Transmedia in the Classroom: Breaking the Fourth Wall

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ABSTRACT

While transmedia storytelling surrounds us in our daily lives as we experience ubiquitous market campaigns, there is a dearth of documented instances of transmedia storytelling being used for curricular purposes within formalized learning environments. This paper discusses the theory, design, and implementation of a transmedia story used as an avenue to further contextualize and unpack several works by Edgar Allen Poe in a 9th and 10th grade language arts class in the United States. Teacher and student responses to the experience are documented.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.1 [**Computing Milieux**]: Computer uses in Education – *collaborative learning, computer-assisted instruction (CAI), computer-managed instruction (CMI), distance learning.*

General Terms

Performance, Design, Experimentation, Theory

Keywords

transmedia, storytelling, curriculum, learning, "additive comprehension," curriculum

1. Theoretical Framework

Indulge us in a metaphor. In very traditional, lecture-based learning scenarios, the classroom is much like a theater. The primary central focus of the class makes up a "stage" of sorts, with chairs, desks, tables, projectors, screens and podiums all in the ready and oriented toward a focal location which is usually occupied by the teacher, instructor, or professor as the central character, who with great oration, if not drama, relays stories and facilitates understandings. Meanwhile, the students play audience. On occasion, the students also assume the role of peripheral characters as they come forward to gain the spotlight either while the teacher is not looking or with permission to share their knowledge and wisdom. Parody aside, however, it is exactly the "breaking of the fourth wall," a term in theater coined by Diderot [1] and used to describe the broaching of the imaginary wall between audience and actors, that often makes learning more dynamic and interesting for students in educational environments.

The breaking of the fourth wall has long been used from an *instructional* standpoint since educators have long used student-centered learning [2, 3] that has its early rumblings in the constructivist pedagogical approaches of Vygotsky [4] and the Progressive philosophies of Dewey [5]. If we are to extend our playful metaphor, we might say that with student-centered methodology, the entire classroom is the stage and the scripts are now multiple and various, individualized and collaborative, enveloping comedy and drama with sporadic bouts of absurdity and tragedy.

Likewise, it might also be said that *educational content* (the tools of learning) holds a similar position as the old-school teacher. The content lies as an object of consumption with interaction occurring usually through response to an end of chapter questions, or perhaps manifesting as part of a discussion via the whim of the teacher. However, in contrast to a long history of student-centered instruction, much of today's language arts curriculum remains fairly traditional, though it could be positioned to break the fourth wall, which would allow students a way to engage with educational content more actively. While a good deal of educational digital content is still flat, we have seen a greater accentuation in the research literature and in classroom practice on how dynamic content (primarily gaming) can be used in class contexts. Often times in the literature, we also see a bifurcation of what it means to do academics and what it means to play games [6]. Some scholars, however, are taking a deeper look at how game play overlaps with reading and writing and have begun to show the added potential benefit of game play on literacy [7, 8, 9]. Yet, less is known about other types of dynamic content and media and what it affords learning.

In this paper, we tackle transmedia storytelling as a dynamic content method through which learning can be facilitated. Transmedia was first coined as a term [10] when discussing how vast networks of marketing in the forms of stories swarm a central product such as a Batman movie or the release of a new CD. Stories embedded in video games, real artifacts and websites extend the narrative reach of the central media object. Though the contours of its meaning are in flux [11, 12], transmedia is primarily defined as a story that is told in pieces through various mediums so as when brought together, it tells a complete whole. Yet, the media may be viewed separately, and it may make sense as a stand alone. Transmedia storytelling can entail adaptations [13] or extensions of stories [14] that add new dimensions to plot, characters and themes.

Although meant to be associated with result of the entertainment industry's weaving together of storylines across mediums, the term "additive comprehension" [15] seems of particular import to learning situations, too, since it highlights the degree to which each new text adds to our understanding of the story as a whole. Transmedia storytelling is positioned to do just that, and although teachers often supply students with supplemental content for learning, these objects are coherent and centralized through a single medium with storylines that are not overlapping or infused with each other's narrative DNA.

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The gaming literature supplies a solid lens for analyzing the contours of transmedia. Games in education include a range of implementations from the well-known but recently termed *gamification* (using game design elements in non-game contexts) to using game design as a strategy for teaching course content. The range in which the types of games and ways that games are employed in educational settings continues to grow and diversify. Alternate reality games (ARGs) is another form of game play using transmedia to engage players in a narrative that evolves and changes through time. Much like the narrative of a role playing game (RPG) video game, play takes place in the real world using both virtual and real components. Successful enactment of an ARG requires highly choreographed components being triggered and timed according to very specific player actions. Though many of these components are automated through coordinated platforms, the overarching experience cannot be play-tested in the same capacity as a video game, leaving a broader opportunity for unscripted and emergent game play influenced by the contexts and surroundings in which it is deployed.

