

THE TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING PHENOMENON: AN APPROACH FROM COMPLEXITY

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ABSTRACT: The present work seeks to analyze the Transmedia phenomenon under the light of the systemic theories developed by Edgar Morin and Jorge Albuquerque Vieira. Contrary to what much of the literature on the subject indicates, Transmedia isn't a narrative, but an ecosystem. Thus, our goal is to understand how a transmediatic ecosystem is articulated and developed, and also how this ecosystem finds its way as a *living system*. We conclude the article with a comparison between the current immersive transmediatic ecosystem and the mythological world of archaic societies.

KEYWORDS: transmedia storytelling; culture of convergence; complexity; theory of systems; ecosystems.

Índice

Introdução	1
1 On Instability, Complexity and Spirals	2
2 On Immersions, Migrations and Imbricate Experiences	6
References	8

Introdução

THE present stage of so-called Transmedia Storytelling resembles the period in which Cinema lacked most of its conventions, rules and standards regarding language and communication channels. In

fact, there's much fumbling around in the darkness, much trial and error, in this new way of telling stories in New Media. It isn't constrained to movie theatres and/or traditional TV stations; it expands, gravitates, plunges and moves through different sources, links and paths. This is known as multi-platform media (Jenkins, 2009: 138). It is more sensitive in that it provides a greater multiplicity of viewpoints and collateral experiences to spectators who wish to explore and learn more about characters and the plots into which they are immersed in and intertwined with (Jenkins, *ibid.*: 184).

The Transmedia phenomenon came to be at a time when users/readers/viewers/

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players were immersed in experiences that spanned both the new and the old media. Indeed, the qualitative aspect of Transmedia arises out of the integration of different languages, aesthetics and poetics that make up these experiences. In order to understand the exploratory, interlaced, immersive and expansive nature of the phenomenon, we must turn our attention to its hyper-complex ecology.

So what is this hyper-complex ecology? Media ecology is simply the current environment in which we see a plurality of media coexisting, competing, connecting, diverging and converging with one another, giving rise to a great variety of experiences—prosaic, playful, economic, logical (Morin, 2007: 141) —that permeate our everyday lives.

In spite of facing a multifaceted media ecology, with distinct languages and poetics, the media and the arts weren't extinguished, but they transformed one another. Mass media became on-demand; print media started leading a double life: online and offline; photography became social media; and social media transformed our public spaces, now ubiquitous and transitive. There is still room, however, for movies theaters and scheduled TV shows and radio broadcasts, as well as for circus and theater events, concerts and rock festivals, all kinds of artistic performances, art museums and graffiti. In short, the media ecology doesn't exclude anything, all experiences and interfaces are incorporated.

We possess the media as much as we are possessed by it, this is a bidirectionally driven relationship (Morin, 2007: 127). It is a circuit with a positive feedback loop that gains autonomy through eco-dependency. In fact, the media is eco-dependent on experiences that are outside of itself. At the same time, that which is outside is also eco-dependent on the media. The old and the new are never rejected, they are incorporated, intersected, overlapped and organi-

zed to give rise to multiplicity and diversity. This is the Gordian knot that we have come to call hyper-complexity.

Thus, the Transmedia phenomenon is umbilically connected to this hyper-complex media ecology and this is the systemic view that underlies this article.

1 On Instability, Complexity and Spirals

Transmedia is basically shaped by the interactions (Morin, 2008: 105) that occur between different media. These interactions are systemic, which means there is a group of communication media that individually performs specific functions and these groups interact and commingle. Together, they give rise to a fictional universe. The interaction and interaction between specific media is immersed in a unique and dynamic universe that shapes an active organization—or system. This system has a procedural matrix that is forged through the multiform interplay between diversity, variety, antagonism, diversion, rupture, equilibrium, order and disorder.

