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The Trouble with Transmediation:
Fandom's Negotiation of Transmedia Storytelling Systems

Transmedia storytelling, defined by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* as a narrative that "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole," has been rapidly adopted as a content model and cross-promotional device for media properties with fannish appeal.[1] Jenkins, accordingly, makes a compelling argument for why transmedia storytelling systems hold allure and creative potential for fans. Invoking Pierre Lévy's definition of texts that function as cultural attractors, creating a circuit of expression where the activity of creators and interpreters mutually sustains each other, Jenkins extends Levy's terminology to discuss how transmedia texts are both cultural attractors and "cultural activator[s], setting into motion their decipherment, speculation and elaboration."[2] This desire to decipher, speculate, and expand has always been affiliated with fans' textual play and production, filling in narrative gaps and exploring textual excesses through the creation of fanfiction, fanart, vids and role-playing games (RPGs). Consequently, we can argue that a text doesn't need to be conceptualized as a transmedia story to function as a cultural activator, as fans have been unofficially unfolding narratives across multiple media platforms for generations.

What does distinguish commercial transmedia narratives from their unofficial, fan-created counterparts is their implicit promise to decentralize authorship and promote collaboration, both between creators in different mediums and creators and fans. While Jenkins stresses the decentralized or collaborative model of authorship these systems foster,[3] he offers an important qualification that "the most successful transmedia franchises have emerged when a single creator or creative unit maintains control,"[4] thus problematizing a reading of these systems as democratizing creative ownership. Borrowing Roberta Pearson's language, this is "the Jekyll and Hyde of transmedia storytelling."[5] For all of the rich encyclopedic and elaborative narrative potential that transmedia stories offer creators and fans, the commercial imperative that underlies their creation and the consumptive demands and creative strictures they place on fans has received little scholarly attention. This has resulted in a conflict between those who claim that transmedia storytelling systems offer fans sophisticated webs of content to explore and enhance and those that see these webs as precisely that: a mode of confining and regulating fannish analysis and textual production.

The goal of this project is to abandon momentarily the utopian readings of transmedia storytelling as "Jekyll" and begin to articulate a number of reasons that audiences and fans could construct transmedia storytelling as "Hyde." Specifically, I'm interested in how emerging

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transmedia storytelling systems and "authorized" or "official" ancillary content, such as podcasts and webisodes, reinforces the textual authority of a limited few, even as the text itself expands. This concurrent narrative expansion and constriction of textual authority leads to what Roberta Pearson identifies as the central paradox of transmedia storytelling and convergence culture at large: "that the very digital media that have been hailed as blurring lines between producers and consumers and creating a more participatory culture instead reinforce cultural hierarchies."[6] These hierarchies are, unsurprisingly, strictly gendered, an issue I point to briefly below but one that deserves further analysis.

This critique adopts Pearson's Jekyll/Hyde dichotomy precisely because I don't view transmedia storytelling, its proponents, or the commercial nature of these systems as inherently nefarious. That said, deeply embedded within transmedia storytelling's creative potential is a presumed consumption and comprehension of all of the cross-media narrative elements, a fannish mastery of an ever-expanding canon. It is the time and labor that goes into mediating the various flows of a transmedia story, and how those flows in turn mediate fan consumption and production, that is of central concern to me.

The creative constraints transmedia storytelling systems place on fans comes in a series of interrelated forms: first, there is the temporal control of intensified consumption that transmedia narratives encourage. For example, a fan of *Heroes* in any given week could be consuming a television episode, print

comic books and webcomics, re-watching episodes online alongside commentary with the creators and cast, exploring a choose-your-own adventure style branching narrative steeped in the show's mythology, reading a tie-in novel, poring over the official *Heroes* wiki, exploring websites for the fictional Pinehearst Company or Primatech Paper (among others), creating a character to be potentially featured in *Heroes* webisodes, and so on.[7] Thus, while a narrative nugget of information dispatched in any of these forms could prove inspirational for fans, the creative window of opportunity for them to play within the ever-evolving transmedia narrative has shrunken considerably. Fans who wish to explore the narrative gaps in the canon through the creation of their own fan texts find them either already filled in by the show's creators or difficult to develop before another piece of the transmedia narrative overwrites or negates it.