In regards to education, ARGs share the same challenge as educational video games in trying to successfully merge quality play and engagement with educational content. Game design for entertainment purposes alone is a difficult and challenging task ($10.5 Billion dollar industry) [16] and the volume of entertainment titles that aren't successful is in part evidence of the challenges inherent game design and development. Throw in the successful integration of learning content into games and there is an additional layer of complexity. For ARGs, the multimodal nature of a transmedia component requires a hybridized game design approach; identifying the potential of the physical environment married with the capabilities of the technology.

Salen & Zimmerman [17] provide an exhaustive list of guidelines for reviewing and studying games but as is the nature of game design it is difficult to manage all of the parameters at one time. For instance, in the interactivity section there are six sub-topics on outcomes, four modes of interactivity, anatomy of choice, internal and external events, and space of possibility. Though this is an incredibly insightful and helpful breakdown of the complexities of interactivity alone, the bridging of these rich observations with application is a complicated task. It is the investigation of this type of thoughtful game design enacted that requires more thorough research alongside educational experiences review to help isolate why some educational games are successful and others not.

From an educational psychology perspective, Spiro's theory of Cognitive Flexibility [18] perhaps offers a valuable framework for thinking about transmedia content and how it might serve learning. In short, transmedia is an ill-structured problem space. The solution of transmedia mystery for example requires the "reader" to thread together a plot and sew together meaning across a number of mediums. Often times the transmedia content parallels the work that is done in class, other times it expands and complicates it. As it does so, the transmedia content allows participants to follow the leads they find fruitful and appropriate to finding a solution to a problem or issue. Although some researchers look closely at how learners come to comprehend online sources and hypertext [19, 20] as well as search for materials using hyperlinks, transmedia as an object of consumption assumes that the story lives at multiple levels of richness depending on how deeply a reader investigates. There is not one right answer to obtain. Consequently, transmedia content is intended to put the reader through a constructive act, not merely transmit content as often happens in one-dimensional texts.

Consequently, to investigate transmedia as a learning tool, we ask: How might transmedia storytelling be used as a tool for learning? And when used with students, how do they respond to the transmedia experience?

2. Methods

2.1 Contexts and Participants

Transmedia storytelling was used within the six-week unit on how to build suspense in written narrative. The unit featured several of the works by Edgar Allan Poe as models of good writing since the goal of the unit was to use classical works of literature to highlight the elements of suspense and then make contemporary connections to them. Students continually practiced reading the challenging works of Poe throughout the unit. Given that Poe is often considered a difficult read and that supports for understanding are often needed to help students understand of the text (e.g., reading strategies, references, graphic organizers), transmedia storytelling was enlisted to heighten student academic engagement and provide a different way to experience the life and works of Poe. To test how transmedia storytelling would be received by students and teachers and to see whether they were making connections between the transmedia story and the works of Poe, we enacted the curriculum twice. The first pilot was with 16, ninth graders at a rural alternative school, and the second pilot was with 96, tenth grade students at an urban high school in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. The classes were co-taught with the teacher and researcher as participate observer [21]. Student and teacher observation and interviews were conducted and artifacts gathered to understand how transmedia was taken up by students and teachers, if at all.

2.2 Transmedia Curricular Design

The unit's curriculum was located in a Learning Management System called Educurious, powered by Remix [22]. The platform is best described as a marriage between a content delivery system and a social network, and consequently, the students interacted and collaborated with each other in the network, as well as received their lessons with some teacher instruction. The class relied on a blended learning model [23] in which the students and teacher still met live in classrooms and operated much like a traditional class, but the content and some interactions were digital. The platform was a natural conduit for the transmedia story since it was the hub for retrieving lesson materials and storing student writing.

A set of characters was established in the platform that appeared among the regular student profiles, and the content associated with the characters was time released into the Educurious system so character postings appeared in Status Updates, blogs, and messages. As a whole, these various postings with their subsequent links to other online content, were sequenced and woven together to form a story that echoed plots in Poe--thus, acting as reinforcement to understanding plotlines, themes and characterization.

From a curriculum standpoint, the sequence of the stories read in class and their analysis were gently reinforced by the transmedia content. As example, during the reading of "*The Murders on the Rue Morgue*," the set of characters in Educurious, posted status

updates, blogs and messages about the story, Poe, and each other. In fact, the transmedia story had its own villain who anonymously played tricks and intimidated the other characters as the transmedia story evolved. For example, echoing the happenings in one of Poe's stories in which a young mademoiselle was choked and shoved up a chimney, Ashley, one of the transmedia characters, experienced having her stuffed animals' throat slit and then stuffed up a chimney. Another transmedia character, Enrique, having a fear of the dentist and having just read "Berenice" (in which the narrator in a trance unburies his betrothed and pulls out her teeth), was taunted when he was sent a cast set of dentures with a cypher printed on them.