In its ontological bias, Transmedia is therefore the result of a pluralistic, multiform, diverse and varied organization, with an active unity that establishes and maintains itself—acquires existence—via the multiplicity of interactions, complementations and intercommunications which the different media—with its specificities, functions and aesthetics—can provide, produce, develop and transform. Therefore, “(...) its diversity is necessary to its unity and its unity is necessary to its diversity.” (Morin, *ibid.*: 147)

Thus, Transmedia *is born* in complexity—for it needs other media to exist—and it *generates* complexity—for by triggering different media with their specificities—languages and aesthetics—it enlarges the semiotic horizon of the current fictional universe. As soon as the ecosystem esta-

blishes itself, it launches a process of eco-dependence. The ensuing mutual collaboration/cooperation among different media is set against a backdrop of complementarity (Morin, *ibid.*: 183).

Therefore, Transmedia cannot be conceptualized as arising from a single medium, but from a set of knots, bonds, links, terminals and access gateways, whose specificities and functions complement, harmonize and retroact with one another in a recursive multicircuit (Morin, *ibid.*: 231). The resulting dynamics operate through concessions, cooperations and associations between the participating media—movies, social media, comic books, animations etc.; thus, each medium—online and/or offline—has its particularities and is immersed in its own individual characteristics, in terms of language and aesthetics, which collaborates/cooperates/complements (with) the whole: Transmedia.

In fact, this *complex unity* through which Transmedia structures itself is an eco-organization (Morin, 2005: 35-42) with a temporal nature. In other words, it's a type of organization that occurs in time (Vieira, 2007: 93) and whose logic revolves around temporal processes, which in turn encompass transformations, fluctuations and intersemiosis.

According to Vieira (*ibid.*: 89), there are three key classification criteria to observe in a system: its permanence capacity, its environment and its autonomy. For a system to become consolidated as such, it must observe hierarchical or evolutionary parameters that take time into account. These parameters can be outlined as follows: composition, connectivity, structure, integrality, functionality and organization, all of them permeated by a parameter that can appear at the very first stage: complexity. Thus, a system is characterized by its temporal process and its capacity to grow and develop. The complexity of such

a temporal movement arises out of the diversity of connections that help the system survive.

The implementation and activation of Transmedia follows a similar process. Since these media must be grouped together into a single piece of work that is embedded in a network, this environment is marked by a temporal process that demands to evolve through each one of the hierarchical parameters mentioned above. Thus, such a system expands and lasts as long as its permanence capacity will allow, that is, its capacity to reach *regularity* in the construction of a narrative in crossed and complementary medias.

On the one hand, there is a risk, to a greater or lesser extent, that such a combination of media will bring on a process of entropy (Morin, *ibid.*: 94) with the potential to harm the intersemiotic interfaces and exchanges between its many layers of meaning. In fact, the organizational wealth of a system is measured by its diversity and variety, for its logic is marked by transformation, generation and production; or, as Morin underscores: the interactions and associations between different media give rise to “interproduction”. (Morin, *ibid.*: 202) So, entropy would have a homogenizing effect on the system; multiplicity and differences would be lost, leading the system to collapse since the “organization of a system is the organization of differences.” (Morin, *ibid.*: 149). Thus, complementarity means exchange of *information*, the commerce of *signs/difference*, or simply *intersemiosis*.

We can say that, in the end, the poetics operated by Transmedia are produced through the ontological systemic interplay of media interactions in a multiple and cooperative whole (Morin, *ibid.*: 147). Thus, each medium, in its particular field, is responsible for a signic fragment which goes through a process of creation, development, and production. This fragment

has to: a) connect itself to others; b) map existing relations; c) structure itself, that is, establish and strengthen two-way inter-semiotic relations during the articulation and development period of works; d) integrate with other media in a process of complementarity; e) accomplish a task, with the goal of establishing mutual and interdependent cooperation; and, f) materialize in an organization (or organicity) that is cohesive enough to develop pragmatic *regularity* while a specific work is executed in crossed media.

