

# Where Transmedia Storytelling Goes Wrong; a preliminary exploration of the issues with transmedia storytelling.

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## Introduction

Transmedia storytelling is causing a buzz within the realm of New Media, both in a theoretical field and in the more practical field. The term ‘transmedia storytelling’ is used by Henry Jenkins to describe what he considers to be a phenomenon in the media landscape where narratives are no longer constructed within the boundaries of a singular medium, but transcend that single medium and spread out to other media. Each separate media expression should, ideally, contribute to the larger narrative, or to quote him: “A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole.” (p. 97, Jenkins, 2006). Although this definition seems as clear-cut as it comes, the implementation of the term proves to be a challenge. The central question within this thesis is: *To what extent does transmedia storytelling unfold across different media platforms?*

There is a discrepancy between the definition that is given to the term transmedia storytelling and the way it is implemented. Even in Jenkins’ work *Convergence Culture* (2006), often seen as a key reference regarding transmedia storytelling, this discrepancy is evident. The definition requires a ‘whole’ to which each media text can make its contribution; a large central narrative that is divided over several media platforms. The definition implies that every part cannot be consumed separately, after all it is part of a larger whole and thus meaning can only be created when all parts are consumed in connection with each other. However the examples that are cited, *The Matrix* franchise<sup>1</sup> for example, that serves for many as *the* example, do not show this central narrative, this inability to understand each media expression, or media text, without consuming the rest as well. In fact it seems to be more the rule than the exception that these transmedia stories possess a multicentricity of narratives and only share a common framework of reference.

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<sup>1</sup> Consisting of three movies, *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999) being the first, an anime *The Animatrix* (Morimoto et al., 2003), a computer game *Enter the Matrix* (Shiny Entertainment, 2003) and a comic book series published in two volumes (printed in 2003 and 2004 respectively) containing short stories by various artists.

In order to answer the central thesis as to what extent this phenomenon of transmedia storytelling does unfold across different media platforms, several sub questions and underlying issues have to be dealt with first. Chapter One will deal with the question of ‘what is transmedia storytelling?’: what are its origins, how is the term implemented and by whom, and what problems arise when implementing this term. Chapter Two will deal in greater detail with the problems that arise with the term transmedia storytelling. Special attention will be given to the source of possible misconceptions, how the discrepancy between term and use arises, and the fundamental flaw in the definition of transmedia storytelling. Chapter Three will deal with the ramifications of this claim. The question of the possibility of transmedia storytelling will be presented, and if it exists how can it exist. The final chapter is dedicated to the conclusion.

## 1. What is transmedia storytelling

When searching for a definition of transmedia storytelling there are roughly two uses of the term. The first is a theoretical use of transmedia storytelling. The focus is placed upon a cultural and media analytical approach rather than actual pragmatic implementation of the described effect, like in Jenkins' work *Convergence Culture* (2006), or *Transmedia Storytelling* (2003), Kinder's work *Playing with Power* (1991), and Paul Cheng's text *Waiting for Something to Happen* (2007)<sup>2</sup>. In other words it is used to describe certain structures within media and culture. Within this field the theory and terminology developed by Jenkins is dominant. Very few texts deal with the concept of transmedia storytelling, and even fewer critically reflect upon his explanation of the term.

The second use is a more practical and commercial implementation of that which is described by the term. It focuses on the term transmedia storytelling as a way to describe a product. It has become a formula for making money, a part of a business model, and it is used in works such as *The Producer's Guide to Transmedia* (Bernardo, 2011), *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling* (Phillips, 2011), or *Transmedia Storytelling: Imagery, Shapes and Techniques* (Giovagnoli, 2012). Although the two uses of the term are quite similar, the commercial implementation of the notion of transmedia storytelling is often a bit more liberal and vague than the theoretical one, since in this field there is a lesser need for a strictly defined workable theoretical construct and more need for a generalized concept<sup>3</sup>. There is a strong overlap within this use between practice and theory, leading often to texts with a less academic argument or basis. It seems that the practical implementation and its commercial use is preferred in many papers, this paper

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<sup>2</sup> *Waiting for Something to Happen* (2007) deals primarily with the issue of transmediality within computer games, the tension between interactivity, narrative space and the passive cut-scenes. Although the text is not strictly speaking of transmedia storytelling as defined by Jenkins, it still reveals one of the key issues of 'transmedia' and the problem with the definition of the word medium.

<sup>3</sup> Although not adding a judgment of value to this distinction, it is important to be aware of this distinction. In the field of New Media studies there seems to be a strong overlap between the theoretical and practical fields, making it vulnerable to the mass production of quasi theoretical texts without a strong academic basis or argument.

will focus on its theoretical implementation and thus mainly on the theoretical construction of the term by Henry Jenkins in his work *Convergence Culture* (2006).

## 1.1 The definition of transmedia storytelling

The name of Henry Jenkins is most often connected to the term transmedia storytelling. Jenkins is the dominant theoretician when discussing transmedia and transmedia storytelling, and it is Jenkins who has formulated the current definition of transmedia storytelling. The term ‘transmedia’, however, originates from Marsha Kinder who discusses it in her book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games* (1991) and uses it in conjuncture with a term from Literature Studies, namely ‘intertextuality’<sup>4</sup>. As the title of her book implies her initial focus lies on the construction of power, and in connection to that the construction of gender and social roles. In her work she analyzes movies and television, and to a lesser extent video games, making a very interesting observation when analyzing four Saturdays worth of ‘CBS Fun’ programs.

First of all, she notes the presence of intertextual referencing that exceeds the borders of media. In other words texts, in the literary sense, do not just refer to texts, or books do not just refer to other books, as it was initially formulated, but media texts within one medium, or media platform, refer to media texts within another. Intertextuality, it seems, is not inherently bound to the single medium of the written word, as many theoreticians have claimed. Furthermore the term intertextuality does not merely refer to the referencing between texts on a basic textual level, so to the use of a specific word, but to one that occurs on a more symbolic level, not necessarily bound to a specific medium. The observation that these intertextual references are not just bound to one medium, but transcend multiple media, can merit the use of the word ‘transmedia’. Kinder thus coins the term transmedia in her analysis. Transmedia is broader than one medium, and she clearly shows that there is such a thing as transmediality on a symbolic, or intertextual, level. She limits her use of transmedia intertextuality, however, only using it to explain

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<sup>4</sup> A term originally coined by the poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in her text *Desire in Language: A semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980)



certain ways of social (gender) typing that is constructed across several media platforms. Typing is a performative action she connects strongly to the construction of gender and gender identities, while the term intertextuality, as such, can be applied to a broader field of analyses than merely these types and power relationships. Although Jenkins does not refer to the term intertextuality as such, his theory of transmedia storytelling does perfectly apply to the principle of the idea of intertextuality.

Much like the term transmedia intertextuality, the term transmedia storytelling also refers to an originally Literature Studies term, namely storytelling, or rather narration and the construction of stories<sup>5</sup> (Rigney, 2006). Knowingly or not Jenkins' choice for the word 'storytelling' has two separate levels of meaning, in other words it refers to two different meanings of the word 'storytelling'. On one level it refers to the generalized term that is the narrative, the relaying of the story. On the other level it refers to a part of the narrative itself namely the story as differentiation between the sequence in which the events are related to the reader or viewer (plot) and the 'actual' chronological order of events reconstructed by the reader (story) (Bal, 1997). When Jenkins describes transmedia storytelling, it essentially seems to be similar to what Kinder refers to, only now it focuses more on the performative action of creating a singular 'grand narrative'. In Jenkins' definition there is a drive towards a whole, a unity, where in Kinder's theory there are but referential links. Kinder highlights the commercial application or practical application of this transmedial 'formula' of reference and the way this network constructs power relationships within society. Her understanding of the term transmedia intertextuality lies close to the 'commercial' understanding of transmedia storytelling, or perhaps to that which can be more aptly named transmedia adaptation, and as an extension of that (transmedia) franchising.

