

Transmedia Storytelling and Transforming Human Imagination

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ABSTRACT

New media norms are determined by technology. New forms create multiple medianorms with transmedia and social media applications. Publishing and/or broadcasting parts of a story in electronic/digital cross-media broadens the network of mental engagement more compared to mere adaptations of a literary work to another medium. With developments in transmedia outlets, new layers are added to the story and storytelling is further broadened and deepened.

It is then necessary to consider how the human imagination will be affected by new progresses: Will it expand or narrow? Will it be virtuality or reality oriented? How can we guide imagination in this unpredictable media environment? In this theoretical study, possible answers are examined in order to propose satisfactory responses and to gain insight into the nature of the subject.

Keywords: *New Media, New Communication Technologies, Imagination, Transmedia, Transmedia Storytelling, Adaptation, Intertextuality*

Transmedya Öykü Anlatıcılığı ve İnsan Hayal Dünyasının Dönüşümü

ÖZ

Yeni medya normları teknoloji tarafından belirlenmektedir. Transmedya ve sosyal medya uygulamalarıyla yeni formlar, yeni çoklu medya normları yaratmaktadır. Bir yazımsal eserin basitçe başka bir medyaya uyarlanması ötesinde; öykünün basılı, elektronik/dijital çapraz medya ortamlarında parça parça yayınlanması, zihinsel ilişkiler ağını genişletmektedir. Transmedya uygulamalarının gelişimiyle, öyküye yeni katmanlar ilave edilmekte, öykü anlatıcılığı daha genişmekte ve derinleşmektedir.

Bu gelişmeyle insan hayal dünyasının nasıl etkilendiğini göz önünde bulundurmak gerekmektedir. Hayal dünyası genişlemekte midir, daralmakta mıdır? Bu sanallığa mı gerçekliğe mi yöneliktir? Bu öngörülemeyen medya ortamında hayal dünyasına nasıl yol gösterilebilir? Bu teorik çalışmada, bu sorulara tatmin edici cevaplar önermek ve konunun iç yüzünü kavramak üzere olası cevaplar incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Yeni İletişim Teknolojileri, Yeni Medya, Hayal Dünyası, Transmedya, Transmedya Öykü Anlatıcılığı, Metinlerarasılık*

Introduction

Production and consumption of media content is standardized, and it is culturally accepted by society and media professionals with certain norms. If an innovation or novelty like transmedia emerges within a society, society first perceives it as abnormal. If it is recognized and accepted, it becomes normalized within the society. The development of computer technology, mass communication, and social reflections helps societies to generate their own norms and forms, and transform old forms. Marshall McLuhan grounded this situation with his well-know aphorism: *Medium is the Message*. Accordingly, emerging media facilities determine the structure, meaning, and effects on the audience, and the medium then becomes the message.

Any check on a search engine reveals the fact that reading rates are decreasing year by year. Formerly, reading rates were higher than at present. In the past a reader with *intellectual curiosity*, would buy a five hundred pages classic novel to actively read it for a week with enthusiasm. However nowadays, the pace of life is accelerated, and the ways of feeding the body and mind have changed.

The daily pace of life has increased rapidly. This is evidenced by fast food, microwave cooking, instant coffee, and people consuming much more media content. People tend to use computers, information technologies, and mobile outlets as an *entertainer*. New consumers prefer watching film adaptations of a novel rather than actually reading it.

In the 21st century, the mass media has started to tell stories from all quarters of media outlets. Interconnected media conditions have arisen and termed this 'transmedia storytelling'. Other similar terms have arisen for interrelated media outlets and formats including intertextuality to multimedia, multiple media, cross-media, and convergence. It is unnecessary to distinguish and separate media with certain terminologies. Beyond defining terminology, this paper aims to develop an understanding of digital and converged media environments and their nature, and to explicate major stories of the transmedia environment and their effects on human imagination. *Computers are beginning to change the reading habit. With a hypertext, it is possible to search for all the cases in which the name of Napoleon is linked with Kant in a few seconds. Hypertexts will render obsolete printed encyclopedia. Unlimited texts and texts which can be interpreted in infinite ways on internet but human nature and capabilities limited* (Eco, 2000).

