in many ways. Such an approach is like Davidson's (2010) theory of retroactive and proactive transmedia. Phillips continues to dissect this mode of thought, with a consideration of how big each piece of fragmented media is:

The end result of both processes is fragmentation— the story has been broken into pieces. It's just a matter of scale. *Star Wars* uses a story that's been broken into really big fragments (a whole film, a book), and *Pandemic* uses much smaller ones (a single bottle of water, a series of tweets) (2012, pg. 17).

Phillips then argues that by splintering a story into smaller pieces, the demand of consumers to interact with every piece of media as part of the story becomes more important, as the text is more distributed and embedded in a different number of platforms. Phillips offers this aspect in a visualised gradient (figure 3). It can be inferred that West Coast transmedia is likely to represent the left side of the spectrum in the diagram below, as East Coast would be placed on the other side. This stance also shows close parallels with my own theory, positioning *Star Wars* as predominantly MT on the left side of the figure, and *Pandemic* as more clearly DT biased on the right.

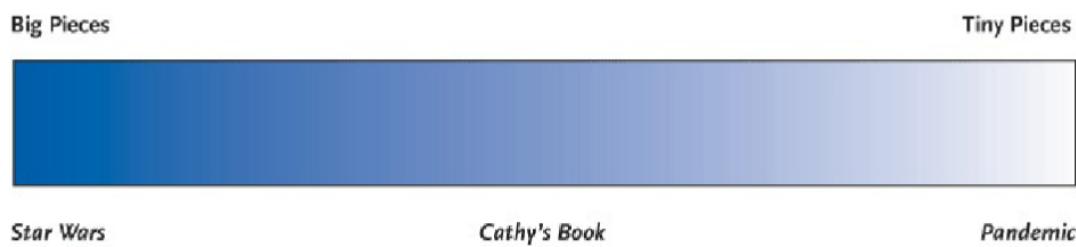


Figure 3. Transmedia fragmentation spectrum (Andrea Phillips, 2012, pg. 17).

Phillips' statements on East Coast/West Coast transmedia and the fragmented delivery of narratives is an effective approach. In common with Phillips, I find more fragmented stories, like *Pandemic*, to be boundary pushing, providing fresh ways to serve content in comparison with *Star Wars*.

Despite agreeing with the way Phillips assesses transmedia on a gradient, I do have some reservations. While it is interesting to assess the scale of the fragmented media, I would instead suggest the benefit of simply assessing whether each piece offers something new to the whole text. Concerning *Pandemic*, it is true that many small pieces, well-coordinated into an overall story do, represent a meticulous and compelling text. However, I would argue that big pieces of fragmentation can still produce important and complex content for a transmedia story. Consider *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), a text that I drew upon earlier in this thesis. The videogame was seen as a major steppingstone for the greater *Star Wars* universe, elevating mythology and fictional history to a new height. However, this is a large piece of fragmentation, warranting the text's placement on the left side of Phillips' diagram (Figure 3) (a move that fits with Phillips' overarching assessment of *Star Wars*). Considering the first principle of my analytical framework, in the case of *Pandemic*, each meticulously planned piece of content brings something new to the story — whether it be the function of a found item in the ARG-styled scavenger hunt, or the unity between the game and the screened film itself. Then, in accordance with the positive critical acclaim given to *Knights of the Old Republic*, I would say the game also offers something new and meaningful to participants. By reappropriating the established *Star Wars* universe, expanding it, and elevating its fictional history, the scale of the content does not matter in this example — only that it offers something new for consumers.

Drew Davidson

Also discussed above, in another approach to understanding the design choices behind transmedia texts, theorist Drew Davidson (2010) suggests considering the timing of when a project begins to utilise multimedia — offering the terms “pro-active”, where texts are

inherently designed to operate together as transmedia, and “retro-active”, where additional media are introduced after the success of an initial piece of content (2010, pg. 10). I find this approach by Davidson to be quite relevant since the timing of transmedia content creation gives an indication of a storyteller’s intent. Frequently, successful franchises that spawn from a single medium have their content transplanted across accessible formats for profitable exposure. Such an expansion usually seeks to transplant what is already recognisable, into a new and isolated context. Meanwhile, pro-active transmedia relies on taking the initiative at inception, so content is placed across multiple media channels up front. Pro-active transmedia frequently produces content that is perhaps more boundary-pushing and ambitious. The idea of retro-active transmedia clearly speaks to financial viability, which is a factor to consider with my view of MT. However, financially viable reasons to create a transmedia experience can still be DT, combining the search for monetary gain with the creation of a genuine new text, again drawing qualities similar to *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*.

Chapter 4: Prism Girl (case study)

In 2019, I used a creative practice project to analyse the impacts of transmedia on the music listening experience. Specifically, I sought to measure: an expected increase in listeners, effects on the general quality of experience, and the forming of fanbases. The project, which I named *Prism Girl*, consisted of a music album, videogame, and interactive web narrative. Access to this creative practice is placed in the abstract section of this document for reader accessibility. *Prism Girl* was designed as an original transmedia text, with each component combining to create a unified narrative. The narrative revolved around a fictional artificial intelligence as the story’s protagonist. Both qualitative and quantitative data to gauge

audience response was also collected over a four-month period to extrapolate results. This data consisted of: album streams from YouTube and Spotify, visits to the website, downloads of the videogame, and results from a survey that allowed for both quantitative and qualitative feedback. In this chapter, I explain the methodologies used and creative choices made while constructing the *Prism Girl* practice, the results of the data collection, and what can be learned from assessing it as MT/DT.

Website

The website acts as a hub for *Prism Girl* with a performative quality, appearing as a fictional software development company, much like the aforementioned *Dark Knight* ARG used seemingly real Gotham City political websites. Ideally, *Prism Girl*'s presence across the Internet was designed to act as hypertext communication and content (Nelson, 1965), to encourage exploration through a non-linear reading style and with no defined starting point. George Landow (1989) built upon theories of hypertext, noting how hypertexts encourage connections and curiosity. For example, the footnotes in a text document may give further reading and direction, with the choice to engage up to the reader. This practice is frequently mirrored on the Internet today through hyperlinking, where websites link to one another in non-linear ways, providing choices for viewers and the potential to communicate more information, ideas, or points of view, amongst other things (Landow, 2006). The nonlinear communication used in my creative practice therefore reflects the contemporary media landscape (Lambevski, 2000). The main hub website features links to the album on Spotify and YouTube, the character's Twitter account, and a separate website from which to download the video game. All these linked components also link back to the website hub, allowing for an accessible non-linear approach to consuming *Prism Girl* content from many

directions. The hosting site WordPress was chosen to produce the website as it is free, accessible to use, and simple in design. It was an imperative aim to make the website as easy to use as possible.

Prism Development Studios

Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has approved this study (HRE2019-71294)

[MEET PRISM GIRL!](#) [ADMIN ACCESS](#) [PLAY WITH PRISM GIRL](#) [SHARE YOUR PRISM GIRL FEEDBACK](#)



Figure 4. The *Prism Development Studios* website.

Music

The self-titled *Prism Girl* album was released with a runtime of 37 minutes across 12 tracks. I created the tracks and produced the album using computer software Ableton and Pro Tools. Most of the album was digitally created with synths and drum machines, with a small number of tracks featuring my recorded guitar playing and vocals. Ableton was used as it is a program I am already familiar with. Aesthetically, the album exists in the maximalist and industrialist genre, with influences from shoegaze and hip-hop artists. However, it was a deliberate approach during the recording process to have the album traverse genres and expectations by offering a unique sound to listeners with no regard to boundaries. Aesthetic

influences on the album from other artists include Death Grips, Machine Girl, the album *Revolver* (1966) by The Beatles, as well as the Museum of Modern Art featured artist Arca. The focus for the album was to elicit a digital aesthetic that represented the character of Prism Girl and supported the project's overall imagery. Interlude tracks in the album featured a text-to-speech function that delivered dialogue from the character Prism Girl — an attempt to produce the narrative function of the character living within the music and speaking to listeners for immersion.

I designed Prism Girl the character with the intent of appearing to be a real artificially intelligent program, even though this was not the case. Whether listeners believed this artificial intelligence truly existed was irrelevant, it was used to create a level of immersion throughout the transmedia text via performance. Performative personas in music acts have been utilised before in the past, such as rapper Rick Ross' fake drug-dealing experiences, David Bowie saying he was from outer space, or members of hip-hop group NWA claiming to be criminals (only member Eazy-E frequently found himself overnight in jail for petty crimes). Despite being recognisably false if investigated, listeners often accept the performative persona as it enhances the entertainment, as is the case for the personas of professional wrestlers (Jones, 2019). This phenomenon can be explained through the term kayfabe, commonly used to explain the fanaticism of scripted professional wrestling matches (Litherland, 2014). With the character of Prism Girl, I aimed to introduce the kayfabe of an artificial intelligence as a musician, emphasised by content throughout the music, videogame, and website which refer to Prism Girl being a slave to its creators. This was to reinforce a consistent characterisation across each medium for the overall

transmedia experience, aiming to have audiences feel invested in the plot, perhaps even identifying with the protagonist of the story.

The delivery and listening practice of the *Prism Girl* album was constructed to exist entirely within the digital realm. This decision was made to best reflect the current music industry, which prioritises listening routines in digital spaces. Transpiring from the boom of MP3 audio files in the late 1990s, the music industry has since been monopolised by online streaming platforms (Anderson, 2013). Popular music streaming service Spotify was chosen to host the *Prism Girl* album as it held 36 per cent of global streaming during 2019 (Iqbal, 2019). Spotify can also be used as a free service, unlike other music streaming services such as Apple Music and Tidal. It was my goal to ensure participants could listen to the album under any circumstance of choice and not to scrutinise accessibility. As a final measure, the album was also uploaded to YouTube, another popular platform that made the album freely accessible. Publishing the album to streaming services such as Ableton and Apple Music, was done through the online service DistroKid. DistroKid was chosen as it is a cheap service, quick to help independent artists reach popular streaming services, and quick to publish music.

Video game



Figure 5. A screenshot of the *Prism Girl* videogame played on computer.