The complexity of the dialogue that takes place between online and offline media leads them to integrate and take shape. This transformation happens through the interfacing and signic interchanges they bring about, but also *maintain* and *produce* among themselves. (Morin, *ibid.*: 148)

What makes such multiplicity of media work in a complex and interacting unity is that which Morin calls *generative idea*. (Morin, *ibid.*: 277) In this sense, this matrix idea—*source of information*—puts these subsystems in motion and gives rise to a recursive retroactive multicircuit between the whole and its parts, and between the parts and the whole. This means that the parts—subsystems or media—have a retroactive and recursive effect on the whole—the Transmedia—and the whole has a retroactive and recursive effect on the parts. The parts form the multicircuit where intersemiosis, fluctuations and transformations take place. (Morin, *ibid.*: 228)

This *nucleator idea*—which is the argument that shapes the entire fictional universe—unleashes the fluxes and the multiprocesses—circle-evolutions—between the subsystems. The resulting dialog—between animations, comic books, TV series, short films, feature films, video games, theme parks, apps, and/or any other online or offline communication channel—revolves around this *key idea*,

the story's DNA. The nucleation process around a source of information is what *moves* the organization, so it closes the system; but it leave sit partially open to the environment in which it is immersed, since the *nucleating idea*, to be autonomous, must feed on knowledge—memory—that is umbilically connected to its key idea.

In fact, information about different characters, events and the different parallel/crossed/interrelated stories is disseminated across specific media that adheres/cooperates with the macro story that is underway. Therefore, the *transpoetics* promotes a multiplicity of worldviews and semantic relativism, i.e., a perception of distinct layers and instances in each new aesthetic/language/media that is developed.

Each subsystem or medium goes through evolutionary phases in their own distinct way and in specific moments during a transmedia performance. This is called circle-evolution; the end of a process/narrative in a specific media is the beginning of another process/narrative in another media. Or, as Morin defines it, it is: “(...) a retroactive multiprocess that closes in on itself from multiple and diverse circuits (...)” (Morin, *ibid.*: 231)

Therefore, the end of a narrative in a movie marks the beginning of another narrative in a videogame; the end of a videogame is the beginning of a narrative in a comic book story; the end of that is the beginning of a web animation; we then have a recursive retroactive multicircuit.

Morin explains the concept of generativity as being:

(...) an indefinitely reborn, organized and regulated genesis. The generative circuit is neverending and transforms interactions into retroactions, turbulence into rotation, unceasingly it produces, in the same movement, being, exis-

tence, and productive organization. (Morin, *ibid.*: 277)

Hence, the concept of generativity is one that reinforces a sense of circularity around the key idea matrix–recursivity–and of action that renews and expands itself–retroacts–from this matrix/*dna*. The matrix story/argument/script feeds *information* into the subsystems, that is, it organizes information and how the subsystems are to be articulated, mobilized and organized. It is simultaneously the *guardian* and the *source* of the matricial idea. (Morin, *ibid.*: 379 and 394)

In fact, its role as *source*–storage–of information is what makes the subsystems learn, understand and develop their specificities. (Morin, *ibid.*: 150) In fact, it is through the transmission/distribution of information that the activation/articulation *strategies* for different media types are delineated. So, on the one hand, there is a control/command center–nucleation–and, on the other, a “programming” center with the goal of reaching a specific outcome and that is projected to complement and integrate the subsystems into a whole: Transmedia. (Morin, *ibid.*: 392)

This *flux of information* is critical to prevent degeneration, a process that is inherent to the whole system. When selecting what information will be disseminated, quality is more important than quantity, as this also plays a role in reducing waste, mistakes and system collapses. In fact, the level of quality used to process information during the development phase of a script/argument also impacts the dissemination process, since by having such information “at hand” producers/authors/developers can measure the periods in which each media will operate within the system.