We can read this shrinking window of time for fans to textually engage with an unfolding canonical narrative as an exacerbated form of what Matt Hills' calls "just-in-time fandom."[8] Placing Hills' claim that "practices of fandom have become increasingly enmeshed within the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting,"[9] in a convergence context, I share Hills' anxiety that a simplistic reading of this trend as "a techno-evolution towards fuller 'interactivity' neglects the extent to which this eradication of the [analog fanzine] 'time lag' works ever more insistently to discipline and regulate the opportunities for temporally-licensed 'feedback,' and the very horizons of the fan experience."[10] Transmedia storytelling strives to eradicate these time lags altogether, formulating a new "just-in-time fandom" that is defined by an increased rate of consumption and canonical mastery, rather than fannish analysis and textual production.

Consequently, we might view this adoption of transmedia storytelling techniques and ancillary content models as a two-pronged industrial attack on the current drive towards time shifting. While we can assume that fannish rhythms of reception[11] ensure that a new installment of a text will be consumed on (or shortly after) its original airdate or release date, positioning a series within a web of transmedia content that has direct bearing on the unfolding serial narrative offers fans incentives

to eradicate time shifting, thus maximizing ratings and downloads. Moreover, this ancillary content is routinely located on the series' official website, offering alternative revenue streams for the network as they concurrently promote the show and make strides towards upgrading television's failing commercial model.

Moving beyond the temporal demands transmedia models potentially place on fans, we arrive at a second issue: in transmedia's efforts to create a "unified and coordinated entertainment experience,"[12] a unification of interpretive meaning is frequently a byproduct. This unifier of meaning, tasked with keeping the fictional world that is being built in order, is frequently a male author-god. Jenkins uses *The Matrix*'s Wachowski Brothers for his test case,[13] but contemporary examples of transmedia fanboy author-gods abound: George Lucas, Ron Moore, Joss Whedon, Eric Kripke, Josh Schwartz, J.J. Abrams, Tim Kring, and the list goes on. These masculine voices of authority, referred to as "The Powers That Be" (or TPTB) in fan communities, are implicitly invoked in their role as continuity watchdogs and vocally and visibly confirmed as the creative authority over the text through acknowledgements and interviews.

For example, Ron Moore is positioned as *Battlestar Galactica*'s transmedia figurehead through a number of channels: first and foremost, as the show's creator, but also through his weekly episodic podcasts (where he serves as a mouthpiece and interpreter of the text on behalf of the property's entire creative team) and in multiple interviews with other authors under *Battlestar Galactica*'s transmedia umbrella. The writers of the various *Battlestar Galactica* comic book series (*Zarek, Season Zero,* etc.) are particularly quick to stress the canonic ties of their transmedia contributions, ensuring fans that "every aspect of the comic universe is run directly through Ron Moore's office."[14] Thus, for every example of *Battlestar Galactica* allowing other authors to help construct their transmedia story, Moore is perpetually reinforced as textual foreman and his interpretation becomes the one definitive, "correct" reading of textual events.

The result, according to fan and scholar Kristina Busse, is that "certain groups of fans can become legit if and only if they follow

certain ideas, don't become too rebellious, too pornographic, don't read too much against the grain."[15] The "certain groups of fans" Busse is referring to, those too "pornographic," those who "read too much against the grain," are likely the writers and readers of slash fiction, the creators and consumers of slash art and vids. Historically celebrated in the first wave of fan studies in the early 1990s for their subversive reading of heteronormative popular culture texts, slash as a form of fan production has been dominated by female authors and readers. Consequently, while Busse's concerns might be directed towards slash fans specifically, they're directed generally at female fans, their reading practices, and their gradual exclusion as "legitimate fans" in this convergence model.