Transmedia adaptation is the adapting of a narrative as to convert it to another medium platform. It distinguishes itself by not necessarily forming a part of an undividable

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<sup>5</sup> Tzvetan Todorov coined the term 'narratology' in his structuralist approach (1969), although the analysis of narratives and thus the theoretical term of 'narration' or 'narrative' can be traced back to Roman Jakobson (1921), Claude Levi-Strauss (1958) and Vladimir Propp. The distinction between the two elements that make up a narrative (story and plot) are most clearly defined by Mieke Bal (1997).

‘whole’, but instead existing of a singular narrative that is transported to other media platforms, such is the case with the majority of book, film and game adaptations. Transmedia franchising is moving a step beyond the simple adaptation, and incorporates the merchandising aspect such as the CD’s, action figures, or other toys. These types of merchandise are not part of a larger narrative that is created, but are, instead, primarily objects of which the use cannot be, as such, clearly defined. They can either function as collectibles, or as playthings. To claim they become part of the story world ignores their ambiguous position and nature.

Two major issues arise when talking about transmedia storytelling as defined by Jenkins. First of all there is the question of medium/media. In order for something to transcend a media platform there must first be a working definition of the term ‘medium’ and its plural ‘media’. Secondly there is the problem of narrative. Vital in Jenkins’ term is the part about storytelling, yet it is not clearly defined and in itself creates confusion.

## **1.2 The problem of medium in transmedia storytelling**

By working with the term medium and media the term transmedia storytelling irrevocably ties itself to the age old discussion about what exactly is a medium and how the content of a given medium is formed. This discussion is dominated by two theories: that of Marshall McLuhan and that of Raymond Williams. McLuhan, who discusses this topic in his book *Understanding Media* (1964), claims that a medium, or what is referred to in this paper as media platform, is an extension of the human senses, and ultimately self-determined, it tells us what to do with it. The re-using and re-appropriation of existing material by new media, referred to as ‘remediation’ by Bolter and Grusin (1996), is central in McLuhan’s understanding of media content. Raymond Williams on the other hand, claims, for example in his work *The Long Revolution* (1961), that the use of a medium is ultimately determined by the social context, its users and institutions.

McLuhan’s interpretation of media is a very broad one, and rests on three basic elements. Firstly, a medium is an extension of our senses. For example, writing is an extension of

hearing, pictures of viewing, and the internet is an extension of our mind<sup>6</sup>. Secondly, everything, every piece of technology or artificial construct can be considered a medium. Thirdly, the content of any given medium is always another medium; his famous statement ‘the medium is the message’ (McLuhan, 1964). He states:

“It could be argued that these activities [brain surgery or night baseball] are in some way the “content” of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the fact that “the medium is the message” because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.” (p. 9, McLuhan, 1964)

However in this line of reasoning the user side of the equation is omitted. He states that it is the medium and only the medium that determines its content. It is true this form of technology provides new possibilities, but it also is limited in its use. With the arrival of the first electric lights, one could, in fact, not perform the actions McLuhan claims, like for example have night baseball games, because of the limited lifetime of a early light bulb. Furthermore it is ultimately the *choice* to use it for baseball games that brings the ‘medium’ to purpose. Later on McLuhan states: “The electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no “content”. (...) For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the “content” (or what is really another medium) that is noticed.” (p. 9, McLuhan, 1964). This claim, however is problematic in itself, omitting the question of meaning<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This position is rather deterministic, it places the user seamlessly into a network of hundreds of media each serving to extend our senses. The argument ignores the fact that although the medium/the network might be considered to extend our senses it ultimately also limits those senses as it increases dependency upon itself and sometimes removes and oppresses other senses. The effect of a stethoscope is that it extends our hearing almost into the human body, but it also drowns out the rest of the sounds surrounding the doctor.

<sup>7</sup> Yet in his argument McLuhan surpasses the notion of meaning, forgetting to deal with the question if one can recognize a medium as being a medium if it does not convey meaning. It is the question of ‘if a tree falls in a forest and there is no one to hear it, does it make a sound?’ McLuhan omits this question and just assumes yes. Secondly there is the question: Does not everything have a meaning, if only on a hermeneutic layer, beyond the obvious primary message?

This position is opposed by Williams who emphasizes a more social constructive view on media development. It is ultimately the human decision, or human interaction that constructs the effects of (new) media technology. In his text “The Technology and Society” Williams states:

“Thus we often discuss, with animation, this or that “effect” of television, or the kinds of social behaviour, the cultural and psychological conditions, which television has “led to,” without feeling ourselves obliged to ask whether it is reasonable to describe any technology as a cause, or, if we think of it as a cause, as what kind of cause, and in what relations with other kinds of causes.” (p. 291, Williams, 1974)

According to Williams there is not one cause, like the arrival of technology, but a process in which our understanding is shaped. So when describing the effect of this new medium television in his text, he begins by describing various avenues of development ranging from the cause and effect within the technology and within society, the social history of television as a new technology, and the history of the use of television technology (Williams, 1974). In other words, he observes the development of television technology from a range of different viewpoints, each having its own separate causes and effects on the development of the medium as a whole. He recognizes that technology does not come into being in a vacuum of the media landscape; instead, it is active in a whole pre-existing system. In other words have we not decided ultimately to use a military network for civilian purposes to spread pointless stories, bad pictures, gritty movies and porn? Internet has not sprung in its completion from the mind of J.C.R. Licklider, it was constructed, and still is constructed in interaction with society and its users. The shortcoming in this approach is ignoring the fact that even though we might want to do something with particular media, we are not always capable, simply because not every medium, and/or media platform is able to perform every action one might want to perform. In other words limits are imposed upon us by any given media technology.

The truth of the matter is, without getting lost too deep into this debate, it can be safely assumed that both positions are right and both positions are wrong. It becomes like

Schrödinger's cat<sup>8</sup>, the situation in which both ends of this theoretical spectrum are reached. Every medium and every new technology create new possibilities, they might even be seen as elements that expand our senses, creating for us ultimately new ways of thinking and expanding our mindset and our mental framework, allowing us to think in new ways and about new things in ways we never imagined. These new avenues of understanding and thought are, however, also inherently limiting us in our mental framework and our mindset. It might be said that as they expand our senses, they equally and inevitably limit them, for they are limited in their possibilities. Texts and language, for example, allow the creation of abstract constructions, a reference to things that are not really there. It however limits us in our perspective, for its impossibility to refer to 'reality' as such, because it has no (longer) a direct link to that which we refer to (Derrida, 1971). Text and language cannot create the effect pictures can, yet pictures cannot describe the abstract notions developed in language. Each new medium provides new modes of thinking, but in turn limits once again, our perception. The arrival of computers and hypertextuality (Lister et al., 2009)<sup>9</sup> creates the possibility of organizing texts in a non-linear way, but in doing so problematizes linear constructed narratives. New media technologies provide us with enhanced goggles that allow us to see different aspects and different elements, new possibilities, but at the end of the day just a set of goggles.

