Transmedia Storytelling
Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company

by

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SUBMITTED TO THE COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES PROGRAM IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES
AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

JUNE 2007

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Abstract

Transmedia narratives use a combination of Barthesian hermeneutic codes, negative capability and migratory cues to guide audiences across multiple media platforms. This thesis examines complex narratives from comics, novels, films and video games, but draws upon the transmedia franchises built around Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* and *The Dark Crystal* to provide two primary case studies in how these techniques can be deployed with varying results. By paying close attention to staying in canon, building an open world, maintaining a consistent tone across extensions, carefully deciding when to begin building a transmedia franchise, addressing open questions while posing new ones, and looking for ways to help audiences keep track of how each extension relates to each other, transmedia storytellers can weave complex narratives that will prove rewarding to audiences, academics and producers alike.

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Acknowledgements

To my thesis committee - Henry Jenkins, William Uricchio, Chris Weaver, and Frank Espinosa - for being the best mentors an MIT man could ever hope for.

To Andy Pessin, Michael Brint, and Pranav Kothari, for their own mentoring and for helping me get here. The next pint's on me.

To Diana Henderson, who first introduced me to the term 'negative capability'. Cheers for that.

To the Bayers, David, Barb, and Eric, for introducing me to *The Dark Crystal*. *Big* cheers for that.

To Mike Lebowitz, Roberta Pearson, Junot Diaz, Derek Powazek, Stephen Jacobs, Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, Bob Rehak, Rob Kozinets, Martyn Pedler, Marc Ruppel, and Christy Dena, for saying exactly the right things at exactly the right times.

To my friends and family, for their infinite support and for enduring my endless rambling on while I tried to get this stuff sorted in my head – especially Mom, Dad, Talon, Nick, Nick, Nick, Jess, Aaron, Ken, Em, Mark, Erin, Josh, Amy, V, Kasi, Relia, Barry, Chris, Generoso, Philip, David, Ivan, Alec, Sam, Parmesh, Ilya, and Joshua. Sorry, guys.

To Pauline and Kenneth Alexander, who I think would have really liked to see me at MIT, and to Jean and Herb Long, who I know currently do.

To Laura Thomas, for putting up with me. Thanks, hon.

And to Jim Henson, for obvious reasons.

Introduction

I was born in December of 1977, which means that I was four when Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal* came out in 1982 and eight when *Labyrinth* was released in 1986. As a result the Henson 'dark fantasy' films struck me right between the eyes – if anything, I discovered them just a little too early, as evidenced by my memories of watching *The Dark Crystal* and being scared out of my mind. What were these huge, lumbering monsters that looked like rotting vultures in dresses, these "Skekses" things? Where did they come from? What was this alien world, this alternate universe? My discovery of *Labyrinth* at age eight was more forgiving, although I still feel the same odd fearful twinge I got from the Skekses when I watch David Bowie perform, well, anything. Where is this labyrinth located? Who built it? Why doesn't Jareth, the Goblin King, appear to be a Goblin himself?

These questions are so compelling due to a combination of careful worldbuilding and a concept called *negative capability,* which is the artful application of external reference to make stories and the worlds in which they are set even more alluring. Both *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* were accompanied by companion books, *The World of the Dark Crystal* in 1982 and *The Goblins of Labyrinth* in 1986, that fleshed out the worlds in which the films were set. Contrasting the ways in which both of these works utilize worldbuilding and negative capability helps us to work toward elucidating a rough aesthetics of transmedia storytelling, especially when examined in the context of the further transmedia extensions the Jim Henson Company created for these franchises in 2006 and 2007. Analyzing the degree of success that these franchises and others have

achieved over time permits the formulation of recommendations for creating successful

new transmedia franchises as the field continues its rapid expansion.

First, however, a more basic question must be addressed: what exactly *is*

transmedia storytelling? Transmedia storytelling can be seen as what literary critic Julia

Kristeva calls intertextuality writ large. According to this theory, every text exists not in

isolation but in a complex web of interconnectedness with other texts that influenced it or

are influenced by it, texts that it references or that reference it, and so on. In transmedia

storytelling, this concept is made explicit, complicated and formalized through

intermedial deployment. Transmedia stories build narrative references into each

component (the TV show chapter, the film chapter, the video game chapter, etc.) to direct

audiences through the closed system of the franchise – which, when taken *in toto,* makes

up the transmedia story. It is the crafting of this interconnectedness that will be the

primary focus of this thesis, examined in the following three sections.