The role of *guardian*–of information–refers to the function of regulating the multicircuit, that is, reiterating, repeating and regenerating what has generated it:

the generative idea. (Morin, *ibid.*: 242) The concept of regulation means that disturbances and deviations are neutralized, that is, we know how to coexist with, explore and assimilate the entropic processes and how to weave *regularity* into interrelations, associations, cooperations, complementarities and intersemiosis across Transmedia processes.

The living system is dynamic and the way to keep it constant and in circular evolution is to manage the different networks of interactive temporal/information flows. This means that initiatives pertaining to specific media, or even manifestations of followers/fans with their own story productions/appropriations, texts, videos, drawings, etc., can cooperate towards stability but also towards dispersion.

It’s important that we don’t reject the shifting nature of deviations and ruptures–negative feedback–, but that we assimilate it, understand it, learn from it and reverse circumstances–positive feedback–, because transmediatic works are established not only through official channels, but mainly through speculative, conjectural, rhizomatic, labyrinthine spheres, owing to the immersive, participatory and playful nature of its game.

In fact, the stability of the system–homeostasis–is achieved through the intermittent flow between internal and external exchanges. However, stability does not placate disorganization and disorder, but assimilates and explores them through positive feedbacks–constancy, circuit, repression of disturbances–and negative feedbacks–dispersion, deviation, deregulation–in a systemic game that seeks the improvement and maturation of the active organization.

Morin explains that: “All creation, all generation, all development and even all information have to be paid for with entropy.” (Morin, *ibid.*: 98) Therefore, regularity means we display the necessary sen-

sibility, conduct and knowledge to balance the setbacks, delays and other problems that might appear in the course of this kind of work.

In this case, regularity does not seek to become bureaucratic, it doesn't target machines, but the *machinant* (Morin, 2008: 282), that is, it's in a constant state of genesis, transforming turbulences and waves, the random and the chaotic, into a whirlwind, into a driving force. So we can say that regularity seeks to preserve "heat", kinetic energy, movement, flow, organization and creativity.

In each new beginning—when a story is told and articulated through a specific media—the system keeps turning, echoing and resonating through other stories, poetics and aesthetics, so it never "cool down". Such initiatives—namely, the intertwined narratives that have distinct temporalities—act as "thermostats" because when they are triggered, their actions that were previously arranged across specific time periods allows Transmedia to stabilize, that is, to continue gravitating around the minds of its followers, who in turn share their thoughts, insights, theories etc., attracting more fans to the franchise, increasing its range of action and perpetuating its influence, permanence and longevity.

Finally, Transmedia only happens and takes place to the extent that it can circulate regularly through different media. This circularity is transformed into a circuit (Morin, 2008a: 228-231) with to-and-fro movement and recursive capabilities. It can resume previous narratives while being sequential, irreversible and retroactive. It expands and adds new perspectives, information, scenes, characters and narratives.

This system or ecosystem circle evolves in a spiral shape, since with each re-

turn, new beginning or immersion in one fictional universe, we are offered or presented with different dramatic moments and points of view, we can explore the immersive aesthetics, the playful chain iterations. It is this spiral and diverse *one-ness* that is similar to the archetypal figure of the *ouroboros*, which eats its own tail.

2 On Immersions, Migrations and Imbricate Experiences

What the transmediatic ecosystem proposes is an immersive experience into potential worlds (Vieira, 2008: 78) by dilating the biological *Umwelt* towards a noological² *Umwelt*. It must be understood that the noological reality of the transmediatic ecosystem does not exclude the reality in which the fan lives, that is, off the franchise, on the contrary. The two axes—reality and the fictional universe—coexist and nurture one other. It is not necessary, therefore, to abandon one to experience the other. To submerge in a fictional ecosystem of this magnitude, we don't have to leave our bodies inert in some corner while our minds migrate to other worlds. In fact, both spheres are imbricated into a uniduality (Morin, 2008: 172).