Media help shape the messages we send with them, limiting them, creating parameters in which the messages are allowed to exist. Expanding the old boundaries, but never removing them. It is an extra inch of freedom or possibility, yet it is only an inch. The boundaries are never obliterated, as so often is claimed by enthusiasts. To re-evolve the

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<sup>8</sup> Schrödinger's cat is an image popularly invoked when describing a unity of two situations that seem to be contradictory, yet are occurring at the same time. Schrödinger's cat is named after the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger who described the experiment in which a cat is placed in a sealed off box with a vial of poison. The vial will be broken depending on the chance occurrence of a radioactive atom decaying. During the time frame in which someone is unsure whether the atom has decayed one can speak of the cat as both alive and dead, although one can only find out by opening the box. This image does not presume that the cat is actually both alive and dead, but only that one can speak about, or presume it as such.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that *New Media* by Lister et al. (2009) is an introduction work, it does provide a more than adequate definition of hypertextuality and what defines new media as being new media, such as the presence of the virtual, the interactive, the hypertext, the creation of networks and simulation.

image of Schrödinger's cat: within the parameters of the box one can think of the cat as both alive and dead, but only within those parameters that is the confinement of the box. This leaves the definition of the term medium in the most practical sense. What is a medium, apart from what we do with it? There are roughly two notions of the term medium that can be distinguished. Firstly there is medium in its most basic sense the carrier of things such as sound, sight, touch, things we perceive and help us perceive. This lies close to McLuhan's idea of medium, so it would also include light, lamps, cars, or computers (McLuhan, 1964). Secondly there is medium in the more traditional sense such as writing, pictures, and music; this excludes many other technologies. It is a notion of medium which revolves around the relaying of meaning, rather than expecting they have meaning, and it therefore lies closer to the notion adopted by Williams (1974). To make the term 'medium' workable, one must make a division between specific media technologies that revolve solely around the conveying of meaning, like paintings, books and films, and those who *can* convey meaning, but do not have the relaying of meaning as their primary goal, like trains. Trains can be seen as conveying meaning, the primary goal, however, is transportation. Looking at media from this perspective seems to be the most effective when analyzing cultural expressions and in which forms they are poured, although many issues remain unresolved, some of which will be discussed in Chapter Two.

### **1.3. The problem of narrative**

One of the problems in Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling is that it remains vague about what he is referring to when he speaks about 'storytelling'. Either he refers to the creation of a story in the popular sense, often referred to as 'narrative' within the field of Literature Studies, or the narrative as it is constructed in hindsight by the reader out of the actions presented to the reader, user or audience by the text. That which Jenkins' aims for seems to be 'story' in the latter sense of the word, the (re)construction of the (grand) narrative by the user. Each element or action can be presented, as such, via a different medium, or media platform, and in the end the user will be able to construct a coherent 'whole' or narrative. However Jenkins argues this whole is predetermined, so

he is working backwards, as in literary theory the story is not there as such, but only later constructed by the user (Rimmon-Kenan, 2001)<sup>10</sup>. Jenkins presupposes the presence of the story that as such is interpreted by the user in a particular way. It becomes an imposed and accessible object, opposed to an active process of understanding. However, the story is not there, but only comes into being in interaction with a user who consumes the narrative and for him or herself constructs the story. This process can take place because of the *gaps* within a narrative (p. 128, Rimmon-Kenan, 2001). It are these empty spaces that create the dynamic within the narrative and spark the story construction with the user. Again, the story, as an object, is not present within the larger narrative, but only is created by interaction. It is a mental process, working beyond the work itself. It refers to the process of creation of meaning and understanding.

In turn, the recognition of this ‘story’ implies that there is such a thing as a transmedial narrative, which also has to be analyzed, observing the way the different elements are joined into a whole and how they are presented to the user. Creating a complex narratology 2.0 idea, in which actions of characters are replaced by media expressions, which in turn possess minor narratives which are structured in a similar pattern as the whole, which would be the transmedia narrative. It would not be transmedia storytelling, but a transmedia story working together with a transmedia plot and a transmedia narrative; the ‘telling’ would not be a factor. This approach would require a further and sharper look at the way information or gaps are presented to the user, and the process that has to be followed while consuming this work, which does not happen. It is questionable if analysis of such effects is even possible because of the vast narrative complexity, especially considering each media text which forms a part of this vast transmedial narrative would also consist of a narrative with its own dynamic and story/plot division. Furthermore the analysis of the story is hard enough within one text, let alone if this one text consists of many others, it becomes an impossible task.

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<sup>10</sup> Rimmon-Kenan is Emeritus Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The majority of her works deals with the creation and use of narratives and she is amongst the first to explore the notion of ‘gaps’ and how they direct the reading experience.

The term transmedia storytelling in itself implies the *telling* of a story, the narration of events, and the ‘whole’ about which Jenkins speaks would be the grand narrative. From this understanding a conclusion has to be drawn that no element should be able to be consumed separately, because after all, all elements within a narrative only in combination with the other elements create meaning. However in virtually all the examples that are used, *Pokémon* (Jenkins, 2003), *The Matrix* and *Survivor* (Jenkins 2006) there is no singular narrative. In fact, there is often a multiplicity of narratives that is created. The Japanese *Pokémon* franchise is the clearest example; all the media texts on their respective media platforms, the anime, the manga, the games, refer to each other, but they have, in fact, nothing to do with one and other on a narrative level. Each expression has its own main character, its own narrative, and thus its own interpretations. The main characters from the *Pokémon* manga<sup>11</sup> (Kusaka, 1997), Red and Blue, have nothing to do with the main character from the anime series (Tajiri, 1997, Japan), Satoshi (or Ash Ketchum), or the game (Game Freak, 1998). Although in certain cases the narratives can be connected to each other, largely each expression possesses its own distinct and unique narrative. What they do have in common is a shared referential framework: the appearance of the characters, Pokémon and location (for an example see Appendix I). These images are shared in all media expressions creating a sense of recognition, but the different media texts do not link on a narrative level, but merely on an intertextual one.

*The Matrix* the computer game (Shiny Entertainment, 2003), comic (Wachowski, 2003) and movie (Wachowski, 1999) can be separately consumed, showing they are not as such part of one grand narrative<sup>12</sup>. Each possesses its own narrative. In combination with each other they create a greater sense of meaning and understanding, they refer heavily to one and other, but they are not as such one massive narrative (see Appendix II). After having consumed all media expressions the user is able to reproduce a story that has expanded

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<sup>11</sup> The original manga series delivered as promotional material for the game, not the manga series which are a retelling of the anime series. It is not uncommon for manga to be retold in anime form (and vice versa) but often there are also original works containing original narratives based upon the worlds created in a popular manga or anime.

<sup>12</sup> It is another question if one would *consume* them separately, it is about the possibility they possess. Chances are that if one enjoyed the movie one is more likely to buy the game, or vice versa, but one is not needed to understand the other, each can be consumed completely separate from the other.



itself over several media, becoming a transmedial story, or a story that transcends media, yet is not a unified whole.

## 2. The problem of transmedia storytelling

### 2.1 The source of the misconception

As mentioned in the previous chapter the explanation and the definition given in Jenkins' work about transmedia storytelling is (in itself) contradictory. He defines transmedia storytelling as: "A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole." (p. 97, Jenkins, 2006) The examples he gives while explaining the definition, such as *The Matrix* and *Pokémon*, do not adhere to this definition, because the expressions or different media 'texts' are in fact not part of this singular narrative. They create multiple narratives that, although using a unified referential framework, are not a unified, singular great, transmedial narratives. If on the other hand the focus is placed upon the process in which the different media expressions on different media platforms take the place of events and so create a complex media transcending structure that can, and in that case has to be, read as a narrative the theoretical idea becomes more readable, but becomes an analytical juggernaut almost impossible to analyze. Each media expression would be a narrative text, a series of events, actions and gaps. These separate narratives would in turn become part of a greater narrative and each smaller element should be viewed in conjuncture with all the other elements in order to make any statement about the performative action of story construction. The many gaps and the great influence of the user, who can consume all elements, but not always does<sup>13</sup>, lead to a speculative monstrosity that can hardly be analyzed. This assumption is based on the implication that there is such a thing as a transmedia story, which automatically gives life to the notion there has to be a transmedia plot and transmedia narrative. Although the transmedia narrative can be reconstructed, the nature of the plot becomes highly complex and almost impossible to research. Once the internet (sites) and other paratexts are factored in, it becomes impossible to determine

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<sup>13</sup> Because he is required to take action in order to obtain all these expressions, an action he does not always take.

the sequence in which the work is, should be, could be and can be consumed<sup>14</sup>. This adds to the entangled and still growing analytical giant that is the grand narrative, making the action of deriving meaning from this narrative virtually impossible.