The video game for my creative practice was designed and produced using the software Unreal Engine. Unreal Engine was chosen as it is free for videogame designers not seeking to profit off of the licence. As well, the community surrounding the computer software offers a wide variety of free in game assets — such as textures, lighting, sound effects, and objects. All elements of the Prism Girl game were sourced for free, and legally, through this community that proved for an accessible and easy videogame-making experience. Having never personally designed or created a videogame before, this experience was a testament to the accessibility and easy-to-navigate service of Unreal Engine. The game functions as a first-person exploration experience, allowing users to traverse a dream-like virtual world decorated with *Prism Girl* branding. Artistic influences for the game came from the likes of *LSD: Dream Emulator* (1998) and *Superliminal* (2019). There is no objective in playing the game, or ways to win or complete it. It exists to complement the music's aesthetics with a visual component. Influence on the game's design comes from an emerging genre of videogames often referred to as "Walking Simulators" (Ferland-Beauchemin, Hawey &

Benoit, 2019, pg. 100), encouraging individual experience, interpretation, and questioning of meaning. Walking Simulators generally subvert the established traditions of videogame design — whether it is a conscious decision or not of game makers. This seeks to remove competition and goal-based gameplay in favour of artistic interpretation, individual player experience, and aesthetics of storytelling. Typically, there is no case of winning or losing during the gaming experience, unlike traditional titles such as *Pong* (1972) or *Space Invaders* (1978). Walking Simulator games may include *Journey* (2012) or the critically acclaimed and genre progressive *Gone Home* (2013) — both titles that place an emphasis on player experience and storytelling, with little-to-no design on completion or competition. Other games in the genre that encourage more abstract interpretation may include those by developers Arcane Kids, such as *Bubsy 3D: Bubsy Visits the James Turrell Retrospective* (2013) — a form of parody art that introduces a dialogue that centres on the commercial failings of the *Bubsy* videogame series and instigates questions of the importance of modern art.

I sought to emulate the same design philosophy for the videogame component of the thesis' creative practice. There is no objective way to win or lose for players, only that they experience the digital world. This experience ultimately seeks to expand on the lore of Prism Girl the character. This decision was made to both expand the aesthetics of the creative practice, as well as not to divide participants based on videogame skills. I was not seeking to test the players' skills as part of the research, so there was no need to create goals or opportunities to fail. In taking inspiration from existing Walking Simulator games, Prism Girl may be more akin to the aforementioned *Bubsy* title by developer Arcane Kids, rather than the socially conscious *Gone Home* that seeks to question the limitations of the videogame

genre itself and instigate discussion of real-world movements such as LGBTQ rights. Much like the efforts of Arcane Kids, Prism Girl the game is more of a meta exploration positioned around immersion and reflection of the player's experience. Whereas *Bubsy 3D: Bubsy Visits the James Turrell Retrospective* uses satire art and as game designer Ben Esposito explains:

[Bubsy was] a smokescreen for talking about art. Using the aesthetics of a bad game in poorly executed edutainment in order to get people to interact with art, [gets people to] actually think about concepts related to art and the infinite. Being critical of the idea that games should could be art (Kotzer, 2016, para. 11).

Prism Girl evokes a simplistic experience of the character's world, with elements of corporate and the music industry as shown in Figure 5.'s use of office props, oversized contemporary art sculpture, large television screen to evoke a sense of consumerism, and pictures of office spaces littered along the walls to visualise a homogenised business world. These visual cues expand on the online narrative from the website component of the creative practice centred on Prism Girl's plight as a music making artificial intelligence bound to the demands of their maker. Questioning the involvement of capitalist business and art is also used in Arcane Kids' *Bubsy* title, with the official website jokingly claiming to be sponsored by McDonald's, Citi Bank, and Facebook (Arcane Kids, 2013).

In addition, the game is scattered with nonsensical phrases, which serve as passwords for the website component of the creative practice, opening locked sections. This practice is similar to the promotional (but now defunct) websites used to market *The Matrix* franchise. In the case of *Prism Girl*, applying the passwords from the videogame on the website gave participants world-building elements and additional content, such as an augmented reality snapchat filter that played exclusive music not featured on the album, as well as character

dialogue. My aim was to reward participants for engaging with the transmedia experience, just as participants in alternate reality games (ARG) are rewarded for being engaged — such as the *I Love Bees* ARG, or *The Dark Knight* marketing campaign. For this reason, I propose the interactivity between the *Prism Girl* website and video game acts similarly to an ARG, although many acknowledge an ARG allows participants to affect elements of the game with their own input (Connolly, Stansfield & Hainey, 2011), which my practice lacks.



Figure 6. A screenshot of the *Prism Girl* augmented reality snapchat filter.

Analysis of Outcomes

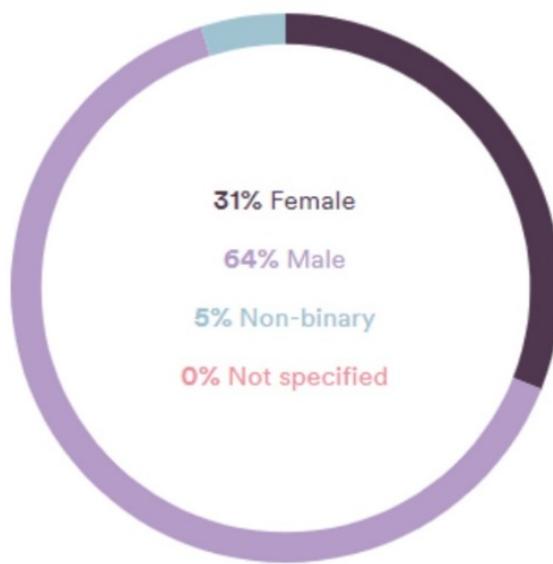


Figure 7. The *Prism Girl* album's gendered audience one week after launch on the 29th of August

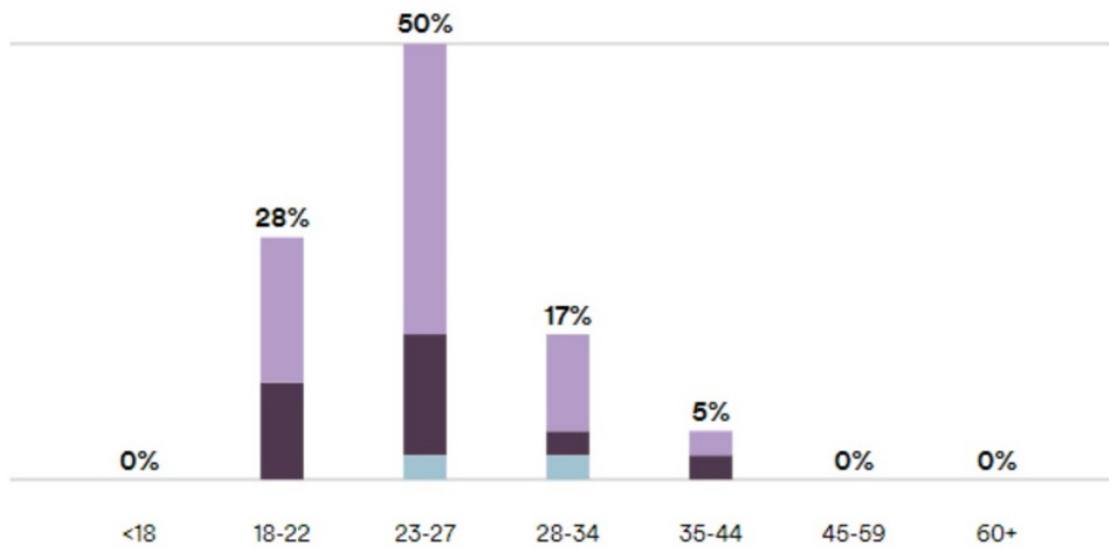


Figure 8. The *Prism Girl* album's aged audience one week after launch on the 29th of August

The self-titled *Prism Girl* album was published on Spotify on the 22nd of August 2019. One week after its debut, the album had engaged listeners across Australia, Germany, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and the United Kingdom. Although gathering geographical data was not a goal in the design of the research model, it was automatically collected through Spotify

and does seem to demonstrate the level of engagement made possible through the Internet. Similarly, gathering gender and age-related data was not intended, but was again automatically collected via Spotify. During August, male listeners represented the majority at 64 per cent, while female listeners made up 31 per cent. Remaining listeners identified as non-binary or other. Listeners aged 23-27 years were dominant at exactly half of the engaged demographic. Listeners aged 18-22 years came in second at 28 per cent. Remaining demographics appeared aged 28-34 years at 17 per cent, with the remaining 5 per cent of listeners aged 34-44 years. In August, the album accumulated 36 unique listeners, making up for 237 streams of the album in that month alone.

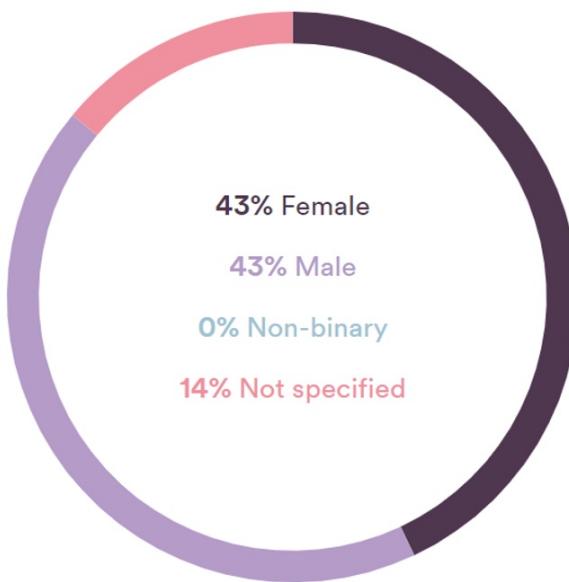


Figure 9. The *Prism Girl* album's gendered metrics as of the 24th of October

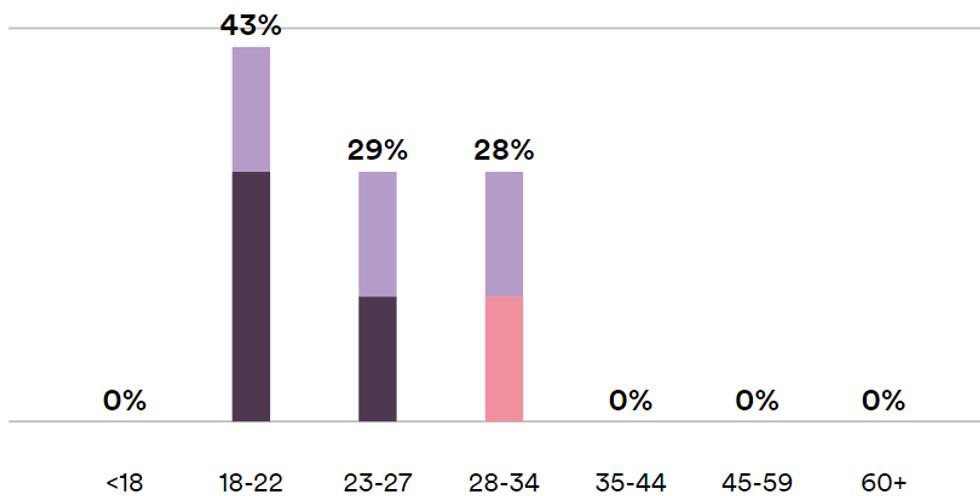


Figure 10. The *Prism Girl* album's aged metrics as of the 24th of October

As of the 24th of October 2019, the demographic of listeners shifted to show female and males at an equal percentage. Listeners aged 23-27 were no longer in the majority, with listeners aged 18-22 overtaking them. Listers aged in the older bracket, 28-34, saw a rise from 17 per cent to 28 per cent. Listeners aged 35 to 44 completely disappeared. The album also struggled to retain its initial breakthrough numbers, dropping to seven unique listeners for 28 streams in total during the month. However, 26 per cent of users continued to listen to the album after adding tracks to their own personal Spotify playlists, revealing that the album had established frequent and dedicated listeners in its small demographic.