Media Convergence

Information, communication technologies, and content (medium and message) are simultaneously interconnected. Print and broadcast media, telecommunications, computer networks as conventional or new media, and mass media content have converged with technological developments. Hardware and software on digital devices, computer and mobile phones are now fully integrated and indistinguishable from each other. Some examples of this include dictionary entries, search topics, content on history to technology, online information intertextualized with *Wikipedia*, and many more printed, electronic, and digital media outlets. The development of digital technologies has resulted in hypertextuality with connected devices and applications online.

Traditional adaptations which take a single story that exists in one medium and retell it in another medium, namely cross-media, have expanded to transmedia. The converging of digital infotainment enables people to choose the format, time, and physical space according to personal preferences and enjoyment.

Accelerating the pace of digitalized life in the image era, impatient people prefer to watch passively the adaptation of a one-hour popular film. This situation seems unbearable in the fast paced life conditions of young generations.

Transmedia Storytelling

Transmedia has emerged as the dominant entertainment environment. In the age of images, new generations have adapted visual storytelling environments. They are willing to consume still images and moving images from television, photo, and video sharing sites and mobile devices. Imagination for McLuhan (1962) tends more and more to refer to the power of visualization, which has a great effect on an audience in the age of images.

A photograph on a paper is easier to read (see) and remember than a text on the same size of paper. Images push people to passivity because they do not require them to spend much effort in the pursuit of information or entertainment. People think and dream with images and those images become their major source of imagination.

Today, information about the living world comes to us not only by means of words, but more and more through the powerful images and sounds of our multimedia culture. *Although mediated messages appear to be self-evident, in truth, they use a complex audio-visual 'language' which can be used to express multi-layered concepts and ideas about the world* (Thoman & Jolls, 2008).

Transmedia, as another fictional and virtual world, is an imaginative space in which the viewers can lose themselves in a range of different contexts. A variety of values and conflicts concerning the relationship between text, viewer, and technology comes into play (Evans, 2011). Albert Einstein famously said: *"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there, ever will be to know and understand."*

Knowledge can be instilled through textbooks, teachers, and a formal learning environment, but imagination is something completely internal, and it cannot be taught. Knowledge is useful and meaningful only after it undergoes transformation to an innovation or inspiration by using human imagination, an imagination that uses knowledge effectively. Knowledge is limited, and it works to produce, copy, or reproduce. However, knowledge and endless imagination give rise to unique works together. On the other hand, imagination is very effective and reflexive in human behavior. An oil painting or a novel incites the consumer to think about the portrayed object and subjects. It opens a door to imagine details of another time and place, outside the frame or narration of the reader. Yet, if a printed novel or an oil painting is compared with digital and virtual media content first and foremost, the printed novel and an oil painting have a physical existence namely they can be touched. Consumers can see and read something repeatedly, or

stop and stare in order to think about some details. They force us to imagine sounds, smells, or tastes. Novelists must use words to refer to them (Kroeber 2006:24) because the novelists' major tools are words. Novelists portray a complete image with words for readers to formulate a second self. In contrast, a transmedia storyteller splits images for various media and formats in order to continue and complete the rest of the images according to the course of imagination of each reader.

Visual storytelling with a moving image is very powerful and uses various electronic and digital media technologies. A film director can use powerful technical tools and details such as a stage, décor, costumes, camera movements, and many other physical factors. In addition, visual effects, sound effects, animation, and creative visuals can also be used through computer technologies. While watching a film, a transmedia application can appear, and the viewer can be taken on an emotional journey beyond the film. Comic books to cartoon films, all media outlets are present ways of understanding and imagining a fictional world beyond the living world. Film techniques focus on the persuasive details in the story and, thereafter, undertake the functions of human imagination. *Movie makers concentrate on controlling an audience's attention* (Kroeber, 2006).