Furthermore on the background another problem looms, the definition of medium. Jenkins actively disconnects media from its media platform. Seeing not the 8-track, for example, as medium, but as he says: “Recorded sound is the medium.” (p. 13, Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins moves towards a more basic definition of the term medium, inhabiting a vague area between elements such as sound and sight, written word and music. It opens a new Pandora’s box of issues and misunderstandings. It leads towards an endless phenomenological discussion about the essence of a given medium that operates within the confinements of a b.b.f.k.a.m.<sup>15</sup>. Largely it ignores media specific, or media platform specific elements of that medium or a media text. Jenkins seems to strive for a supposed unity within media texts, within the content of the various media platforms, although it is highly questionable if this unity even exists.

## 2.2 Transmedia’s black box fallacy

In the introduction of his book *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins, 2006) Henry Jenkins opposes the notion of the black box, the idea that our access to media content will in the future come to us via one single black box. He calls the notion of the black box a fallacy, saying that: “Part of what makes the black box concept a fallacy is that it reduces media change to technological change and strips aside the cultural levels we are considering here.” (p. 15, Jenkins, 2006). He differentiates between the hardware, which is diverging, and the actual content which is, according to him, converging. He notes: “I don’t know about you, but in my living room, I am seeing more and more black boxes.” (p. 15,

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<sup>14</sup> The linear understanding of narrative still dictates Literary theory, and the definition of story, the chronicle (re)construction of events presented in the plot by the reader, stresses the importance of the order in which the events are represented in the plot.

<sup>15</sup> Black box formally known as medium.

Jenkins, 2006). Furthermore he cites the Cheskin research<sup>16</sup> in which they also note that the media content is converging.

There is but one problem when talking about the convergence of media content. This convergence, no matter how you look at it, can only occur when all media expressions are floating within a single space<sup>17</sup>. Transmedia storytelling exists by the grace of the convergence of media content, and is indivertibly tied to the concept of convergence culture, which is, by Jenkins no less, again tied to the black box fallacy. It is based upon the notion cultural (i.e. media) expressions or cultural texts reside in a shared space where they are allowed to converge and move so close to each other they melt into one major narrative, inexplicably tied to one and another. For this entity to function properly, according to the formulation by Jenkins, it has to be accessible from one unified point, and in one unified way, otherwise it cannot be consumed as a seamless whole. To dismiss the existence of the black boxes is to dismiss the shared space in which the media expressions reside. By embracing them the limitations and possibilities of media specificity is ignored. A black box would be an amorphous mass that takes no particular shape and places no boundaries, no limitations and no specific possibilities inherent to each medium. It ignores the limits and possibilities of a novel, or a television series, whom in turn direct the development of the content. Disconnecting the content from the medium, by formulating the medium as a black box, ignores the parameters in which the content is formed, destroying a valid avenue of analysis.

The question of medium is what remains. If the medium is not its hardware (e.g. not the media platform), but its content, it still ignores the fact that there are many media who are composed of multiple other media. Movies can be separated in images, text and sound, within film narratology they refer to this division as sound narration and image narration (Verstraten, 2008). Sound in turn can be re-divided in music and voice-over. Comic books consist of pictures and words, yet they are a unity: one cannot be consumed

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<sup>16</sup> Cheskin research is research into consumer insights, specifically the report named: “Designing Digital Experiences for Youth” in *Market Insight Series* from Fall (2002).

<sup>17</sup> Jenkins considers the space to be separate from the media platform, ergo a blank space that is not a black box, yet is also not a specific media platform.

without the other. Do they then transcend the media, language and imagery, by which they are created or are they a new medium in which two elements are joined? Hence computer games are in a league of their own, for they are not a medium, they exist only by grace of other media, film, sound, space, text. Paul Cheng, in his text *Waiting for Something to Happen* (2007), analyzes the tension between narrative space, interactivity and the static, passive cut-scene's within video games. Although he goes even a step further by looking at specific elements within the computer game, the cut-scenes versus the narrative space, both can be re-divided into different media, the spoken word, music, writing, and so on. It creates a paradox from which there is no escape.

It also leads inevitably to, as mentioned before, a phenomenological discussion of essence. The old discussions about the bookness of a book, or the filmness of a film, the televisionness of television, the writeness of writing, or the soundness of sound. It is an unanswerable question, simply and solely because such essences and definitions change. What is film now, is not film later. To pursue this line of thought, attention must be given to the differences between these essences, because how can one otherwise determine if something is transmedial? It leads to the differentiating between elements that cannot be, or do not necessarily have to be differentiated. Who can truly pinpoint the difference between digital publication and analogue publication, between the p-book and the e-book? Not a difference in principle, but in essence. Is a written word in ink on paper so inherently different from that on screen or e-ink, and if so, should there be a differentiation made between those works printed and those handwritten? Is the meaning of a word different depending on its medium?

It leads to one of two conclusions. Either transmedia storytelling is in itself a fallacy, as it simply cannot exist because there is no shared space in which it can converge (after all media platforms are specific and different from each other on more than merely their basic content level), or transmedia storytelling as term cannot describe that which it is explained to describe. It does not describe a whole, a unity, but separate and multiple narratives, and although each separately consumable, they share a common referential

framework in which they refer to each other and draw upon their shared notions.

### 2.3 The use of transmedial intertextuality

By returning to Kinder's original notion of transmediality and transmedial intertextuality, certain issues with transmedia storytelling can be resolved. She notes in her book *Playing with Power in Movie, Television, and Video Games* (1991) the following:

“What I found was a fairly consistent form of transmedia intertextuality, which positions young spectators (1) to recognize, distinguish, and combine different popular genres and their respective iconography that cut across movies, television, comic books, commercials, video games, and toys; (2) to observe the formal differences between television and its prior discourse of cinema, which it absorbs, parodies, and ultimately replaces as the dominant mode of image production; (3) to respond to and distinguish between the two basic modes of subject positioning associated respectively with television and cinema, being hailed in direct address by fictional characters or by offscreen voices, and being sutured into imaginary identification with a fictional character and fictional space, frequently through the structure of the gaze and through the classical editing conventions of shot/reverse shot;<sup>[14]</sup> and (4) to perceive both the dangers of obsolescence (as a potential threat to individuals, programs, genres, and media) and the values of compatibility with a larger system of intertextuality, within which formerly conflicting categories can be absorbed and restrictive boundaries erased.” (p. 48, Kinder, 1991)

Her approach solves two major issues that arise with Jenkins' notion of transmedia storytelling. First of all, she explains that what she defines, unafraid to draw on theory formulated by old media<sup>18</sup> to explain something that crosses between all forms of media, namely intertextuality, or a shared referential framework, that transcends one medium<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> A misleading term in itself, as if new media stands somehow separate from all rules of older media and as if the old media can be rendered obsolete by the newer version of itself. The term New Media creates unnecessary confusion and the illusion that simply because it is considered new everything one says about it is new, or that it can only be understood from a somehow new perspective. Many old theories and terms can be applied and many practices still continue on the 'new' media. If only because we always start from a position that is constructed upon our previous notions and understandings based upon older media and older culture.