To date, the *Prism Girl* video game download page totalled 32 views, but only eight actual downloads. Not only does this show a large gap between listeners on the Spotify album, but also a large gap between curious visitors and those who actually played the game. This is despite the game being free and one-click away. The website page hosting the *Prism Girl* game spiked in traffic on August 19 (its publish date) and subsequently died down. Surprisingly, it saw a resurgence during October for unknown reasons. This disparity in

engagement in the videogame poses a problem in the intended design of the creative practice, as unifying each component is integral to the transmedia experience but seems not to have worked for my project.

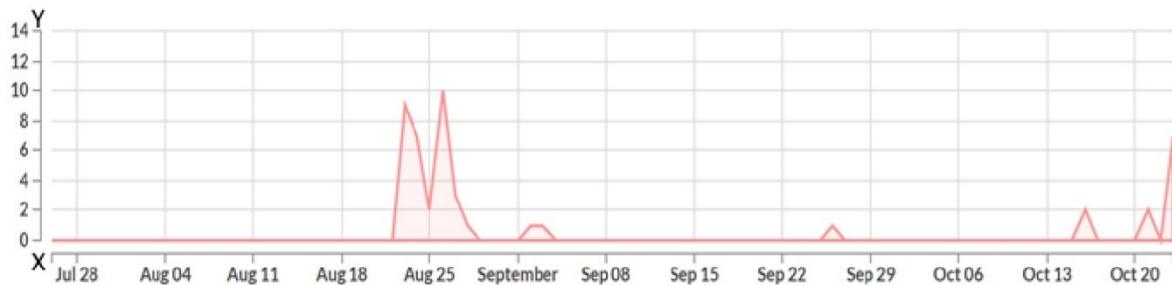


Figure 11. The Y axis represents the number of views of the *Prism Girl* video game download page as of the 24th of October. The X axis denotes the date timeline.

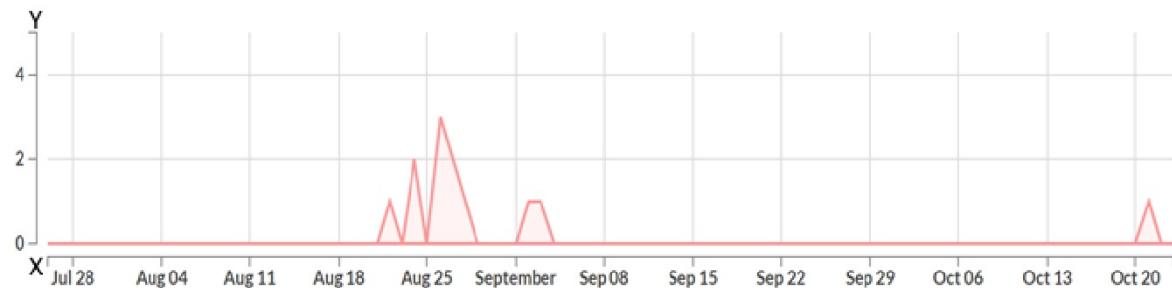


Figure 12. The Y axis represents the number of downloads of the *Prism Girl* video game as of the 24th of October. The X axis denotes the date timeline.

The *Prism Girl* website peaked at 42 views in its publishing month of August, subsequently dropping to 20 in September and finally four in October to total 66 views. Despite the music component of the research amassing over 200 streams worldwide in less than a month, and the video game component garnering some downloads, the survey accompanying the research only gathered two responses. This might be because there was no blatant incentive for people to take the survey. If perhaps there was a reward such as a financial incentive, or extra content, then more people would have likely interacted. In addition, while expressing

curiosity on the web is quite easy, a task that is even just one click away may not draw people in if it does not seem directly beneficial to the participant. Given how accessible content across the Web is for consumers today, it is much easier to exit from anything perceived as unengaging to move on and find entertainment elsewhere. Most internet users scrutinise what is even worth clicking on using keywords alone (Stokowiec, et al., 2017).

Choose as many answers that apply:

What elements of the Prism Girl project are you familiar with?

- Music album
 - Video game
 - Website (<https://prismgrowth.wordpress.com/>)
 - Prism Girl's social media (twitter, instagram, etc)
 - Snapchat codes/filters

What components of 'Prism Girl' would you rank most fun (1) to least fun (3)?

- The album
 - The video game
 - The website

Explain your above answer as much as possible in your own words

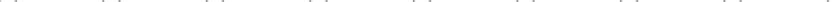
ANSWER

How much do you think the experience of 'Prism Girl' benefits from being multi medium?

Not at all

Greatly

- 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Explain your above answer as much as possible in your own words

How were you directed to this survey?

- The Prism Girl website (<https://prismgrowth.wordpress.com/>)
 - Prism Girl's social media
 - The Prism Girl videogame
 - Prism Girl's Spotify page
 - Other (please specify)

The survey was hosted through the online service Qualtrics. This was chosen as the platforms allows a premium hosting service when connected with a student account at the author's institution. Both participants from the survey answered that they were familiar with every component of the project (album, game, and website) and that they enjoyed the album component the most, the video game second, and website the least. In explaining their choices, one user wrote "Prism Girl, as an album, is a musical adventure spanning - and even going beyond - multiple perceived genres of music". The other participant wrote the album was "interactive and fun". From the survey results, both participants rated the transmedia's positive effects on the music listening experience as an eight out of ten. In explaining this, one user wrote "The effort that has been put into this experience is clearly present. The creator has done an exceptional job at crafting a piece of art that not only spans multiple forms of media, but does so purposefully and effectively". However, the other participant raised a concern that "The album alone is entertaining enough that it could be experienced without the other media". While this can be received as praise for the album, it is indicative of a failing in this transmedia experience. It was intended for each component to be necessary for the text as a whole. For at least this participant, and maybe for others given the engagement statistics, this was ostensibly not the case. The survey sought to unearth any correlations or causation of the creative practice's exposure through the Internet, as well as its design as a transmedia experience. Specifically, it was an intent of mine to find any trends of exposure for the multiple components — for example, if one was more popular than the others, or they were equally as popular. Likewise, it was a goal to see if such success in transmedia design inhibited an increased overall enjoyment of the project. Ideally, a large volume of diverse responses would help to identify correlations. As explained previously, however, the low level of input makes this difficult and arguably impossible.

Significance of the Creative Practice and Further Comments

The *Prism Girl* research project set out to unearth benefits from applying transmedia storytelling to the music listening routine, with a particular focus on the context of contemporary technologies and digital music delivery. The music component gained exposure and eventually a small, but dedicated, fanbase (a handful of listeners are still engaged through Spotify as of December 2020). But to what extent the performance of the album is owed to transmedia is inconclusive. To use conjecture, the successful performance of the music album possibly owed to the recognition and accessibility of its popular publishing platform, Spotify. Interaction with the other elements of the project, the video game and website, were sparse. This may demonstrate that engaging people in a transmedia experience may be harder than expected. To build on these shortcomings, perhaps integrating the video game within the web browser would encourage more gameplay — rather than just viewer traffic.

The research was done in conjunction with the university, which meant ethics disclaimers, displayed on the Spotify page, website, and videogame, made it apparent to participants that the art was part of a coordinated research project. This could be detrimental to feedback and engagement, as an integral element to enjoying ARGs is a willing suspension of disbelief for immersion and enjoyment (Davies, 2017; Phillips, 2005). Therefore, it seems likely that the obvious research focus, including the survey attached to the creative practice, could turn people away the research.

I still believe there is more to unearth from transmedia and listening routines through a creative practice. Serious changes must be made however if another practice-led research model is to be used. Increasing exposure and participation would be a priority, as such

success is seen with the latter quality in ARGs and is often cited as a unique and powerful characteristic of transmedia works (Askwith & Gray, 2008). This could be remedied through a much longer lifespan of the project, perhaps years at a time. In addition, further platforms could be used to deliver the *Prism Girl* text — such as physical art installations, live shows, coordinated marketing attempts, literature, and film. A more dispersed text over years at a time would likely yield better results in reading the effects of transmedia storytelling on the music listening experience.

In continuing the analysis of the music listening experience through transmedia texts, I will now assess *Prism Girl* through the MT/DT categorisation and the complementary three-principles of design.

Principle 1: Introduction of New Content

The first principle of my framework is to measure the ability of the text to introduce new content across each media platform. By content, I am referring to anything experienced by the audience, including plot, narrative, characters, visuals, audio, literature, gameplay, and interaction. Perhaps the most basic principle out of the three, this principle was chosen to reflect the widely considered definition of transmedia storytelling by Jenkins and his use of the word “distinctive” (2006, pg. 96). In the many times that Jenkins has written on transmedia storytelling, he consistently emphasises not only the dispersed content across media forms, but also the method of that dispersal. With my first principle, I aim to highlight how texts use the opportunity to disperse the media. I am interested in the details of what content is dispersed, the choices used to disperse it, and how it entices audiences to stay engaged across each platform.

As it was the intention of *Prism Girl* to serve as a transmedia experience, it is no surprise the content was dispersed across three different platforms: the album, videogame, and web narrative. But to gain a deeper understanding of how this content succeeded or failed in engaging fans, we must dissect the design choices I chose to disperse the content. While definitions of transmedia suggest *Prism Girl* to fit the genre of text, my research shows that it failed to interest consumers in the unique fashion that transmedia has the potential to afford. From the collected data, the album performed well, streaming hundreds of times across the world — excelling in reach above the game and website. As the music album carried its own wealth of listeners it represents hundreds of listeners that experienced it exclusively as an isolated album and not as part of a larger transmedia experience. This ultimately suggests that the *Prism Girl* album as a text did not carry the sense of transmedia — people were satisfied without being encouraged to experience the other works to complete the narrative. One could then argue that the videogame and website did not make a clear, distinctive, and valuable contribution to the whole, as Jenkins would require.