It is well known that archaic societies lived a double life: one dedicated to ethical-practical issues, or, as Morin (2008: 169) puts it, one that used empirical-logical-rational answers to deal with daily affairs such as feeding, protection, construction, collection, hunting, etc.; and another life dedicated to critical-pragmatic questions that answered questions in the semantic sphere, which Morin named symbolic-mythological-magical (2008: 169). This intellectual sphere dealt mainly with the demands of uncertainty,

² "(...) designates the world of ideas, of the spirits, of the gods, of the entities produced and nourished by the human spirit within the culture. These entities, gods or ideas, endowed with dependent autonomy

(of the minds and culture that feed them) acquire a life of their own and a dominating power over humans." (Morin, 2007: 208).

of the future, of loss, of death, of life, that is, of the meaning of all things around the individual and his/her community. This noological sphere was dedicated to understanding the world through gods, spirits and entities, summoning them when necessary, satisfying their desires and appetites, building temples, shrines, sacred places, or performing prayers and other rites to obtain blessing and favor at the beginning of the harvest, at the sowing of fields, during battles and all kinds of undertakings.

The two spheres were nourished, there was no separation between the *myths* and *logos*, their relationship was one of complementarity, competitiveness and antagonism. Thus, archaic men and women had to deal with two imbricated spheres that enjoyed full communion. Morin (2008: 174) clarifies that myths "... constitute the discourse of subjective, singular and concrete understanding of a spirit that adheres to the world by feeling it from within." In fact, modern science excluded men/women from this connection with the cosmos, so in order to decipher its mysteries, it made reality an inhospitable place.

In the world of myths, the inanimate has subjectivity, that is, the mountains, lakes, rivers and seas have a story, a narrative, a subjectivity, a proper name that is meaningful, an existence that intermingles with the story of men and women, of their families, their origins and destinies, as well as their community. So we can say this whole—both animate and inanimate—participated together in a macro narrative of the cosmos. They were integrated into it because there was a higher purpose hovering above their clashes, uncertainties, doubts and questions. Everything made sense, nothing was random, everything happened for unknown reasons that were beyond the foreseeing capabilities of men and women, but in due time everything would reveal itself as part of an original and beautiful project. In fact, participa-

ting in such a macro-narrative gave them psychological comfort and ensured their earthly actions were not devoid of semantic value, on the contrary. They were part of a larger plan that gave them assurance of overcoming death itself, of having access to a full life after death, whether in Valhalla or New Jerusalem.

However, men and women who walked through this symbolic world had to learn to read the signs, if not isolated, then together, in communion with the communities to which they belonged. If they didn't possess such a gift, they sought help from oracles, psychics and shamans, experts in interpreting messages that came from the cosmos, gods and spirits. Because,

"All events are in fact signs and messages that ask for and obtain interpretations. The mythological universe is a constant emitter of messages and every natural thing carries symbols, a semantic proliferation and an excess of meanings" (Morin, *ibid.*: 176)

Returning to our time, this mythological environment full of access points and surrounded by meaning on all sides is everything that Transmedia and also Augmented Reality seeks to become or is driving towards.

Through AR, inanimate reality is becoming alive, subjective and re-inhabited "again". The two axes—Reality and AR—coexist and nurture one other. It is not necessary to abandon one to experience the other. To submerge in a noological ecosystem of this magnitude the user doesn't have to leave his body inert in a corner—the Matrix Paradox—while his mind migrates to other worlds. In fact, both spheres are imbricated into a uniduality. This can take on a very complex nature when both start nourishing each other as *self-organized living systems*. Artificial In-

telligence will also become integrated into this process in the near future.

So to create an advanced experience in the transmediatic ecosystem that incorporates Augmented Reality, the fans/participants, in communion with their communities and using the narratives made available by the developers, become co-creators of cross narratives and interrelated plots, promoting the historicity of the ecosystem, actually *populating* it with complexity, generating their own stories/trajectories and expanding the network of correlations (Prigogine, 2002: 69) and, ultimately, *colonizing* these possible worlds.

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