<sup>19</sup> Although the term 'transmedia' seems a bit redundant, as intertextuality as term already refers to cultural products outside of the given text, and is not necessarily limited to the field of literature, most theories might only consider literature.

Secondly she omits the entire black box fallacy and creates a workable term less inhibited by the phenomenological discussions of essence.

Cultural products such as *The Matrix*, or *Pokémon*, clearly operate on an intertextual level, drawing on a shared referential framework and so managing to create a deeper, hermeneutic layer of meaning. Where in Jenkins' theory the media expressions must be in direct contact with each other for the user to seamlessly move from one medium to another in order for the transmedial narrative construction to work, Kinder leaves a space which the user can actively occupy. Within this space the media expression counts on the user's ability to understand, link, recognise and distinguish. Where the transmedia story has to be a whole in order for all media texts to be connected, the intertextuality which crosses media boundaries allows different texts and media expressions to coincide and operate jointly, regardless of manner and sequence of consumption, to enable the user to derive meaning, because it is not a narrative with a begin, middle and ending, or a starting state and an end state<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> The idea of minimal story where a story is defined as having a begin state, a change and an end state. Many argue although that, especially in later literature, the change does not have to occur and the end state is often very similar to the begin state. An example of this is *The Lady with the Dog* (2012) by Anton Chekhov. For further information is referred to: S. Rimmon-Kenan *Narrative Fiction* (2001).

### 3. The impossibility of transmedia storytelling

The question remains to what extent transmedia storytelling, as defined by Jenkins, does actually exist. The basic claim that media texts inhabit a shared space, does not always lead to the convergence of their content, something Jenkins does expect. True, this shared space and black box access raise the accessibility of the media texts, creating a faster and smoother motion from one media expression to another, but only on the level of access. However, each individual media expression operates within its own rules and limitations tied to its media specific elements, but also possessing its own referential framework. This framework can be shared, and can transcend a single media text. In fact, it can transcend the medium itself. However it is still limited by the medium it originates from. Consumers might easily move between different media, or media expressions, the notion there somehow is a unity which can be consumed as such still carries a highly problematic element; it is based upon an ‘imaginary’ illusion (Lacan, 1998). It is based on the notion there is somehow a unity within our experience, that our senses create a singular unified whole. It is, however the user who internally constructs this unified image, joining the various sensory inputs.

Analyzing examples of what could be considered transmedia storytelling, those cited by Jenkins and other expressions, like for example *Mimicry* (Monobanda, 2010) a relatively new project developed by Monobanda, and earlier works such as *Dreadnot* by Reedber (2000) (see appendix IV), but also in *Extremely Loud, Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2006), *House of Leaves* by Danielewski (2000), there is a mixing of different medial elements that each contribute to a larger whole (for an example see appendix V). However, in every case that is so far examined in this paper, one of two things occur, making these cases not part of a transmedial story. Either there is a multiplicity of narratives (1), and not a singular grand narrative, or there is one media platform (2) that dominates over the other platforms.

- 1) There is often a multiplicity in narratives, not a singular grand narrative, that shares a larger referential framework. Examples of this are *Pokémon* and *The*



*Matrix*, but also newer examples such as the *Dragon Age* series<sup>21</sup>, or the MMORPG *Guild Wars* (ArenaNet, 2005). Both *Dragon Age* and *Guild Wars* have expanded their reach and spread from the medium of computer games to the medium of books<sup>22</sup>. Nonetheless, these expressions do not have a larger shared narrative; they *might* have it, but they do not *necessarily* have it. For example, the novels published by the makers of *Dragon Age* deal largely with the story of King Maric. The two books can be considered sequels, but in the larger perspective of the game they are not part of a grand narrative: they are paratexts. The locations from the book, the game and the comic however do repeat themselves, creating this referential link (for an example see Appendix III.). Each individual media expression, however, can be consumed separately from the rest. The individual texts do contribute to the construction of a larger referential framework, consisting largely of intertextual references.

- 2) There is one media platform dominating the other. In his text *Transmedia Storytelling* (Jenkins, 2003) he uses *Pokémon* as an example and states that: “ By design, Pokémon unfolds across games, television programs, films, and books, with no media privileged over any other.” (p. 1, Jenkins, 2003). Often in examples such as *Survivor* (Parson, 2000, US), *Lost* (Lieber et al., 2004 – 2010, US), or *The Truth about Marika* (Sveriges Television, 2007, Sweden) one type of media is favoured over the other. There is one carrier, one vehicle which initially brings the initial narrative to the audience, from there other media expressions arise. Yet one basic narrative on one (starting) medium dominates the others. All of the above mentioned expressions are television series, and first contact is established via the television, which becomes a guiding media platform, with the moving images, recorded sound, and perhaps recorded subtitles as guiding medium. In many alternative reality games either the computer (text or virtual space) or the

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<sup>21</sup> A series of RPG computer games *Dragon Age Origins* (Bioware, 2009) and *Dragon Age II* (Bioware, 2011)), books *Dragon Age the Stolen Throne* (Gaider, 2010) and *Dragon Age The Calling* (Gaider, 2010)), comics *Dragon Age* (Card, 2011))and web video's each telling a different (part of a) story, each possessing their own narrative and only operating in a larger referential framework in which each text contributes to a larger transmedial world creation.

<sup>22</sup> *Guild Wars Ghost of Ascalon* (Forbeck, 2010)

phone (sound or text) are used to start the user on the path of the unfolding narrative, it is often that medium that continues to dominate the narrative that unfolds.

Still, even if one can merge or bring several media expressions into one space, it is questionable if users are able to merge those media expressions just as easily. Each media expression requires another mode of reading and understanding. Although they might refer to each other and exist in a complex network of intertextuality, each media expression remains tied to its own medium, with its own rules and its own media specificity. Transmedia storytelling becomes an impossibility, because as we shift from text to pictures to sound, different aspects and different symbols become important. There is room for (mis)interpretation on other levels, the all-important gaps are constructed in different ways. Where in a book it can remain unknown if a character is black or white, in a movie this fact becomes obvious in a matter of seconds. This creates other modes of tension, forcing the maker, but also the user, to be aware of other methods of invoking that tension. Although many media share common characteristics and tie into the larger referential framework that is a culture, each medium has a media specific set of symbols and references which cannot automatically be transcribed to other media, if only because of the problem of translation and the media specificity of a medium. Not to mention the human factor of making choices between media as people have their own preferred mode of taking in information. Certain users are primarily more visually oriented, while others are audio oriented, while again others are more haptic orientated. As mentioned before, ignoring this human factor creates an imaginary notion of unified content that somehow as a whole can be consumed without problem, and is, somehow, transported as a singular unity into the users consciousness. And even though our minds allow us to create a unified experience, it does not mean the impulses as such enter our minds as a unified whole; we construct it, in hindsight.

As an ideal and abstract notion, Jenkins' notion of transmedia storytelling can operate. Yet what is described, and which cases are defined as transmedia stories do not, in fact, adhere to the rules he has set. It seems not to exist at all. Instead one describes the

phenomenon of (transmedia) intertextuality, the referential framework that is constructed in which media expressions or media texts refer to each other and draw upon shared notions in order to create a world that is richer and more extended than if one would be limited to one medium.