Prism Girl's shortcomings contrast with other music-based transmedia texts that succeed in enticing consumers to experience every component. For example, *Lemonade* (2016), the visual music album by singer songwriter Beyoncé. The album was made available through streaming, accompanied by a one-hour film produced and released by HBO. Both the critical and commercial reception of this project positively drew upon its multimedia qualities (Tate, 2016). The link between the film and the album was explicit: being divided into 11 chapters that each accompanied a track from the music release (similar to Pink Floyd's visual album *The Wall* (1982)). However, the storytelling of the film did not stand only within the confines of the physical screen: its narrative spread to social media, internet forums, tabloids, and

magazines. This was because the narrative revolved around Beyoncé's real-life husband, the also famous recording artist Jay-Z (real name Shawn Carter). Lyricism and poetry throughout the visual album detailed Jay-Z's infidelity, a tale many dedicated Beyoncé fans felt invested in. They wanted to consume anything about the real-world drama they could, thus flooding internet searches with curiosity about who Jay-Z had a tryst with. Paola Bremilla (2019) highlights how successful *Lemonade* was at delivering a transmedia experience, weaving a web of narrative that burrowed into many secondary channels of content:

Here we have the narrativization of music (concept album), the visual representation of a musical concept (visual album), cross-marketing (fashion and literature, along with cross-promotion of two albums), branding (the iconicity and aesthetics of the "Beyoncé brand"), and industry synergies (the music and TV industries, with HBO). The connection of all these elements and strategies, as anticipated, ultimately constructed (and continues to construct) a storyworld based on Beyoncé and Jay-Z characters, functioning as a narrative that fosters fan engagement and social discourse (2019, pg. 83).

As highlighted by Bremilla, *Lemonade* not only succeeded in dispersing its content as transmedia storytelling requires (according to Jenkins), but also spawned a narrative that supported the long-term engagement of fans. This is precisely what *Prism Girl* failed to do, although it should be acknowledged that *Prism Girl* was a grass roots project that built its first listeners in 2019, while Beyoncé's *Lemonade* reached an already dedicated and large fanbase. Regardless, when the first principle of my framework is applied to *Prism Girl*, it highlights its failure to disperse content in way that drew the audience into all its elements, suggesting the need to create a more compelling experience. As mentioned above, this supports an argument for a similar creative research project that would run for a longer

time frame, for example years, to encourage a larger and more engaged fanbase across a more detailed and dispersed text.

Principle 2: The role of each piece of media, and the relationships between them

As the first principle of my framework indicated the level of content in each instalment of the transmedia text, my second principle seeks to highlight the functions of these instalments — as well as the synergy and relationships between each of them. Transmedia is inherently multidisciplinary, and offers great liberty to storytellers and content consumers, making it difficult to quantify all the qualities of a transmedia design. Therefore, I suggest considering the role or function each piece of media plays in a greater transmedia text, as well as the relationship that may exist between these pieces, as a means of further assessing the design choices for each piece of media and for the transmedia experience as a whole. This principle is directly influenced by Jenkins' transmedia definition, particularly his condition that “[...] each medium does what it does best” (2006, pg. 95). What may start as a singular piece of content, becomes a dispersed narrative with context built across multiple instalments, forms, and platforms. It can become quite complex. Therefore, I assert there is a use to assessing the new perspective, or context, that arises when piecing each component of a transmedia story together.

Applying this principle, once again shows where *Prism Girl* is lacking in engaging listeners and players. There is no greater level of clarity given to participants after progressing through all three platforms, as opposed to just one. Although the design of the practice inherently hinges on being a transmedia text, the reward for interacting with it as a whole is

quite limited. A participant that plays the videogame gains no new perspective when relistening to the album — no plot sensitive information is conveyed which supports a newly gifted experience. At most, using the passwords from the videogame on the website gives a level of understanding to Prism Girl as a character after reading dialogue entries. However, this does little to further inform someone replaying the game, or relistening to the music album. The roles fulfilled by each component of *Prism Girl* had few ramifications and impact on the others.

To contrast, let us return to Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. As demonstrated in the previous section of this chapter, I highlighted how the visual album was part of a diverse transmedia narrative, bolstering the artist's voice via dispersed media. Each piece of dispersed media was successful in its own right (one could watch the film without listening to the album itself), but the relationships between each piece of media unite for something greater as well as encouraging participants to consider the unified intent. The unique content of the media is enhanced when the parts are combined, and their impact increases for a unified experience. The visual component firstly takes advantage of the medium specific components: choreography, cinematography, acting, casting, set placement, and editing. Secondly, Beyoncé and the producers of the film made a deliberate effort to create exclusive content. For example, consistently throughout the visual album, Beyoncé reads the works of poet Warsan Shire, perhaps conveying Beyoncé's own characterisation and thoughts within the narrative scope of the album. Such poetry could easily have been included as interludes throughout the album, but instead only appeared in the film. Critical reception of *Lemonade* investigates the purpose of these poems, with New York Times writer Amanda Hess (2016) suggesting that "Ms. Shire's verse forms the backbone of

Beyoncé's album and its exploration of family, infidelity and the black female body" (2016, Para. 2). In addition, theorist Joanna Hartman (2017) states:

Visuality, performance, and the auditory dimension are integral parts of *Lemonade*. In opposition to the music album that only contains the music tracks, in the visual album various media in different constellations create cohesive forces that are integral for processes of signification (2017, pg. 5).

These vital elements to *Lemonade*'s characterisation and use of themes, only accessible through the visual version of the album, enhance the music listening experience as part of a whole — representing the strengths of each role fulfilled by the different media. While exclusive content in each element was used to characterise *Prism Girl*, a comparison with *Lemonade* shows a contrast in the importance of this content. A fan of Beyoncé that forgoes watching the visual album is missing a significant part of the intended experience, characterisation of the author, and a lasting impression that might impact understandings of the audio album in the future — even though each piece of media still thrives by itself. In the case of *Prism Girl*, narrative sensitive information is revealed by engaging with both the videogame and the website. However, there exists a significant lack of synergy between *Prism Girl*'s media — a lost opportunity to elevate the unified text. This failure resulted in an isolated experience when revisiting the album. This contrasts strongly with *Lemonade*, which coordinated its media for a more deliberate and elevated experience that emphasises its positioning as a transmedia text in the first place.

Principle 3: The Quality of Experience Realised Through Transmedia Means

The third principle of my framework aims to demonstrate a necessity of the project being a transmedia story — to convey something that is uniquely transmedia, and only possible through the means of transmedia. Although lacking in the other two principles, I suggest *Prism Girl* fulfills this. *Prism Girl*'s narrative was inherently designed with a dispersed experience as the priority. It was my intention as the artist to make the album an inherent part of the unified text, although its relationship with the videogame and website were not emphasised sufficiently for participants, as data and feedback suggests. However, in terms of design choices, the website and videogame exclusively demand a combined experience to fulfil their potential. The website is only fully realised once applying the passwords gained from the videogame. Therefore, a participant must interact with more than one medium to experience the unified creative practice as intended. As *Prism Girl* excels in this context, it reflects the intentions of myself as an artist, which was to specifically create a transmedia experience. However, my other two principles of transmedia design exist for a reason, and that is to illuminate what the project lacks. No matter how much multimedia is implemented for the *Prism Girl* experience, this intention can fall on deaf ears if participants do not feel motivated to stay engaged or feel rewarded for doing so — qualities I have just explored via the previous principles. Where a text excels in the third principle and lacks in the other two, such as my own, improvements in engagement will be supported by creating a clear reason for your audience to be invested in the transmedia content, and clearly rewarding them for that cross-platform interaction. Such a deliberate design is supported by my first two principles as previously explored: create compelling content in each piece of media, and emphasise the unique role of them, while utilising their relationships for an elevated unified text.

In retrospect, the unification between the transmedia experience and the music album itself for *Prism Girl* could have been better coordinated. Instead of simply publishing the album to Spotify, perhaps obtaining the album could be a feature of the videogame. This would be similar in design to songwriter Björk's album, *Biophilia* (2011), which was not released on a single platform, but rather in segmented pieces across several mobile phone apps. To draw a contrast with another music-based text, consider American band Anamanaguchi's album, *Capsule Silence XXIV* (2016). *Capsule Silence*'s release took an unconventional path, spawning from a hoax viral marketing campaign between the band and supposed game developer, NHX. Journalists documenting the feud took the bait, after Anamanaguchi took to the platform Twitter to air their grievances over the working relationship — claiming NHX had failed to deliver on the business relationships (Patrick, 2016). Anamanaguchi then leaked the game for free online through the file sharing site, MediaFire.

This fabricated drama, publicised online, contextualised the upcoming content from the musicians, much like Beyoncé's publicised relationship difficulties with her husband leading up to the release of *Lemonade* (2016).

Image removed for copyright reasons. The figure featured a screenshot from the videogame *Capsule Silence XXIV*, centred on the collectable audio tapes driving the game's gameplay.

Figure 14. A screenshot of gameplay from *Capsule Silence XXIV* (2016). Each of these virtual cassette tapes represents a track on the album, collected by the player (Esposito, 2016)

The *Capsule Silence XXIV* videogame functioned both for gameplay and as the intended album release. Instead of using a conventional platform to deliver the content, Anamanaguchi made the album a reward placed within the game itself. Players collected cassette tape items in a first-person immersive experience. Each tape corresponded to a

track in the album, amounting to 16 in total, with additional content also included, such as a music video. The experience was bolstered by the tabloid-styled drama surrounding the band and the mysterious videogame developer NHX. The Fake promotional images of the videogame, leaked from a supposed corporate pitch, helped to stir interest. Gameplay in *Capsule Silence* also did more than deliver the album, allowing fans to connect with the extended mythology of the four-piece band. The immersive environment featured: replicate bedrooms, personal files, trinkets, and fully-interactive desktop computers of each band member. It was more than just a game: it was an extension of identity. Game designer of *Capsule Silence*, Ben Esposito, explains

“We wanted to create something sincere where the barrier was lifted and you get to sift through their personal stuff [...] The game is a space for you to interact with the music and the people who make the music in a way that you don't normally get to” (Warman, 2017, para. 34).

Image removed for copyright reasons. The figure featured promotional artwork for *Capsule Silence XXIV*. Image is viewable via the below link.