Digital and virtual media content is mostly fictitious; it exists on digits in the digital dream world. The digits just flash on a screen and then they disappear. The five senses cannot function together when they are separated or discontinued during fast-paced, flows of images and sounds spread from people's imaginations to other's imaginations. These conditions transform the human imagination by media, especially in an interconnected transmedia environment.

Many years ago, kids used to make their toys themselves. They used to play outdoors. Designing and shaping toys helped to develop not only their dreams and imaginations, but also their motor-functions too. However, nowadays, mass producers of toys make more realistic plastic toys, simulations, and real-time multiplayer games (*Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games – MMORPGs* are pull experience) and Alternate Reality Games (*ARGs* are push experience) as reflections of real life. Licensed and advertised toys teach children what to desire, and how to be consumers of material objects (Evans, 2011). These products change children's perception of reality. Games incarcerate children in their homes, and they begin spending most of their free time playing indoors. Because of this, they are weaker physically and emotionally. Children who grow up in this mixed-media culture could produce new kinds of media as transmedia storytelling becomes more intuitive. In a hunting culture, kids play with bows and arrows. In an information society, they play with information (Jenkins 2006).

Reading a classic book feeds the imagination. While reading, readers think about the people, places, and things in the story. Letters symbolize meaning and draw pictures in the reader's imagination. When a classic book is adapted to film, every detail is re-created professionally, planned, and shot scene by scene. Portrayals transformed to screen images are framed and limited according to *mise-en-scène*. They are not used as intended by the original author.

Watching a film controls the viewers' imagination almost completely. No space is left to complete the story by a passive viewer. Accelerating transmedia reality is divided amongst many platforms. Therefore, the realities of transmedia imagination are also divided and continue on many platforms.

Virtuality: The 'virtual' is far beyond the real living world. It exists in the mind, especially as a product of the imagination. Virtual experiences and real life experiences are so close that they intertwine and embody a *double life* dilemma in the imagination. If people live in a second life for a long time, it becomes part of their daily lives and they cannot imagine life without it (Evans, 2011). Virtuality seems more freeing for the imagination because virtuality does not force the limits of the physical world on people. Virtual reality is becoming more and more realistic with technological enhancement. 3D vision and glasses, hi-fi audio, and many more quality features provide for a better imagination.

Transmedia Producers and Marketing

The Hollywood industry has designated a new job for media professionals and advertisers: the transmedia producer. This position involves producing integrated content to spread across three or more media platforms to serve the marketing and advertising sectors. Transmedia marketing started with cross-media marketing which is related to stories told, advertised, and promoted by many media outlets. New generation transmedia storytelling, on the otherhand, is deeper, more detailed, and more divided according to the attention-grabbing nature of digital media and formats. Furthermore, a good transmedia franchise attracts a wider audience with popularity.

Almost all narratives are designed to engage people's expectations. Similar to intertextuality, each piece of a story motivates the user to seek out other pieces with sustained curiosity. Some stories are pathetic, and most of them are memorable. All powerful stories affect human emotions. That is why storytelling has always played an integral role in advertising. Transmedia producers write their stories as a media project with long term planning, pre-production and production, narrative continuity across multiple media platforms, and distribution of an original storyline for various platforms in order to unite consumers with the story.

All marketing implementations are meant to sustain the attention of consumers for the next episode, keep the story actual and in the agenda, and popularize stories to reach as many people as possible through peer advertisement. Transmedia producers passionately create communities committed to spending not just their money but also their imaginations in the worlds they represent (Jenkins, 2006).