It is easy to take a stick and simply whack away at Jenkins theory and his ideas, even though, as has been mentioned, there are certain fundamental flaws in the definition he has created. It must be said that he is the first who has looked at developments in the field of new media from this perspective. His book, *Convergence Culture* (2006), is the first, and so far the only work, that has dealt with this issue, and he has thus cast an enormous shadow upon this area of analysis. It is this shadow that perhaps is the greatest issue with Jenkins' theory. Many technology enthusiasts have happily adopted, used, and sometimes abused his terminology. Unfortunately there has been little, or no, critical reflection upon the statements Jenkins made, not from within the field of media studies, or cultural studies, and not from within the field such as literary studies, film studies or new media studies. The fact that many of these notions and ideas have existed before, like for example the notion of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), and as such have not been exploited to explain these phenomenon, cannot be simply attributed to one man.

## Conclusion

Concluding: *To what extent does transmedia storytelling unfold across different media platforms?* The notion of transmedia storytelling, defined by Jenkins in his book *Convergence of Culture* (2006) cannot be so easily applied to narratives that seem to transcend their initial medium. When analyzing the term transmedia storytelling, six important issues arise: a) the lack of critical reflection of the term ‘storytelling’; b) the fact Jenkins assumes there is a pre-existing unity that is the story; c) the issue of gaps Jenkins forgoes; d) the way Jenkins constructs transmedia storytelling, which leads to a black box fallacy; e) the fact there is a multiplicity of narratives rather than one, or there is one medium that dominates over the others; and f) that which Jenkins seems to describe is actually a larger network of intertextual references.

- a) Jenkins adopts the term storytelling without a critical reflection of the implications of the term. The term storytelling refers on two levels to the creation of a story, what within the field of literary studies is referred to as ‘narrative’. First of all it refers in the popular sense to a story, which is called a narrative, and second of all it refers to an element within that narrative, namely the story, the chronological ordering of events done by the reader, standing in opposition to the plot, the events as depicted within the linear structure of the book. By ignoring this division, or not explicitly dealing with it, Jenkins greatly undermines his terminology, because the analysis of the former interpretation, requires a vastly different approach than the analysis of the latter interpretation. The construction of the story, not the narrative, is a performative action done by the consumer of the text directed by the gaps that are present within the narrative.
- b) Jenkins presupposes in his theory a unity of the story, making it an object, that in its entirety can be consumed by the user, and is constructed, beforehand, by the producers. He, however, forgets that the story as such is not necessarily a solid singular object, but can differ and is constructed by each user individually on basis of the elements the user has picked up from the story, and the gaps (s)he has

- filled in. It refers to a product of a performative action rather than an object already hidden within the folds of a media text.
- c) The directing capabilities of the gaps within the narrative are ignored. Within the field of literary studies the gaps within the narrative are considered the directing force within a 'story'. These gaps are actively filled in by the reader, who thus creates the story, and with the arrival of new information adapts, changes or discards the story, or parts of the story. The further one removes himself from a singular text, and starts looking at larger works, for example the 'whole' of various media texts about which Jenkins speaks, the larger these gaps become, and the more room there is for interpretation, thus creating larger differences between interpretations. Furthermore where within a singular text certain elements of information can be missed, the vast majority can still be used. In larger transmedial constructs one has the option to completely, and consciously omit whole parts of the narrative, possibly creating vastly different stories than others who do consume all the texts.
  - d) The term transmedia storytelling seems to be a snake biting his own tail. Jenkins sees a medium separated from its specific media platform, and opposes the notion of a single black box through which one can consume this medium, or various media. However his theory does suppose a unified area in which these different media texts reside, this creates a paradox situation. Either there is no black box and thus no shared space, which exists because of the presence of a black box in which this space exists, or there is a shared space, and thus there is a black box. There is another problem with this position. To dismiss the existence of the black boxes is to dismiss the shared space in which the media expressions reside. By embracing the notion of shared medial space and a unified form of accessing it, the limitations and possibilities of media specificity are ignored.
  - e) When analyzing the examples of transmedia storytelling one of two things occur either the work consists of a multiplicity of narratives rather than one singular

(grand) narrative, such is the case in for example the *Pokémon* franchise, or *The Dragon Age* series, or one media platform dominates the others, such is the case in, for example, *Lost*, and *The Truth about Marika*. This makes transmedia storytelling as an object which forms a ‘whole’, in which each media element contributes to that whole, and in which no media platform dominates the other, impossible because always one or the other is occurring.

- f) That which Jenkins seems to strive for, or searches to explain is rather the construction of a larger referential framework based upon intertextual references between various media texts. It is not something that is new, or inherently unique to the new media and the convergence of media texts. It, as he aptly notes, has become more and more prominent. However the use of the term intertextuality and referential framework would yield more lasting and stronger analytical results, simply because they more strongly refer to that which is being described and analyzed by Jenkins.

For now a true transmedia story as described by Jenkins does not exist. It is highly questionable if the media texts can overcome their media specificity to truly merge into this seamless mixture of various media expressions, if only because the various modes of experiencing these media expressions are tied to our various senses, as partly formulated by McLuhan in his notion of extending the senses (McLuhan, 1964), and these senses divide our experience. The conclusion can be drawn that transmedia storytelling, as defined by Jenkins, remains an impossibility, because it seems unable to overcome these basic media specific boundaries without running into considerable problems. A unity that in its entirety can be consumed remains, thus far, an imaginary illusion. Jenkins is, however, correct in noting there is a hermeneutic or referential level that stretches beyond merely one media platform. This is not so much a process that is unique to the arrival of new media, but something that is present throughout the development of the media landscape. Jenkins is right to point out that this process has become more prominent, especially with the arrival of new media platforms that bring the various media texts in

closer proximity to each other, and so draw more attention to their shared referential framework or intertextuality.

As mentioned before, one man cannot wholly be blamed for these flaws, and this thesis has become, despite the best of intentions, a somewhat Jenkins-centric text. There are many more elements that provide worthwhile avenues of research, such as the somewhat teleological notion of technology which is hidden within the folds of Jenkins' theory, the idea that technology develops at such a pace that within time there would be no clear distinction within the consumption of different media texts. Also further exploration of the implications when adopting such theoretical notions of intertextuality and transmedia intertextuality is needed before a workable understanding of this phenomenon can be reached. However, the scope of the research done does not allow for such a broad and detailed exploration. This text serves as an initial exploration of the current issues with regard to transmedia storytelling, and is meant to serve as a critical reflection upon the initial foray into this unexplored territory.

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## Appendix

### Appendix I



Figure 1: One of the protagonists named Blue from: *Pokémon Adventures*, chapter 1. (Kusaka, 1997)



Figure 2: Concept art of Blue from : *Pokémon Adventures*, chapter 3 (Kusaka, 1997)



Figure 3: the sprite of the unnamed antagonist from the *Pokémon* generation I games. (Game Freak, 1998)



Figure 4: The protagonist Red from: *Pokémon Adventures*, chapter 1. (Kusaka, 1997)



Figure 5: Concept art of Red with his Pikachu from: *Pokémon Adventures*, chapter 1 (Kusaka, 1997)

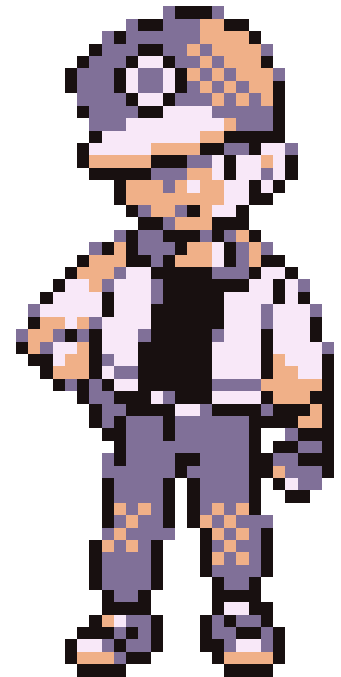
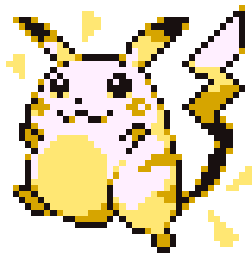