This concern is compounded by the fact that transmedia stories present an opportunity to push queer readings or queer characters to the periphery of the narrative, allowing for a concurrent acknowledgment of the homoerotic subtext that inspires slash fiction and a ghettoization of such readings, isolating them from the primary commercial text the fandom revolves around. Two recent examples[16] would be Buffy's lesbian experimentation in issue #12 of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season 8* comic book series and the outing of Lt. Felix Gaeta and Lt. Hoshi as lovers in *Battlestar Galactica*'s second set of webisodes, titled "The Face of the Enemy."
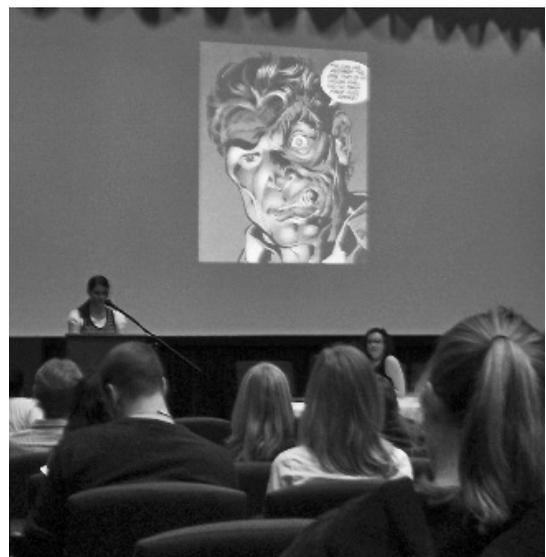
As Jenkins divides convergence-era creators into "prohibitionist" and "collaborationist" camps with regard to fan production,[17] it forces us to interrogate the prohibitionist tactics of transmedia storytelling systems' "collaborationist" objectives. To some degree, we could see transmedia narratives as a more covert form of cease and desist letters, creatively (rather than legally) prohibiting fans from certain interpretations of or elaborations on the text. As transmedia storytelling reinforces the boundaries between "official" and "unofficial" narrative expansion, often resulting in a celebration of authorial intent and establishing the fanboy auteur as a key player in how convergence culture is shaped, it has also appropriated fan labor for its own promotional gain. Theoretically, the acknowledgement and distribution of fantexts by a show's creative and corporate overseers could be read as a decisive break from prohibitionist tactics, but these instances of collaborationist fan outreach are fraught with legal and promotional ties, and gendered implications.

One example is the *Battlestar Galactica* Videomaker Toolkit, which launched in 2007. In exchange for offering vidders and fan filmmakers raw material from the television series in the form of audio and video files, fans would turn over the rights to their finished vids to SciFi and attach a promotional tag for the show to the end of their clips. Thus, fans traded ownership over their finished products in exchange for heightened visibility and an aura of professional validation. Importantly, the raw material offered to fans was primarily comprised of clips of gun battles, Centurian robots, and ships careening through space, fodder that would prove most inspirational to action or science fiction narratives, and certainly targeted male fan filmmakers over vidders. Vidding, a fan practice dominated by women, relies on popular music and footage of characters to create relationship-centric music videos. The fact that there was no footage of characters from the show made available to fans, and that the Videomaker toolkit rules strictly forbade use of copyrighted material outside of that offered on the site, severely limited the types of fantexts that could be produced.

We also need to distinguish between the overtly commercial components of transmedia stories (e.g. novels, video games, comic books, etc.) and the supposedly "free" ancillary content offered through official websites that often have just as much bearing on the unfolding transmedia narrative as their overtly commercial counterparts. Fandom, and to some degree the Internet at large, operates as a gift economy. Lewis Hyde, in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, distinguishes gift economies from commodity culture in their ability to establish a relationship between the person giving the gift and the person receiving,[18] creating a communal bond founded on a sense of obligation and reciprocity.[19]