Using the transmedia environment is very expensive, and if you cannot sell your story as quickly as possible, you may lose money and market shares. If the story is completed too soon, consumer attention is lost, but if it continues with consumers on all channels and platforms, mainly social and mobile media, readers become authors. Anonymous authors can keep the story alive for a longtime at no cost. They feed the story with more funds and the collaborative work of many people. Giant media corporations have studios, television stations, recording companies, advertising agencies, and other branches of media ventures that naturally have transmedia advantages. Corporate media uses conventional media environments, user-generated content, and social media as transmedia platforms.

The results of these transmedia techniques for marketing include selling more content and enlarging market share by keeping consumers bound to their product. Without this binding to

the product, customers turn to alternative media content. In a social media platform, transmedia applications popularize and glamorize the content. This results in companies achieving all their objectives. The producer formulates plans to prevent consumers' use of alternative products from -so called- fierce competitors. The main reason for the use of the transmedia techniques are primarily advertising, propaganda, brand loyalty, and seizing the market.

Transmedia producers use whatever media and formats they find convenient and available. These include new marketing systems of mixed entertainment, information and demonstration. Media professionals, as collaborative and conglomerated transmedia producers, cannot easily ignore the important difference between a classic book and a film to be read or watched. Campaigns combine media as photos, documentaries, social media platforms, and mobile applications to introduce readers to a book's back-story, and the pre-production and behind-the-scenes of a film. Peoples' ideas and comments from fan blogs and other websites are used to generate more interested people and create attraction.

In addition, there is a one phenomenon that spreads quickly via the internet called *internet memes*. Because of their popularity, some *internet memes* might be used by transmedia story producers to attract a large audience's attention, and to reach more and more people. This enables spreading content across all media platforms and outlets including mainly television, web pages, social media, photograph and video sharing platforms, and mobile and digital devices. Some of them serve to be tasted¹ and, if the taster likes it, he or she can go to the source and continue with it to completion. Eventually, this behavior might turn into a regular habit, and, if it continues for a long time, it will become an addiction which cannot be avoided or stopped.

Major Transmedia Storytelling Examples and Transmedia Imagination

There are increasing numbers of transmedia storytelling examples. *Pokémon*, a well-known 'pocket monster', appeared as a cartoon film first and became a television phenomenon. It quickly unfolded to include comic books, video games, television programs, licenced clothing and toys. Transmedia outlets could not compete, so they collaborated and continued together. This is a very good example of a comic story transformed into a cartoon serial and multiple films.

One of the most typical and dramatic examples of transmedia imagination is a child watching and imitating *Spiderman*, then jumping to the ground from the fifth floor of a building just as Spiderman did. Here, we see typical miseducation through transmedia because *Spiderman* smoothly flies in the fictitious comics and cartoon world. However, how can a child distinguish fantasy and reality? In a small child's imaginative world, it is almost impossible to separate fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, truth and lie. Their imagination is very naïve, sensitive, and vulnerable.

1 Francis Bacon (1706:135) wrote at his essay "Of Studies"; "*Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested*" Similar to reader of books, advertised products, stories and information are tasted by consumers of media content.

Another example is *Kalila wa Dimna*, a book more than a thousand years old. It is a collection of animal fables and a story within another story, called a 'frame story'. *Kalila wa Dimna* has been translated into almost all Eastern languages; in Turkish, there are more than twenty versions of the book. Not all versions were simple, literal translations. The book was expanded, abridged, versified, disfigured, and enhanced by an endless series of translators. Cartoon, film, and radio series versions of the story have all been created by media producers.

There are numerous other transmedia examples in this fertile media environment. *007 Bond* films have become *James Bond* games. *Star Wars* moved to print and became a novel. The film *Indiana Jones* became *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. Various forms have been released as a serial, VHS, and DVD (Jenkins, 2006).