Figure 6: The sprite of the unnamed protagonist from the *Pokémon* generation I games (Game Freak, 1998)



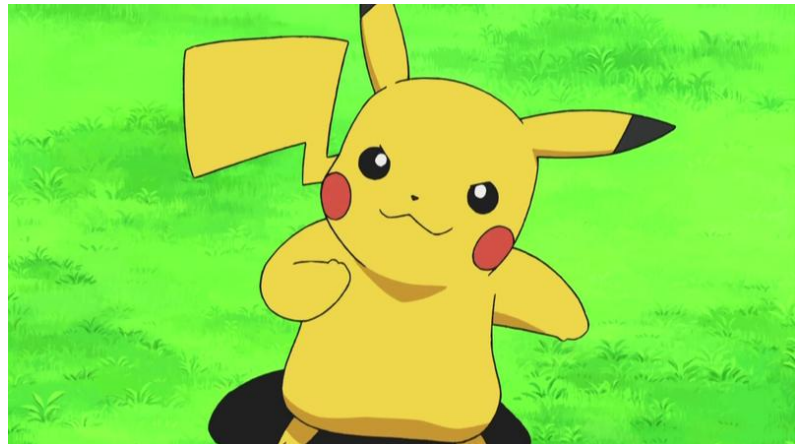
*Figure 7:* Ash Ketchum (or Satoshi in Japanese) from the anime *Pokémon* (Tajiri, 1997, Japan)



*Figure 9:* Sprite of Pikachu from the *Pokémon* Generation I games. (Game Freak, 1998)



*Figure 8:* Gary Oak (Shigeru Okido) from the anime *Pokémon* (Tajiri, 1997, Japan).



*Figure 10:* Pikachu from the anime *Pokémon* (Tajiri, 1997, Japan).

Author note: Notice how comparable the appearances of the two types of characters are, making them instantly recognisable to those who are familiar with both texts. However Gary and Ash perform differently in the anime than Red and Blue in the manga and the unnamed protagonist and antagonist in the games. Also note the trade mark characteristics, like the tail, ears and cheek markings, from Pikachu that return in the manga concept art, the anime and game art.

## Appendix II

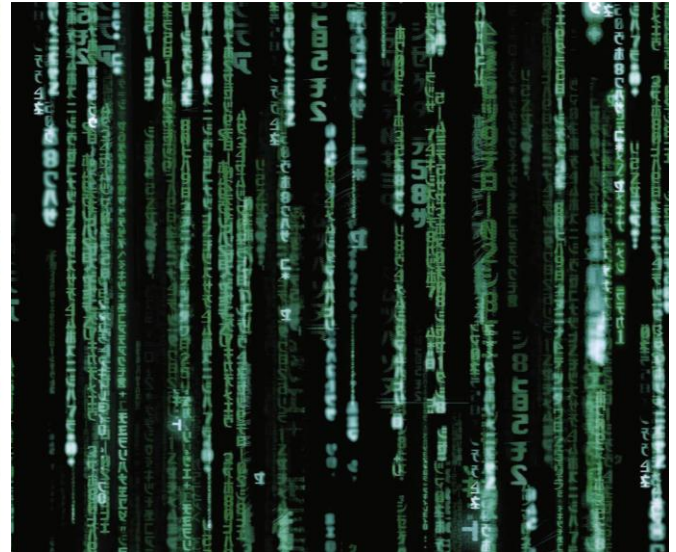


Figure 12: Screenshot of *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999) intro.

### Author note:

Although narrative-wise these two works have little to do with each other, the use of similar typography and similar imagery (the falling letters symbolising the Matrix) they create a larger referential framework.

Figure 11: Page 13 from: “Morning Sickness” in: *The Matrix Comics Volume 1*. (Wachowski, 2003)



*Figure 13:* A panel from “Wrong Number” in *The Matrix Comics Volume 1* (Wachowski, 2003). Notice the characteristic phone present in the room...



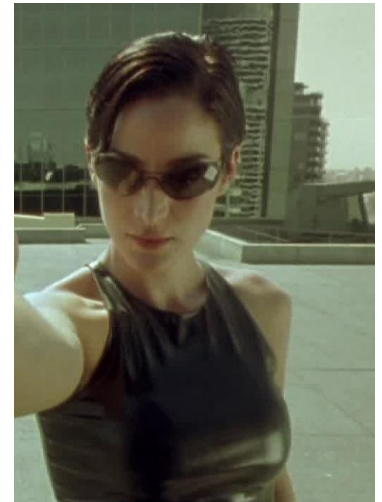
*Figure 14:* ...and the phone coming from the trademark scene from *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999) where Neo is ‘freed’ from the Matrix.



*Figure 15:* Trinity from *The Animatrix* (Morimoto, 2003)



*Figure 16:* The Club Kid from: *Enter the Matrix* (Shiny Entertainment, 2003)



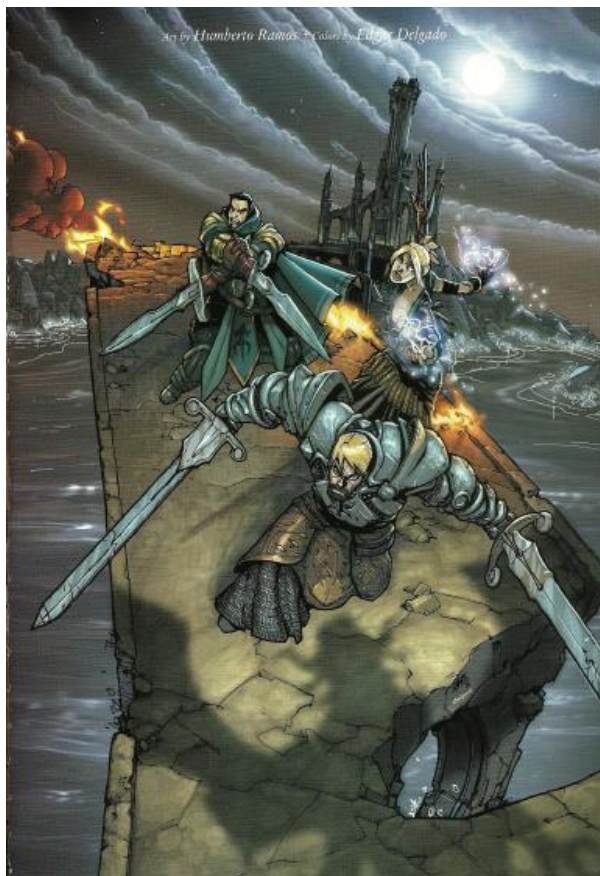
*Figure 17:* Trinity from *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999).

Author Note: The reoccurring use of sunglasses to signify someone who is conscious of the Matrix, either as someone of the resistance, or an Agent, becomes an intertextual reference that spreads from one to the various other media expressions.