Figure 15. *Capsule Silence XXIV* ‘promotional image’ featuring Anamanaguchi bandmate Ary Warnaar, (Esposito, 2016). Retrieved from: <https://www.docdroid.net/aNiwhxt/invpd-prj-h-2-21-d1-pdf#page=7>

This connectivity between player and bandmates, was something I intended with *Prism Girl* and its character, but *Prism Girl* fell short of excelling under the first and second principles, so a lack of a meaningful relationship is apparent between the text and audience. I have explored possible remedies for *Prism Girl* to better perform via my framework, with references to other transmedia music texts: Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* (2016) and

Anamanaguchi's *Capsule Silence XXIV* (2016). Simply stated, *Prism Girl* needed to offer a higher quality and quantity of content across each platform, and a motivator for audiences to feel invested throughout. In regards to MT/DT and the three principles of analysis, *Prism Girl* does warrant the labelling of DT. While the text does suffice the three principles of design, I suggest its direct application presents a space for improvement.

For all of *Prism Girl*'s shortcomings, it should be noted that there are two significant factors for its lack of exposure, and critical and commercial success. One is the absence of a "mothership text" (Suzanne Scott, 2013, pg. 46) — and the other, the absence of an established and loyal audience to consume the media, unlike the cited works of Beyoncé and Anamanaguchi. Scott explains that the mothership of a transmedia text commands a central point of interest for the expanded work, with every piece of media surrounding it being secondary texts: "The function of these secondary texts, both narratively and economically, is to bring audiences back to the mothership" (2013, pg. 46). In the case of *The Matrix* franchise for example, the mothership texts are plainly the feature films — both as the largest source of revenue, critical acclaim, and exposure. Its secondary texts are the variety of videogames, action figures, animated spinoffs, internet content, and so on. All of these smaller fragments of *The Matrix* universe assist in providing a pathway for consumers to watch the films, or have their viewing experience reinforced by the expanded lore.

During production of *Prism Girl*, I intended for the music album to be the mothership text. However, in hindsight I would say all the big three media pieces of the text (album, videogame, and website) now butt heads for position as the mothership text. There lacks a significant factor to make the music album plainly the central focus of the text. Perhaps this shortcoming denotes another factor to the less-than-ideal performance of the transmedia

piece — failing to utilise secondary texts to reinforce the intended mothership text. In the future, a second attempt to measure the transmedia impacts of a music listening experience would benefit greatly from a more concise approach to the music being the mothership texts. This could be remedied with a higher quality and quantity of secondary texts. Perhaps live shows to promote the album and the franchise's fictional universe, apparel, sequels to the videogame that implore several listens to the album, music videos, and so on. As also briefly mentioned, comparing *Prism Girl* to the works of established artists such as Beyoncé shows the disparity in listener base, rather than the design of the media itself.

Chapter 5: *Nathan for You* (case study)

In 2013 the American television network, Comedy Central, debuted its latest series: reality show *Nathan for You* (*NFY*). At first glance, any naïve viewer would mistake *NFY* as being about mundane business transformations — similar to *Kitchen Nightmares* or *Undercover Boss*. This would be an easy assumption to make, as the show's title sequence (a voiceover read by its host), seemingly lays it all bare:

“My name is Nathan Fielder, and I graduated from one of Canada's top business schools with really good grades. Now I'm using my knowledge to help struggling small business owners make it in this competitive world. This, is *Nathan for You*”.

After watching an episode of *NFY*, its opening sequence will likely stand as the only normal thing you see from the 20-something minute broadcast. Like *Kitchen Nightmares*, Fielder meets with a different business owner each episode to pitch a solution for overcoming capitalist hurdles. Chef Ramsay might suggest a new menu or restaurant décor; however, Fielder's approaches were not as simple — he instead pushed the limits of business conventions via grandiose marketing stunts. In the first episode, Fielder has a local pizzeria promise a free extra pizza if the delivery time goes over 20 minutes. The calls from eager customers roll in. Business is better than ever, and Fielder is a hero. The catch, however, is that the free pizza is only one inch in diameter, presented with its own bite-sized box. Upon delivering the free pizza, Fielder (and a delivery driver named Angel) were met with a range of emotions from customers, including laughter, confusion, and even threats of violence. It sounds like a sketch, but the show is presented as unscripted reality television.

While bizarre, Fielder's pizza stunt is dwarfed by later episodes that become increasingly ambitious and original in thought. Over a four-season run, *NFY* saw schemes and deceit draped in marketing campaigns that took constant twists and turns. Later in the show's first season, Fielder allows attractive customers at a clothing store to shoplift items, exploiting their attractiveness as marketing outside of the store. In season three, Fielder advertises \$1 televisions at a local electronics store so that the items can be price matched at the nearest Best Buy outlet. Ensuring that no one bought the low-cost televisions at the local business (incurring a loss), Fielder placed a live alligator instore to guard them. When Best Buy did not honour their price match policy, Fielder tried to mount a class action case by coercing local citizens. *NFY* as a series was absurd, deceiving, performative, boundless, controversial, and yet also self-reflexive and authentic in ways other reality television shows were not. It was confronting, uncomfortable, and surprisingly poignant at times on the topic of 21st century economics and business morals.

While the formula for the series rarely deviated, it sought to push its own rules at every opportunity. The shows became indescribably convoluted at times — making it difficult to anticipate what would happen next. When asked to explain his own show by documentarian Louis Theroux (2020), host Nathan Fielder is even at a loss for words himself. The comedian says:

I will admit that one of the things I'm worst at is describing what I do. I made a show that was a comedy documentary series that involved real people, where I was helping businesses... Man, after doing four years of a TV show, you'd think I'd be better at explaining what it is (Theroux & Nechamkin, 2020, para. 15).

As the show was so ambitious and complex, it often used more than just the medium of television to tell its stories. In season one, Fielder meets with a petting zoo owner whose business struggles to gain recognition, and thus ticket sales. Fielder pitches a solution: have a celebrity animal that tourists would travel far to see. This plan could be approached several ways. You could hire an already famous animal, or perhaps one that is able to perform stunts to impress customers. Fielder instead hires a team of Hollywood-experienced stunt divers and animal handlers, hands out non-disclosure agreements, and films a staged scene: *Pig rescues baby goat*. By staging a scripted viral video, Fielder planned to make the petting zoo pig an internet sensation after it appears on video saving a drowning goat, putting his client on the map. Fielder's plan worked. The video was uploaded to YouTube the year prior to the episode airing. It was viewed over five million times before the episode (and, as of December of 2020, it has double the number of views). Many media outlets were also fooled: *Pig rescues baby goat* was shared several times through popular websites such as the blog Gawker, and user generated site Reddit. The viral clip also found its way across American television such as NBC News, The Today Show, and Good Morning America. After the television episode revealed the deceit, CNN called it "the pig that punked the Web" (2013). Thus, Fielder's prank not only extended itself outside the confines of television as a medium, but effectively commandeered internet based dispersal of media to sell its story for television. Unsuspecting viewers of a seemingly genuine viral video became complicit in a story beyond their personal experience. One day they may stumble across the truth of the seemingly genuine cute animal video — or perhaps go about the rest of their lives never knowing who Nathan Fielder even is.

The staged viral video was not the only time Fielder used his show to fool the world outside of the television screen. In season two, Fielder ran a parody Starbucks store, called *Dumb Starbucks*, which simply prefaced every item from a Starbucks menu with the word “dumb”—an exploitation of parody law. Customers could order a “dumb latte” for example. The business was also marketed through YouTube and Twitter. Before Fielder publicly emerged as the mastermind; many guessed that provocative street artist Banksy was at the helm, media pundits gave it exposure, and self-proclaimed fans of Dumb Starbucks were selling used coffee cups as memorabilia for as much as \$500 (Theroux & Nechamkin, 2020). Then, in season three, Fielder successfully sold a deceptive fitness movement, via a ghost-written biography titled *The Movement* (Garbarino, 2015), which helped him exploit free labour. The bestselling book, filled with lies about body builder Jack Garbarino’s life, was given genuine exposure on a variety of American morning television shows, and is still purchasable on Amazon. In season four, Fielder commandeered a misfit band of musicians so that he could sell smoke alarms under the category of musical instruments, therefore paying less on shipping tariffs. Fielder foisted the smoke alarm onto a talented guitarist in the group. The band, The Banzai Predicament, staged a protest against oil company Shell (after Fielder hired a man to pose as an employee in provoking the band), which gave them legitimate media coverage. Their only single, *Orphaned Skies*, is still available for streaming on Spotify and other music services. You can hear the smoke alarm throughout this recording.

From just these examples alone, Fielder has commandeered music streaming, literature, the Internet (websites and social media), other television shows, performance art, and art installations, to create diverse stories that are ultimately documented in his reality show.

Fielder's fingerprints of trickery are also left in many places, that remain observable like artefacts of mythology. One can still visit YouTube to watch the original upload of *Pig rescues baby goat*, purchase *The Movement* from Amazon, listen to The Banzai Predicament on Spotify, or have a Dumb Starbucks cup as a keepsake.

Despite seemingly having such a large presence in greater American media (although through deceit), *NFY* never saw mainstream commercial success, and peaked in viewership during its second season (Kondolojy, 2014). However, it was the recipient of strong critical acclaim. In 2019 it was the winner of Best Comedy Sketch/Variety series in the Writers Guild Awards. Documentarian Erroll Morris (2017) has praised the show's ability to muddy the boundaries of reality, drawing a comparison to Phillip K. Dick's literature. Regarding Fielder's seemingly sincere relationship with a paid escort (named Maci) in the series' finale, Morris writes:

We all know [*NFY* is] a TV show. We all know that it entails an element of artifice. But where does the artifice begin and end? When Nathan and Maci kiss in front of the cameras, is it just a queasy stunt? Why is it that viewers are so willing to read the romance as real? Maybe "Nathan for You" is ultimately about our unfettered capacity for credulity—not just the suspension of disbelief but the acceptance of the preposterous (2017, p. 5).

Likewise, *Uncut Gems* (2019) codirector Benny Safdie (2016), emphasises *NFY*'s treatment of reality with reference to Jacque Tati's film *Playtime* (1967). Safdie writes:

Tati derives his humour from the meticulous nature and beauty of the gag; it isn't until everyone sees the inner workings of the restaurant—it literally falls apart—that they have a good time. Fielder is working in the same way (2016, para. 9).