The curriculum "bounce" of the transmedia story was not always a direct hit. For instance, although the transmedia content that contained allusion to a work of Poe would usually port on the same day as the text was being covered in class, it could also appear a day or two before or after. This served to form recursive loops with the curriculum, and since the teaching did not rely on the transmedia content as its main focus, the transmedia story could also act as prelude or review of Poe in a different context. Therefore, varying time and context provided students with an opportunity to visit plots and happenings that revolved around Poe. Providing more than one opportunity to experience a curriculum object, such as a short story by Poe and the techniques he used, was intended for students to gain a deeper understanding of the content. Additionally, the transmedia story also made reference to Poe's life and incorporated links original correspondence between Poe and his estranged, adoptive father, as well as Poe's wife.

3. Findings & Analysis

3.1 Teacher Response: What's Important?

Despite the care in design between classroom curriculum and transmedia content, teachers who embedded the transmedia story into the curriculum were somewhat confused by its role from a pedagogical standpoint. Coming from traditional English/language arts, the inclination is for students to have direct instruction of ideas and concepts. With the transmedia, however, the content was more ethereal, and readers can pursue any number of directions. While explicating the plot upfront helped students to gain their bearings, other instruction proved difficult because it was not and could not be the primary text for the course. While a teacher could spend more time unpacking the transmedia story, the curriculum was so full that the transmedia content lived as underlife for the main curriculum. It had to reside under the surface of the curriculum, and it surfaced for class time air only occasionally. One teacher was so confused by the content, she/he simply followed the teachable moments guide developed by the writer without actually ever finding the script for the transmedia story. This didn't seem to impede student progress with the story. In fact, many made it to the concluding chapter to pose their solutions to the mystery. In the second pilot, there was a greater accentuation in how to incorporate the new type of content, and the teacher put a graffiti wall at the back of the class where students were encouraged to post information about the characters and plot as they unfolded. The board acted as a central tool to gather thoughts about the plot and document the unfolding narrative. Informal conversations arose in response to the wall posting, but they took secondary importance.

3.2 Disorienting Position: What's Real?

In addition to social networks, the conventions of transmedia storytelling were also new to students and teachers. When first introduced to the story through messages, some students became confused by the content in relation to the medium. One student after reading a message from a character became very upset by audacity of the character's tone. The teacher needed to remind her that the message was from a character. Another student wrote back to characters insisting that he was sent the messages by mistake. And an adult mentor who was working with students read the activity feed in the platform and became alarmed at the nasty dialogue occurring between the characters and alerted the site administrator, only to be told they were characters in transmedia story. Disorientation acted as a draw for students (and mentors) and once aware of the genre format, they participated as mystery solvers. Some students commented on which character they would like to date and who they would not be friends with. There seemed to be a more personal and visceral reactions to the characters since continuous posting of content through multimedia status updates, messages and blog posts mirrored the everyday communication in which the student participated.

3.3 Splintered Narrative: How to Make Sense of New Genres?

The student response to the transmedia story was mixed. Negative reaction was largely influenced by the platform and content imports not working well during one enactment, but some students simply did not understand how the narrative pieces fit together. This was not an issue of the students not being capable of reading a story through a number of mediums, but rather the mode of storytelling was removed from the school-based literacies they were accustomed to, and the layered and deconstructed content confounded the expectations they had for educational content.

Additionally, Providing students an opportunity to interact with a narrative as an agent caused confusion as to which perspective they should take. Some found being an interloper of message exchanges between characters to be a strange position from an audience perspective since such a stance as a reader is not a common convention within digital domains. One student called it "eavesdropping". In contrast, others were a tickled by the position, and caught onto the format from the start with little problem locating their positionality in relation to the work they were reading.

As mentioned previously, students were also exposed to a secondary curriculum that included nonfiction texts. These reading included biographical information through text and video, as well as original correspondence between Poe and friends, enemies and family. The content rounded out the students understanding of Poe. In fact, he was viewed by some students as a sympathetic character rather than as just a bizarre figure of history and literature. One student commented, "His father was mean. No wonder he ended up this way." Other students became intrigued by Griswold, Poe's long time nemesis, and Poe's relationships with his wife. This type of cross-genre reading and discovery rarely happens in school, and the students made the traversal seamlessly as they moved between texts and dove as deeply into the transmedia story as they desired.

4. Conclusion

Transmedia as a form of Alternate Reality Gaming (ARG) and creating educational transmedia experience not only exposes the challenges of educational game design but reveals the potential for an ambient role of additional learning content when experienced as a game. Transmedia storytelling offers classrooms another way to engage students; it is not meant to be a replacement of teachers and curriculum, but rather a supplement. As ambient content, it serves to reinforce curriculum and expand students' typical exposure to a topic. It allows students to dive as deeply into a topic as they wish, while providing them with a way to access difficult texts and concepts. In this particular study, teachers and students had some trouble locating the genre and narrative within their traditional schema of educational content and stories more generally, but the transmedia content also provided an avenue for "additive comprehension" for the works of Poe. Forthcoming research endeavors include measuring the impact of transmedia on student comprehension and their overall growth in their knowledge base of Poe and his works.

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