### Appendix III



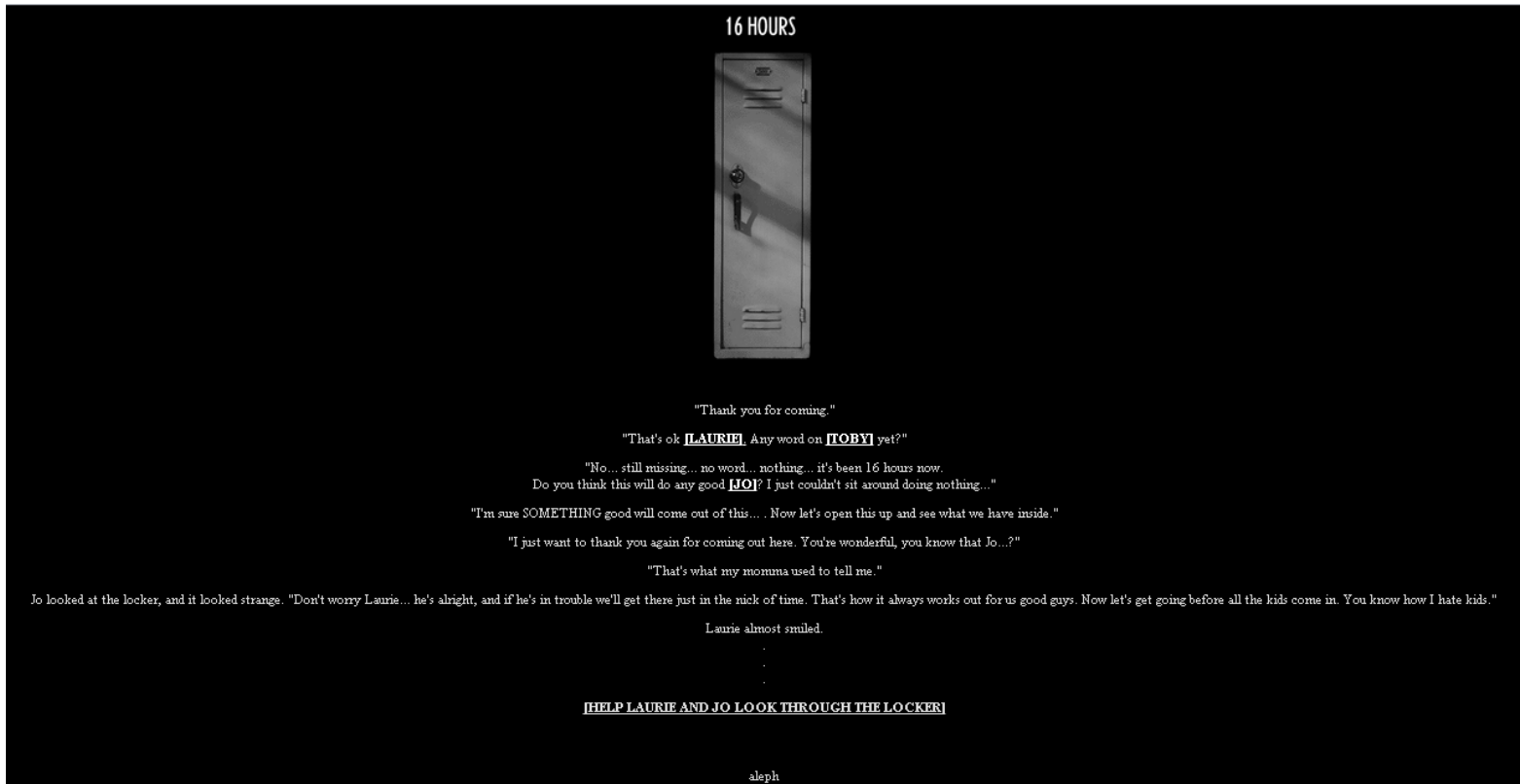
Figure 18: The Circle Tower as depicted in the game *Dragon Age Origins* (Bioware, 2009)



40 Figure 19: The Circle Tower depicted in *Dragon Age* (Card, 2011).



## Appendix IV



*Figure 20:* A screenshot of the start of “Chapter one” in the hypertextual work *Dreadnot* (Reedber, 2000). All the texts between brackets contains a hyperlink, like most of the imagery, each leading to another part of the narrative.

## Appendix V

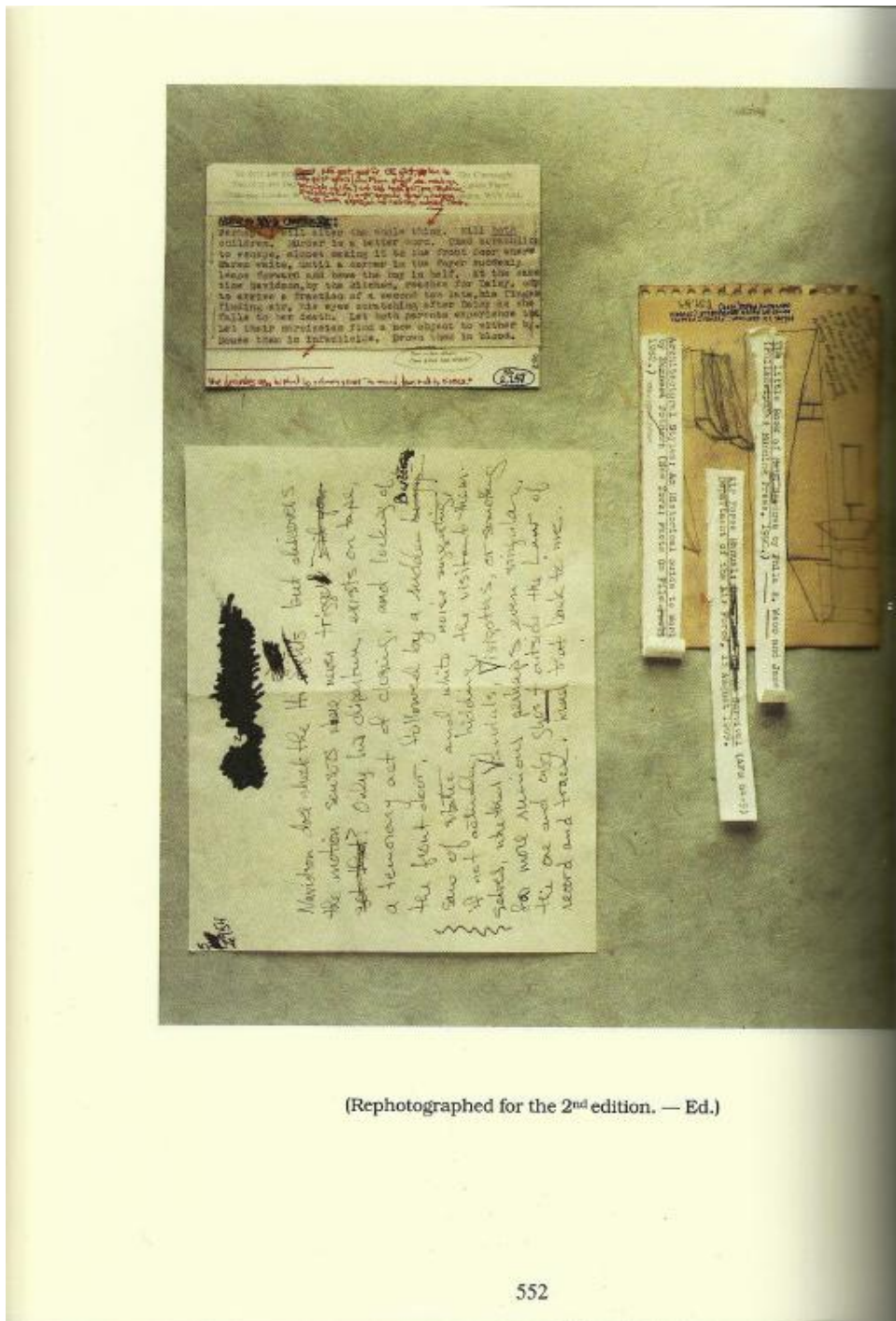


Figure 21: An example of how two different media can mix within one media platform (From: *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, (2000))