While it's easy to critique transmedia storytelling's motives on purely economic terms, ancillary content models such as those adopted by *Heroes* and *Battlestar Galactica* exist somewhere in between commodity culture and a gift economy. Taking on the guise of a gift economy by offering fans transmedia tokens, these systems strive to build relationships with fans and integrate themselves into fan communities while simultaneously establishing a series of tolls and fees in the form of ads, and commercials, and allowing fans to reciprocate only within a strict set of legal and ideological parameters. Gift economies have routinely been theorized as "feminine" economic systems that are most clearly evident in female fan communities, and attempts to professionalize and monetize fan practices by men outside those communities, such as the case with FanLib, have been swiftly and vocally rejected. Ancillary content models, I would argue, could be seen as something of a regifting economy.[20] Their liminal placement between the commercial culture of transmedia narratives and fandom's gift economy leaves fan-oriented web content striving to regift fan culture and fan narratives back to fandom, with promotional strings attached.

Fittingly, since I began by addressing transmedia storytelling within a Jekyll/Hyde framework, I'd like to return to this construct to close by pointing towards one of transmedia's greatest potential threats: its ability to fracture fandom and studies of fandom into two gendered camps, instead of focusing on its intersections and questioning binary assumptions about how fans consume and produce. Male fans, essentialized through their affiliation with canonical mastery, collection, and a presumed desire to "go pro" or

develop a close relationship with creators, are arguably those being catered to by transmedia narratives and ancillary content models. In turn, they become fandom's Jekyll, held up as pure consumers, "proper" fans. Female fans, then, become Hyde: outside of transmedia's control by choice, and thus textually and legally threatening. Jenkins acknowledges that the "current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative," and notes that only "the most gifted transmedia artists [can] surf these market pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story."[21] I would contend that a greater challenge is posed to fans surfing and mediating the narrative flow of transmedia stories to remain artists in their own right.

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Notes

1 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 95-96.
2 Ibid, 95.
3 Ibid, 96.
4 Ibid, 106.
5 Roberta Pearson, "Participation or Totalization: Fans and Transmedia Storytelling," (paper presented at the Television and the Digital Public Sphere Conference, Université Paris II. 23 October 2008).
6 Ibid.
7 The bulk of the aforementioned transmedia content is accessed through NBC's official *Heroes* website (http://www.nbc.com/Heroes/).
8 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 178-179.
9 Ibid, 178.
10 Ibid, 179.
11 Reworking Tania Modleski's turn of phrase from her 1983 essay "The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work," my construction of fans' rhythms of reception inverts the presumptions about the daytime audience/housewife's mode of distracted viewership.
12 Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 22 March 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html (accessed 24 March 2007).
13 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 93-130.
14 William McCarty, "Brandon Jerwa on New *Battlestar Galactica: Season Zero*." *Newsarama.com*, http://forum.newsarama.com/showthread.php?t=113605.
15 Kristina Busse, "Podcasts and the Fan Experience of Disseminated Media Commentary," October 2006, http://www.kristinabusse.com/cv/research/flow06.html (accessed 2 March 2009).
16 Notably, both of these shows have featured homosexual characters. In the case of Buffy, it is her precarious feminine/feminist positioning that makes her queering especially controversial. In the case of *Battlestar Galactica*, lesbianism is alternately framed as heterosexist fantasy (Gaius' ménage a trois with Six and D'Anna) or devolving into violence/abuse (as with another transmedia example, from the TV movie *Razor*, which explores the relationship between Admiral Cain and Gina). Both of these transmedia flirtations with homosexuality are tempered by the fact that Gaeta is revealed to be bisexual (perhaps as a direct result of his tryst with the Eight on New Caprica that is revealed in the Webisodes), and Buffy's experimentation is dubbed a "one time thing" by the character and creators alike.
17 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 134.
18 Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage, 1983), xx.
19 Ibid, 86.
20 I expand on the term "regifting economy" in the Fall 2009 issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc) in an essay titled "Repackaging Fan Culture: The Regifting Economy of Ancillary Content Models."
21 Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101."