In adaptations to transmedia applications, producers use the reputation of a popular story to attract attention of larger masses. Crossovers often occur between novels and films, and classic novels and television serials. These transformations glamorize, popularize, and sustain the storyline, whichever way it goes. Classic books and historic eras are frequently converted into television series. *Aşk'ı Memnu* (Ottoman Turks for *The Forbidden Love*), *Leyla ile Mecnun* (an old folk tale, a love story), *Hürrem Sultan (Roxelana)* in *Muhteşem Yüzyıl - "The Magnificent Century"* are major television serials broadcast in Turkey in the last decade. They are well-known historic stories, similar to folk tales, and their names are a 'brand' for marketers. Using the popularity of brands, well-known names, internet memes, and religious stories like the film *Noah's Flood*, makes the market easy to penetrate. Above all, these specifications of stories are necessary to transform television series.

There are some important and popular science fiction stories such as *Spiderman*, *Star Wars* and *Avatar*, in which imaginative worlds are built by using books, web-sites, and video sharing platforms in multiple media applications. Currently, there are cartoon films where cars talk. They have faces, gestures, mimics, and facial expressions. In addition to talking, the cars also have emotions.

Take the case of a three year old boy who watches and learns from such cartoons everyday, he starts to imagine cars with human characteristics, especially emotions. To a toy in the same place for a long time the three year old says, "It is bored here (I need play with it to recover from boredom)." The same child, on another day while walking down the street, sees a parked, black *Alfa Romeo* with a very aggressive front view. He looks at it again, and with amazement says, "It is very angry looking. He sees inquiring glances, nonverbally saying 'Why' and adds, "His mum dead, so dressed black." Someone might ask, Why 'his' and 'dead'? Maybe only males look angry, especially when their mothers die. No one knows, except this small child. The little boy's imagination has not developed enough, but the child has learned some cultural norms and the feelings of human and cars both from cartoon films, particularly common theme of *dead mothers from cartoons* (Boxer, 2014). So the transmedia can turn into a blended learning environment for a three year old boy across cartoon films, television advertisements, toys, licensed clothing, stickers, and so on. In his little world, he passes amongst various media like he is a ping pong ball.

The objective of the *Kalila wa Dimna* was to teach lessons about animals. *George Orwell's Animal Farm* is similar because each animal has a characteristic feature. Another example is a talking car cartoon film. It is one of the most popular films to date. It is called *Vroomiz* (a popular pre-school series for children 3-6) and is a great example of a popular transmedia story jumping from the screen to I-tunes and games. The cars are designed as animals. A fast car looks like a lion, the cute girl car is pink and is dubbed with little a girl's voice, the powerful car has elephant features, and there is a monkey shaped car that naturally jumps a lot. In reality, cars should not jump. This is another example of miseducation through transmedia. Yet inanimate entities require more imagination, and the blurring of fact to fiction (Alexander, 2011).

Harry Potter is another very good example of transmedia success. In *Harry Potter* there is a fictional school of magic called *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*. The famous series of fantasy novels, *Harry Potter*, became very popular all over the world with the production of the filmed version. The film achieved huge success, and millions of people have watched it via digital cinema or television. The *HarryPotter* stories exploded on the internet and a multitude of consumer products were made including video games, non-interactive media games, comics, *Lego* toys, action figures, and licensed clothing. The *HarryPotter* series' author, J.K. Rowling, founded her own web-page named '*Pottermore*' for groups of fans to write their ideas (they reflect their imaginations), and continue the '*story more*'. Potter fans started to construct *HarryPotter* web-sites, and they followed *Potter* pages in social media. Social platforms, mainly Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, were used for viral marketing. Fan groups wrote blogs which inspired transmedia producers.

HarryPotter novels and films attracted not only the attention of children and teenagers, but also of transmedia professionals. *HarryPotter* has attracted the attention of massive fan groups, generating stories across social media, mobile media, and blogs. Users still keep *HarryPotter* in their agenda, spending their money and imagination for free.

The *HarryPotter* movement has affected many countries' media content in the production of 'magic' programs. In Turkey, screens were filled with magic serials, and the most popular series were *Selena* and *Sihirli Annem*. Many children and teens like magic and these television serials. The popularity and number of magic serials rapidly increased after *HarryPotter*.