Such comments demonstrate perhaps the most unique quality of *NFY*: being a constructed version of reality that often flouts the boundaries of television. While more commercially successful business improvement shows, such as *Kitchen Nightmares*, thrive on drama solely in front of the camera, *NFY* instead thrives on how it can deconstruct this format across places where no camera is needed. Often, viewers of *NFY* are positioned not only to question where the show's intentions begin and end, but also to consider the elements existing outside of the show itself (such as *Pig rescues baby goat* on YouTube). Ultimately, *NFY* employs more than just the television screen alone to sell its "acceptance of the preposterous", as Erroll Morris would say.

Several academic works have critically analysed *NFY*, however, its presence in scholarly publications is small in comparison to the analysis of more popular media. Regardless, *NFY* has seen brief acknowledgement in a variety of topics, including: parody case law (Jones et al., 2015); reality television ethics (Healey, 2017), artistic integrity (Hendricks, 2017); representation of race and gender in television (Marx, 2016); and, consumer brand relations (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2014). The small number of works that do prioritise *NFY*, commonly acknowledge its self-reflexive nature, use of mixed media, and treatment of the conventions of reality television. For example, Mitchell Finnegan (2016) writes:

While a lot of thrills from the show may seem cheap, there's a deeper level of cultural reflection going on beneath the surface. *Nathan For You* is part of a new generation of

television comedy, one steeped in digital media culture and postmodern reflexivity (2016, pg. 2).

Kimberley McLeod (2018) also comments on the show's awareness of types of media.

Regarding an episode that lampoons highbrow live theatre, she writes:

By exploiting the tropes of both theatrical and televisual forms, Fielder reveals the tropes of theatre of the real to be no less cliched than those of reality television. While perhaps this suggests we could now simply regard both as “low culture” forms, I believe this instead begs us to take a more careful approach to thinking about the so-called “real,” whatever the medium (2018, pg. 223-224).

Assessing *NFY* through the context of mixed-media entertainment also shows few works have considered the program's placement as transmedia. At best, Bradley Dixon (2019) makes brief mention of transmedia when analysing the parafictional personas of comedians (with acknowledgment of Nathan Fielder elsewhere in the publication). However, I would argue an analysis of *NFY* should not overlook its use of transmedia storytelling, which I suggest lends to the series' uniquely absurd, entertaining, and at times profound identity. For me, many defining qualities of the show are produced directly from transmedia storytelling and are only possible through those means. Considering *NFY* as a transmedia text will help shed light on the design choices of the series, its impact on viewers, and how it functions as a text.

Serving as a case study, I will demonstrate the defining qualities of *NFY* that I argue qualify it as a transmedia text. Similar to the *Prism Girl* case study, this argument will be seated in the discussion of Jenkins' popular definition of transmedia (2006). Once I have established *NFY*

is an example of transmedia, I will then assess it via the lens of my MT/DT theory. Doing so will once again be supported by my complementary three principles of transmedia design. My reading of *NFY* will assess the entire series, with reference to specific examples. I aim to use my MT/DT theory applied to *NFY* to help in pursuit of this thesis, illuminating what new design choices can be understood from the television series.

Analysing *Nathan for You* as Transmedia

I propose that integral elements of storytelling throughout *NFY* qualify as transmedia. This may not be the case for every episode of the series but shows relevancy for several of them. Throughout Fielder's success in constructing large-scale, sometimes globally received, pranks in the series, he combines a range of varied media. Although the show is ultimately delivered as a television broadcast, integral elements to each episode's narrative take place outside the scope of television. Many of these cases of mixed media continue to permeate outside of the television platform and leave a lasting presence on the consumer's landscape. For example, the aforementioned petting zoo stunt hinged upon the use of video streaming site, YouTube, with the infamous video still observable in its original form. The goal of the episode was to demonstrate the marketing possibilities of staging a viral video by precisely doing this. Host Nathan Fielder himself has highlighted the show's requirement of manipulating the real world to separate it from other shows, explaining "the thing about our show is that we're dealing with reality. If I open a business on the show, I have to open it in the real world, otherwise we're just doing a sketch" (Hill, 2015, para. 17). This proactive use of the world beyond the program contrasts with the retroactive use of other media seen by other reality television shows. For example, *Love Island* simply repackages its content in bite-sized YouTube videos with the aim of promoting show. This content may also be

reviewed or discussed by third party viewers who share their thoughts on YouTube or other social media sites. In contrast, with *NFY* the content of the petting zoo gag begins on the Internet, creating its own context and impressions on YouTube first, before being reappropriated for use on the television series. Thus, the medium of the Internet is integral to the whole story.

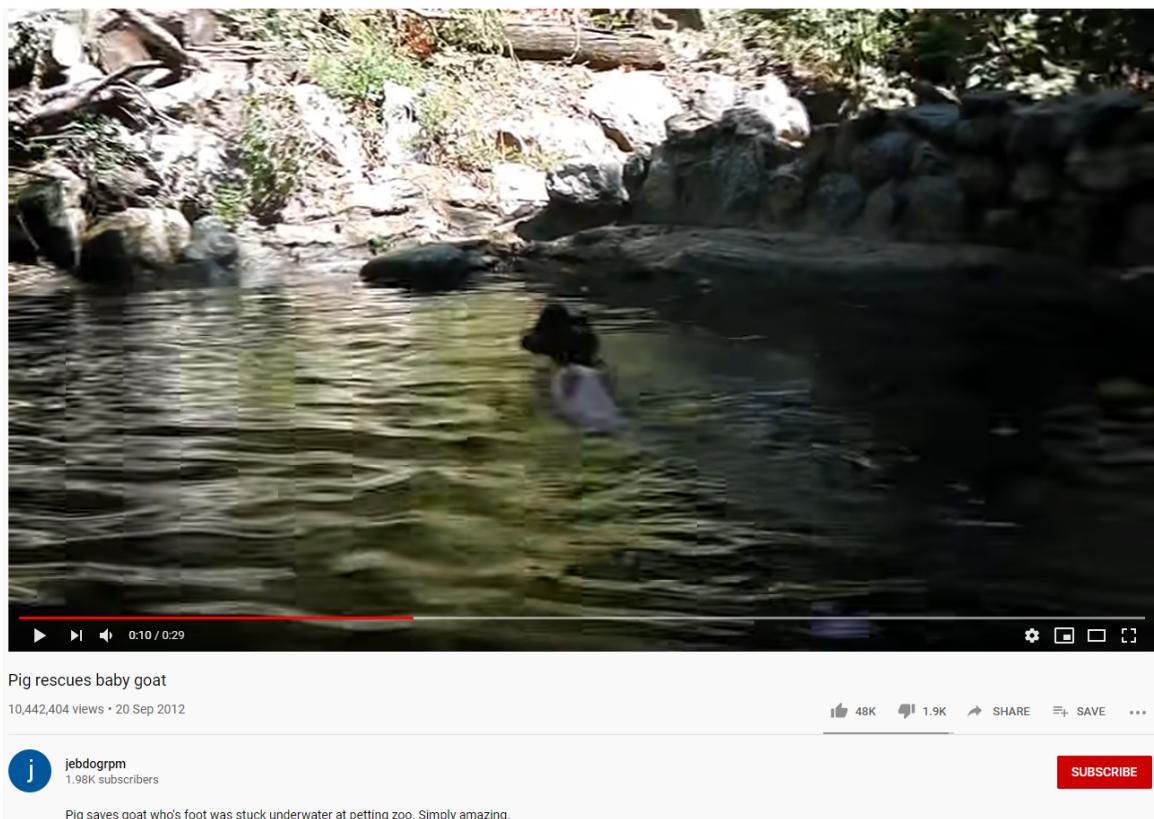


Figure 16. *Pig Rescues Baby Goat* (jebdogrpm, 2012)

To better support this link between real world experiences and *NFY* as a form of transmedia, it is helpful to critically analyse perhaps Fielder's most infamous prank: Dumb Starbucks. In 2014, a coffee shop branded as Dumb Starbucks sprouted in the Los Feliz area in Los Angeles. By all accounts, this store was mimicking the popular Starbucks coffee chain. It shared the logo, design, colours, décor, uniforms, and menu items. The catch was that everything on the menu, and the store's name, was accompanied by the word "dumb". The

business was promoted through Twitter as well as a YouTube video featuring the owner. On its second day of opening, the store was swarmed by curious locals wanting to order a coffee. The story of its popularity was reported in media outlets including: Fox News, Forbes, NBC, and a variety of morning shows. However, not everyone showing up in line for hours was a coffee fanatic — many visiting the store were interested in its artistic value. “It’s an art gallery where coffee is considered art” reads one confused Fox News anchor. “There is absolutely artistic value here” an interviewed local tells ABC News outside of Dumb Starbucks. “There’s a rumour that it might be Banksy” says another to KCAL9 news. “To me, this is a protest. This is a protest against the big fish — the leviathans at Starbucks” a man tells USA Today (Fielder, et al., 2014). A frequently asked questions poster inside the store supported such claims, as it asserted the coffee shop was an art gallery. The Banksy narrative surrounding Dumb Starbucks was a particularly popular one, as also reported by Forbes (Hochman, 2014). Dumb Starbucks imitators used this opportunity to sell fake merchandise for profit. Eventually, Fielder staged a press conference to introduce himself as the coordinator of the stunt. He didn’t make mention of his television show, although the content surrounding the scheme would go on to be used in the second season of the program. To this day, Dumb Starbucks stands as one of Fielder’s most infamous pranks, frequently being brought up with the comedian (Theroux & Nechamkin, 2020).

Image removed for copyright reasons. The figure featured a photograph of the Dumb Starbucks storefront. The published image is accessible via the link provided in the bibliography.

Figure 17. The exterior of the Dumb Starbucks store in the Los Angeles area (Hochman, 2014)

Image removed for copyright reasons. The figure featured a photograph of the 'frequently asked questions' board inside the Dumb Starbucks location. The published image is accessible via the link provided in the bibliography

Figure 18. A frequently asked questions sign located inside the Dumb Starbucks store (Hochman, 2014)

Dumb Starbucks stands as *NFY*'s most viewed episode of all time, reaching 800,000 viewers through its original broadcast (Kondolojy, 2014). By the time the televised episode had aired, a variety of media was deployed to coordinate the stunt: digital media, a social media presence, and a real-world café purportedly functioning as an art gallery. Dumb Starbucks held a presence through the real, online, and televised worlds. Although not explicit at the time, the experience of Dumb Starbucks served as a purpose for a greater narrative, which was only fully completed upon the airing of the episode. John Deighton and Leora Kornfeld (2014) state that Fielder's prank conveyed a covert and clever narrative draped in advertising and marketing — ultimately playing against expectations of branding and consumer relationships. They support this by referencing Nathan Fielder's own words:

[Fielder's] innovation in business, he contended, was that the parody exemption to trademark law allowed anyone to appropriate well-known brands and logos as long as they put "dumb" in front of them. The point of his store, he said, was to demonstrate this principle. Fielder did not link the stunt to his show on Comedy Central, in which his character was a top business school graduate who offered what turned out to be very bad advice to small businesses. The stunt's function as promotion for the show was eventually deduced by journalists and the public. The delayed reveal was an element of play (2014, pg. 30).

Therefore, in Fielder's pursuit of giving an artistic statement on brands, consumers, and parody law, the show host utilised a mix of media for a narrative that took on many forms.

Dumb Starbucks, I suggest, highlights a quality of transmedia that perhaps goes underappreciated. In Jenkins' (2006) popular work on the terminology, he makes mention of using the real world or an "amusement park attraction" (pg. 96). Consider iconic Marvel characters such as Iron Man or Spiderman, that are also placed in the performative confines of amusement parks such as Disney Land alongside traditional media, such as film. Locations and scenarios from these films are incorporated into attractions, rides, and installations — extending the mythology of these characters. This action recontextualises the experience of the character, inviting consumers to meet and interact with them at times. This can also place the consumer in key moments of the character's mythology, such as sitting inside a theme park ride that recreates a firefight from a *Star Wars* film. Although a memorable experience for some, an integral part of a narrative is not always completely conveyed here. The latest Marvel film is complete without demanding a trip to Disney Land.

For such a real-world experience to seem integral to the plot, one can consider alternate reality games (ARG) — the gamification of multiple media and conveying a narrative with the impact of consumers (Connolly, Stansfield & Hainey, 2011). Popular past ARGs have been successful in promoting films such as *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and even the videogame *Halo 2* (2004). While not presented as a game, I suggest there are shared qualities with Fielder's Dumb Starbucks and ARGs. Take for example, the *Dark Knight* ARG. In a marketing campaign to promote the Christopher Nolan film, websites appeared online playing a role in the political landscape of the fictional *Batman* setting: Gotham City. Players of the ARG took directions and objectives from The Joker character.

Donning costumes to show their participation, these players took to the streets to collect clues that worked with the websites to progress the game. I argue that Dumb Starbucks works much in the same way. If it was to be considered as a game, the objective for Nathan Fielder was to turn it into a media sensation as an exploitation of parody laws. While participants in the game, those who visited the store were not exactly aware of the reason behind its creation, their actions progressed the narrative of Dumb Starbucks nonetheless, much like an ARG. This aspect of the Dumb Starbucks narrative then had an impact on the eventual television broadcast, much like the *Dark Knight* ARG is completed through the Internet. Just as *Batman* fans dressed as the Joker character to follow orders and become a part of the story, curious people were lining up at Dumb Starbucks, placing orders, and even buying merchandise elsewhere to be a part of that story. Walking into the store owned by Fielder, while wearing a Dumb Starbucks t shirt from eBay, was like wearing Mickey Mouse ears while visiting Disney Land. This was just another location in Fielder's amusement park of the real world. In a similar way, but in relation to other *NFY* episodes, you may come across The Banzai Predicament on Spotify, or read a review of *The Movement* biography on Amazon. Someone might brag about meeting Donald Duck at Disney Land, but just as well brag that they watched *Pig rescues baby goat* on YouTube before it was featured on *NFY*. Perhaps they even commented on the video or read about it on a news site. Unknowingly, many have stepped into the theme park of Nathan Fielder's pranks — where rollercoasters are replaced with marketing stunts.

If, as argued above, *NFY*, can be regarded as a transmedia creation, then it can be analysed through my three principles of transmedia design. This analysis unearths new

understandings of *NFY* as a transmedia text, while also further supporting the relevance of my MT/DT theory of transmedia.

Principle 1: Introduction of New Content

This is perhaps the most observable trait of *NFY*. Coordinated pranks such as *Pig rescues baby goat*, Dumb Starbucks, music band The Banzai Predicament, and fake fitness fad *The Movement*, all hinge upon a presence outside of television. These examples involve the use of literature, art installations, live performance, the Internet, and music streaming, to convey parts of a narrative that is then completed once documented through the televised episode. This presence outside of television is not a passive choice, but a highly coordinated effort. As Fielder himself emphasises, the series deals with real people — a creative choice to enforce the show's narrative into the realm of reality towards unsuspecting or willing people (Theroux & Nechamkin, 2020). In reference to his work on the series *This Hour has 22 Minutes* (1993) prior to *NFY*, Fielder explains:

[My producer] hired me to do these correspondent pieces with real people. I had never done anything with real people before, but this was the job I was put in, and I was forced to figure out what to do and how to be interesting in that context. And then Nathan for You kind of evolved from there (Theroux & Nechamkin, 2020, para. 17).

As Fielder sought to bring the narrative on the show into the real, to both involve non-actors and satirise the absurdity of business ethics, he used media outside of television which helped to elevate that reality. This made such media not only a presence revolving around the series, but also an integral part of its makeup and character.

To further demonstrate *NFY*'s dispersed content, it can be compared to other television programs that may seem aesthetically similar, but ultimately different in functionality. For example, the use of music in *NFY* through The Banzai Predicament can be compared with the Nickelodeon show *Big Time Rush* (2009). *Big Time Rush*, like *NFY*, ran for four seasons. The scripted teen-comedy series followed the exploits of a developing boy band. In real life, these actors also performed music from the show onstage in character — in the same spirit as the 1966 television program, *The Monkees*. While the way *Big Time Rush* links a television series, live performance, and three pop albums might seem diverse enough to be transmedia, in many ways this is not the case. Any sort of narrative is only really conveyed through the television program itself. The music under the Big Time Rush brand only serves as aesthetically pleasing entertainment designed to increase commercial success. While this music is used to complement appropriate scenes through the series (romantic music for romantic scenes, uplifting music during character development), the music when consumed independently does not convey additional story or plot elements. When contrasting this use of music with Fielder's The Banzai Predicament, a completely different intent is unearthed. The Banzai Predicament was not made to be listenable, enjoyable, commercially successful, create fans, or chart a hit. It served a purpose as part of the bigger scheme — a cog in the machine to exploit a shipping tariff law for the television program's narrative. Thus, the true success of The Banzai Predicament was nestled in a deceitful goal — legitimising the use of smoke alarms as instruments through media publicity. This music was foremost a direct narrative tool, before functioning anything like the creations of a conventional music band. Consider the two images below: while not explicitly stated, one documents an event that is part of a greater narrative, whereas the other doesn't. Can you spot the difference?

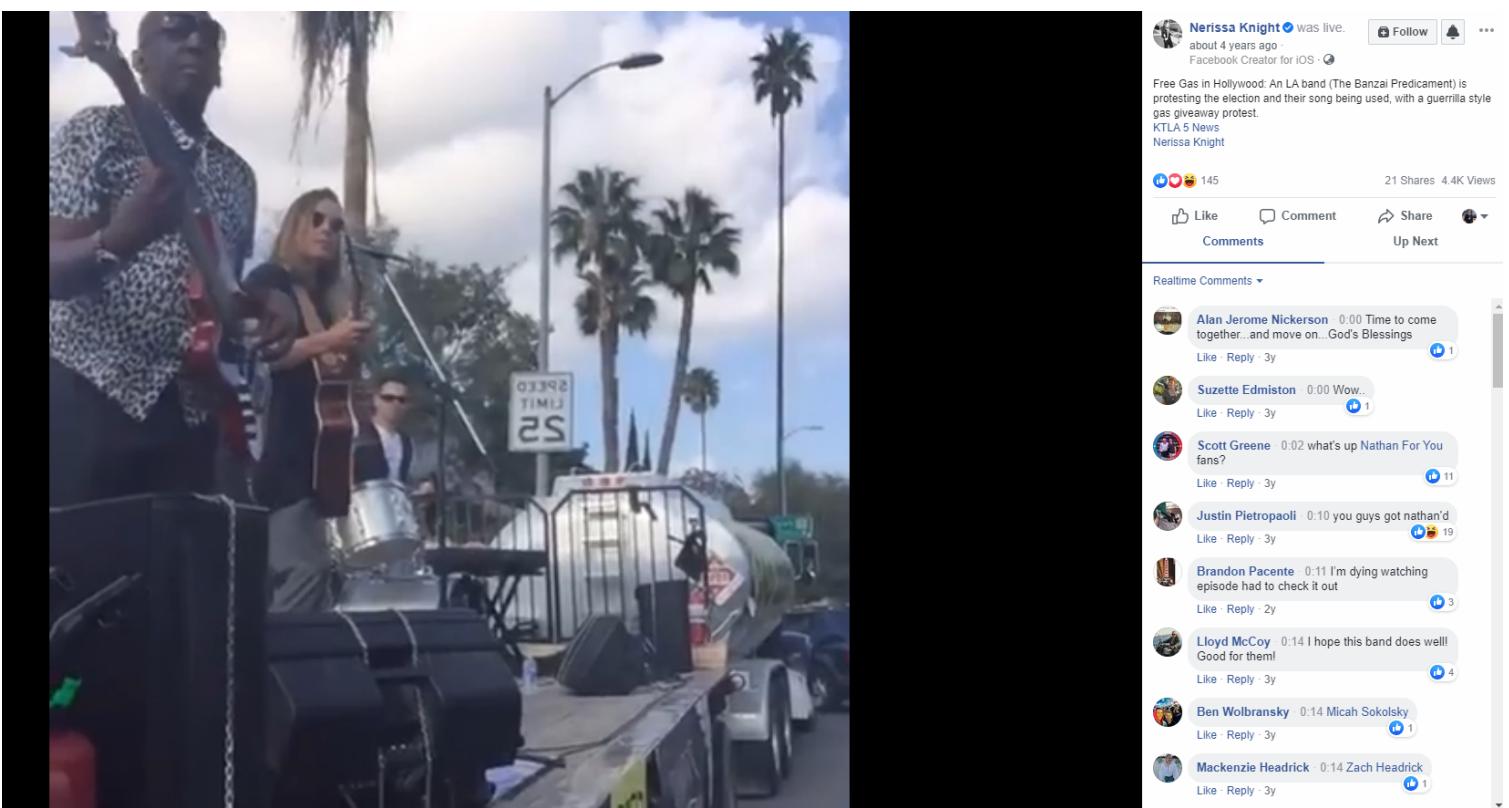


Figure 19. KTLA5 News reporter Nerissa Knight broadcasting *The Banzai Predicament's* protest

against Shell (2016). Screenshot of Facebook broadcast, taken from

<https://www.facebook.com/nerissaknight/videos/1255627297816803/?v=1255627297816803>