The Matrix is designed to be transmedia because of its genre. Fantasy is far beyond the real world experience and *TheMatrix* also portrays a philosophical appeal which is directed at the imagination and building an imaginative world. *TheMatrix* has a different and fictional world that does not exist in the real world. It was created by the human imagination for the human imagination. It started interplay between cinema and video games, but it has continued to be used in many media outlets.

The Wachowski brothers who wrote and directed three Matrix films, played the transmedia game very well, putting out the original film first to stimulate interest, offering up web comics to sustain fan's hunger for more information, launching the anime in anticipation of the second film, releasing the computer game alongside it to surf the publicity, bringing the whole cycle to a conclusion with The Matrix Revolutions, and

then turning the whole mythology over to the players of the massively multiplayer online game (Jenkins, 2006, pp.94-95).

TheMatrix film transported its audience into a world where the line between reality and illusion is constantly blurred, and where the bodies of humans are stored as an energy source to fuel machine-bodies while their minds inhabit a world of digital hallucinations. This fictional universe has been further explored in other media formats such as books, comic books, video games, and animated short films.

TheMatrix philosophy might have been inspired by *Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi's* approach to dream and imagination as proposed in the following quotation:

This mortal world life is a dream, everything seen asleep is dream in a dream. Everything reported of this nature is called the world of the imagination (khayal), and for this reason, there must be interpretation: the matter which has a form in itself appears in a form other than it. The interpreter passes from these forms which the sleeper sees to the form upon which the matter is based.(Ibn Arabi, 2009).

Digital novels at screen (dream) exist to change reading habits. Instead of printed materials, people are required to read on a screen. Digital novels connect the details of a story to increase curiosity for missing or following episodes or parts. There are currently some popular digital novels, which have a very large audience.

Collapsus (<http://www.collapsus.com>) is an interactive digital novel consisting of animation, action, and documentary. The major topic of the story is global energy chaos. This story unfolds according to readers' perspectives to produce alternative solutions to the problem. This story requires empathy, critical thinking, and taking on the responsibilities of experts, politicians and decision makers.

Inanimate Alice (<http://www.inanimatealice.com>) is another popular digital novel which is read online from the screen. This interactive story encourages readers to co-create their own versions of the storyline. 'Alice' connects technologies, languages, cultures, generations and curricula within a sweeping narrative which is accessible to all (Fleming, 2011). Alice uses multimedia environments including text, images, music, digital effects, puzzles and games, to illustrate and enhance the narrative. It is designed to contribute to the unfolding story over time on multiple platforms. This digital novel is actually designed as an entertainment, but it has been adapted as a teaching tool for teachers eager to develop their students' digital literacy skills in digital literacy classes. The story is divided into episodes for in use classroom.

Conclusion

Transmedia storytelling may be the best tool or even a *democratic propaganda* machine in the digital age. This new way of telling popular stories requires care in many aspects. Understanding and creating awareness about this media form are of the utmost importance. By learning digital technologies, computer software tools, and media outlets, marketing and advertisement strategies can create an informed awareness for the perception of reality. Transmedia and imagination must have a relationship in transmedia storytelling. However, children and young

peoples' media habits are very flexible and open to digital media. Digital natives can be too focused on digital media and technologies. Young people should first realize the importance of self-control. They must be taught and informed about distinguishing the benefits and risks of the transmedia environment. It is important to ask the W-questions to understand the nature of digital media and transmedia storytelling. First, What is transmedia? Why transmedia? How can we use transmedia wisely? Why do producers need to use transmedia story telling? Why should media professionals and advertisers work together to produce transmedia stories? Who stands to gain from transmedia use? Who will spend the time and money necessary for success? What are the alternatives to these media environments? How do transmedia stories affect human imagination? Asking these kinds of questions about transmedia can help us to understand it better, and to benefit from the advantages and avoid the risks of transmedia stories.

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