Figure 20. Band Big Time Rush performing in Bristow, Virginia (Samantha, 2013). Image taken from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KcM7OokRII>

Principle 2: The role of each piece of media, and the relationships between them

Analysing *NFY* through this second principle may highlight why the show is so critically well received: in part because of the level of deceit and trickery executed by its host Nathan Fielder. Comically, one of the show's greatest draws is the absurd lengths Fielder goes to in an effort to market his clients. Usually, the larger the scheme grows, the more willing participants Fielder takes advantage of. For example, in the episode where Fielder tries to launch a class action suit against electronics chain Best Buy, he constructs a fake dating show to gather dirt from an ex-Best Buy employee. The woman, only known as Elle, genuinely believes she is on camera for the sake of a reality dating show. However, viewers have more context, knowing she is only an accessory to Fielder's senseless rivalry with a

corporation. Viewers laugh at Elle's expense as she awkwardly navigates a romantic evening with Fielder's antisocial persona. Throughout the show's tenure, there are many "Elle's"; many people who unknowingly play a role in Fielder's larger narrative. Journalist Nerissa Knight, as pictured above, played into Fielder's hand by giving a band that plays the smoke detector media coverage. Hundreds of people lined up at Dumb Starbucks to marvel at the art gallery, only to become part of the artistic experiment itself. Therefore, depending on what role you play in the mythology of *NFY*, you assume a different context and experience. This participation by the outside world also affects the trajectory of the narrative. For example, the *Pig rescues baby goat* viral video had a whole different context until it was revealed as an accessory to the television program. In that case, there were potentially over five million "Elle's"; five million people browsing YouTube, or watching USA Today, being duped by the fake video. Such context is also exaggerated through how each piece of media plays against each other: the purpose of *Pig rescues baby goat* becomes whole once its production process is viewed through *NFY* on television.

Analysing *NFY* through this principle also highlights its strengths in storytelling. Some people might only see the televised experience, remaining unaware of much of the media surrounding the episode, however, consuming and interacting with that media gives a new perspective of the gag. This speaks to a level which encourages and rewards consumers for being engaged with the transmedia aspects of the text. For example, the episode about *The Movement* is bizarre enough on its own. Watching morning show hosts blindly accept everything about not only the inane fitness routines, but also the content of the falsified biography is hilarious. Ghost writer Austin Bowers even asserted that plant-body builder Jack Garbarino was childhood friends with the late Apple chief, Steve Jobs. The journalists

did not protest this at all. Shown through the episode, this is funny enough. However, a new perspective is likely gained if you buy and read the book yourself allowing you to gain a full understanding of just how wild Fielder's gag was. Reading the book has the potential to peel away layers of the greater narrative. In fact, many people might have been exposed to the book's content before the stunt was unravelled. In that case, they would have assumed a role in Fielder's story, captivated via literature and morning show television, before realising they were just a prop in his theatre of the absurd — one that pushes boundaries of television and other media. Although Kimberley McLeod's (2018) assessment of *NFY* is in relation to an episode specifically involving live theatre, I would suggest her comments can be applied to the show's theatre of the real aspect, present in a variety of episodes that take advantage of unassuming participants. She writes:

Reality television is routinely mocked for its insincerity and vacuousness, while theatre of the real tends to be dominated by serious, socio-politically engaged topics and approaches. With the "Smokers Allowed" episode, Fielder folds theatre of the real into his larger project—an ongoing reality show that simultaneously confirms and disrupts dominant narratives about reality television (McLeod, 2018, pg. 211).

This highlights Fielder's strength to play participants and media against each other for his narrative in both the show, and in the real world. The pretence of being a reality television show plays to Fielder's advantage at times, frequently disarming his prey. Meanwhile, he uses participants as props in a highly coordinated, sometimes covert, and often self-reflexive gag. In contrast to perhaps more conventional contemporary transmedia, such as a videogame used to promote a block-buster film, Fielder's narratives allow for all different kinds of roles to be played by participants who are both willing and unwilling. With a

videogame, prioritised commercially to please a demographic, you are expected to undertake one specific role as a consumer. Fielder's theatre of the real is much more liberal, showcasing a fluid landscape of absurdity that utilises multiple media to blur the boundaries of reality. Those who are curious and dive down the rabbit holes of Fielder's many pranks, are rewarded for investigating the makeup of each gag with further context and content.



Figure 21. Bodybuilder Jack Garbarino providing press for *The Movement* biography on KCWI 23 News (2015). Screenshot taken from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaGxDNWcmx4>

Image removed for copyright reasons. The figure featured an excerpt of *The Movement* (Garbarino 2015), chapter five.

Figure 22. An excerpt from the biography *The Movement* (Garbarino, 2015)

Principle 3: The Quality of Experience Realised Through Transmedia Means

This brings us to the final principle of the analytical framework: the general experience of the text only being achievable through the means of transmedia. As I argued earlier in this chapter, not only do I find transmedia assessments of *NFY* lacking in academic work — analysing the television program and its surrounding elements as transmedia can greatly help to better understand its critical success. As I have demonstrated drawing from specific episodes, some of Fielder's most recognisable pranks deliver a unified experience through diverse media. Not only are these media used effectively in their own right, they are demonstrably integral to the intended experience overall: selling absurdity, offering legitimacy, lampooning topics, being deceitful; and yet also poignantly critical of culture, socioeconomics, and media forms. *NFY*'s impressive storytelling is only possible using multiple media. It is not just a good example of transmedia, it is extremely compelling transmedia that pushes the boundaries of this form.

To demonstrate the purpose of using this principle to assess *NFY*, imagine the viewing experience if the series was entirely bound to the confines of television. Generally, this would erase a level of self-reflexive storytelling, undoing opportunities that widen the scope of the series when placing its stories across different media. Pranks such as *The Movement* would be near-impossible to coordinate without actually writing and publishing the biography itself. This would also remove other opportunities, such as when Fielder fools morning show hosts into believing *The Movement*'s worth as a body building program. The petting zoo episode would not work without having drawn in millions of viewers with a staged viral video. The Banzai Predicament wouldn't actually have to publish their music but would instead just appear as a band throughout the single episode. Plainly, this removes the

genius of *NFY*, which thrusts its characters and stories into the viewer's real world, blurring the lines of reality. Without transmedia, the mythology of the show shrinks to the detriment of the narrative. To return once again to a quote by Fielder, the show separated itself from others by deriving authenticity from flaunting of the rules of conventional television:

Audiences are very good at sensing inauthentic moments, and I like putting myself in situations that throw me off, because that leads to the most authentic moments from myself [...] The thing about our show is that we're dealing with reality. If I open a business on the show, I have to open it in the real world, otherwise we're just doing a sketch (Hill, 2015, paras. 12-17).

Fielder's decision, to create genuine moments via reality, drive the show's use of more than just television: including elements of theatre, music, the Internet, literature, and so on. Such uses of mixed media highlight where Fielder's voice thrives not only as a comic, but also a curator of the day-to-day absurdity of our real life. Such a mixture of media, as well, is what positions the show to operate as transmedia — whether it was a conscious decision or not.

I suggest my analysis of the show as transmedia unearthed significant new understandings to *NFY*'s creation and viewing experience. Its strengths and uniqueness are especially highlighted through my categorisation of MT/DT, and the supporting three principles of design. *NFY* clearly thrives as DT, with its use of meticulously planned multimedia elements that push its storytelling to ambitious heights, only possible by using transmedia to blur reality. *NFY* offers exciting new content at every possibility, sets up ambitious relationships between each delivery platform, providing a unified experience subverting conventional reality television through a living, breathing text firmly planted in people's day-to-day lives.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis establishes the complex design choices that contribute to the delivery and experiences of transmedia texts, noting that an objective approach to defining what constitutes transmedia and its rules has barely matured past the popular terminology offered by Jenkins. To help fill this gap, I have offered my categorisation of MT/DT and the complementary three principles of design. To show the worth of this analytical framework, I have applied it to two case studies: *Prism Girl*, and *Nathan for You*. In the case of *Prism Girl*, applying the three principles highlighted where the project failed to produce a compelling transmedia experience. Although it fulfills all three principles to a degree, warranting a label of DT, making changes to *Prism Girl* to better address the design philosophies outlined by the analytical tool would create a stronger and more cohesive experience. This argument was framed with references to other music based transmedia texts, such as *Lemonade* (2016) and *Capsule Silence XXIV* (2016). By drawing comparisons, opportunities to significantly better *Prism Girl*'s design as a transmedia text were made apparent.

Applying the MT/DT categorisation to the second case study, *Nathan for You (NFY)*, unearthed new understandings of the text. I argue this level of analysis of the series is needed for academic discussion, as well as general discussion of contemporary media and popular culture. Several published works draw out the many qualities of *NFY* that make it such an intriguing piece of media, including the frequent flaunting of television conventions, satire, performative comedy, abstract goals and moments, the comedic genius of its host Nathan Fielder, large scale pranks on the unsuspecting public, or anything in between. While all these qualities do speak to the uniqueness of the show and its positive critical reception, my MT/DT categorisation (and associated three principles) address all these

things under the banner of transmedia storytelling. Through my analysis, I drew upon the ways in which *NFY* thrust its content outside of the television screen, and into the real world, sometimes beginning its story outside the confines of the television medium to spin a narrative. This pursuit of genuine interaction, and stories placed in people's day-to-day, is often a quality outlined in the favour of *NFY*'s genius (Safdie, 2016; Morris, 2017). I have argued that it is best exercised via transmedia processes, sometimes only possible through such processes. My argument was fortified by comparing *NFY* to other media that may seem aesthetically similar (such as the television series *Big Time Rush*), showing how these differ from the coordinated multimedia stories birthed via *NFY*. Whether there was a conscious effort to use transmedia storytelling for the show or not, it now seems to be its greatest strength following analysis through my three principles of design. I would categorise *NFY* not only as a case of DT, but as one that excels at this form, thus being a template from which other creators could learn.

Applying MT/DT theory throughout this thesis has been a successful way to investigate the design choices behind a variety of transmedia texts. The chosen case studies show it provides insight into, music-based transmedia, as well as a critically acclaimed television series and associated media. Alongside this, the three principles of design I identify have been useful in assessing a variety of theories (Gambarato, 2013; Davidson, 2010; Phillips, 2012) and other texts such as *The Matrix*, *Lemonade* (2013), and *Defiance* (2011). It seems reasonable to suggest others could use my categorisation and three principles of design to create and analyse transmedia narratives in both educational and professional settings, with the potential for the theory and principles to evolve as transmedia itself continues to evolve.

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