The first section will attempt to map the field, starting with Henry Jenkins' work

as the cornerstone and then expanding to incorporate additional insights by Mark Hanson,

Christy Dena, Marc Ruppel, and others. I will then provide more examples of transmedia

storytelling, suggest some possible useful distinctions between types of transmedia

storytelling, and explore how the concepts of worldbuilding and negative capability can

use Kristevan intertextuality to guide audiences through transmedia narratives. After

that, I will repurpose Roland Barthes' notion of hermeneutic codes somewhat,

subdividing them into six possible classes of questions that arise in readers' minds when

reading a text, and how these can be utilized in analyzing and improving the links

between extensions in transmedia stories.

The second section uses the Jim Henson properties as case studies, closely examining how each film's use of worldbuilding and negative capability affects the structural and aesthetic relationship between the parent film and its extensions. By examining the hermeneutic codes in each film (or hypotext, as described by Gerard Genette), and how each franchise's extensions (or hypertexts, also *a la* Genette) make use of these codes, we can make suggestions for how contemporary storytellers might create worlds better suited for transmedia expansion.

The third section of this thesis considers some of the challenges facing transmedia storytelling and how a better understanding of hermeneutic codes, worldbuilding and negative capability might be utilized to overcome them. This section will describe some possible directions that transmedia storytelling might develop in the next few years and conceptualize some tools, for both storytellers and audience members, that might assist in its growth.

Examining the basic underlying principles of intertextuality leads to a better understanding of the special challenges and benefits of weaving a narrative across multiple media forms. This thesis aims to combine literary technique, theory, and, to a small degree, user interface design principles to provide storytellers, producers, audiences, and academics with practical creative insight into the business, aesthetics, and production of transmedia storytelling.

I. What is Transmedia Storytelling?

In the January 2003 issue of *MIT Technology Review*, Henry Jenkins describes how increases in the complexity that audiences expect from their entertainment, in the feasibility of sharing digital assets across multiple media forms, and in the entertainment industry's insatiable hunger for wildly profitable multi-media franchises are fostering the growth of a new type of entertainment. As Jenkins writes:

> The kids who have grown up consuming and enjoying *Pokémon* across media are going to expect this same kind of experience from *The West Wing* as they get older. By design, *Pokémon* unfolds across games, television programs, films, and books, with no media privileged over any other. For our generation, the hour-long, ensemble-based, serialized drama was the pinnacle of sophisticated storytelling, but for the next generation, it is going to seem, well, like less than child's play. Younger consumers have become information hunters and gatherers, taking pleasure in tracking down character backgrounds and plot points and making connections between different texts within the same franchise. And in addition, all evidence suggests that computers don't cancel out other media; instead, computer owners consume on average significantly more television, movies, CDs, and related media than the general population.[1]

Jenkins suggests that the result of this combination is *transmedia storytelling,* or the telling of a story using multiple media types. In transmedia storytelling, the first chapter of a narrative might be a TV show, the second a film, and the third a video game – much like *Pokémon* in the example above. Jenkins defines the term in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture:*

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[1] "Transmedia Storytelling", http://www.technologyreview.com/Biotech/13052/

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.[2]

Jenkins suggests that the franchise surrounding the 1999 sci-fi blockbuster *The Matrix* may be the most ambitious example of this new type of storytelling. Creating merchandise to surround a successful media element is nothing new – the works of Charles Dickens spawned Pickwick Cigars and even taxis – and the creation of spinoff content from a popular story is a long-familiar practice, but the Wachowski brothers did something much more shrewd. The brothers looked at the types of materials that commonly sprang up around a successful genre franchise and then carefully sketched out a plan that would utilize each of these additional media components to further develop their primary story. By incorporating all of this 'secondary' media material into their mental map from the outset, each of the additional media components in the *Matrix* franchise (including comics, a series of short anime films, a video game, and an MMOG), offered increased value as a contribution to a single massive story, thus becoming more valuable to audiences as a whole, and at the same time provided multiple points of entry to the narrative franchise. Moviegoers may experience one of the three films first; a gamer might become engaged in the narrative by picking up *Enter the Matrix;* an anime fan might first experience the franchise through *The Animatrix,* and so on – a common philosophy in our conglomerate-heavy entertainment industry, but here the drive to continue exploring the franchise is increased by promising not narrative repetition, but

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[2] pp 95-96.

extension. While each could be experienced separately and still be enjoyable, each

component became part of a single unified storytelling experience. As Jenkins notes:

> The Wachowski brothers played the transmedia game very well, putting
> out the original film first to stimulate interest, offering up a few Web
> comics to sustain the hard-core 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.
> Each step along the way built on what has come before, while offering
> new points of entry. (Jenkins 95)

According to Jenkins' definition, transmedia narrative might be graphed thus:
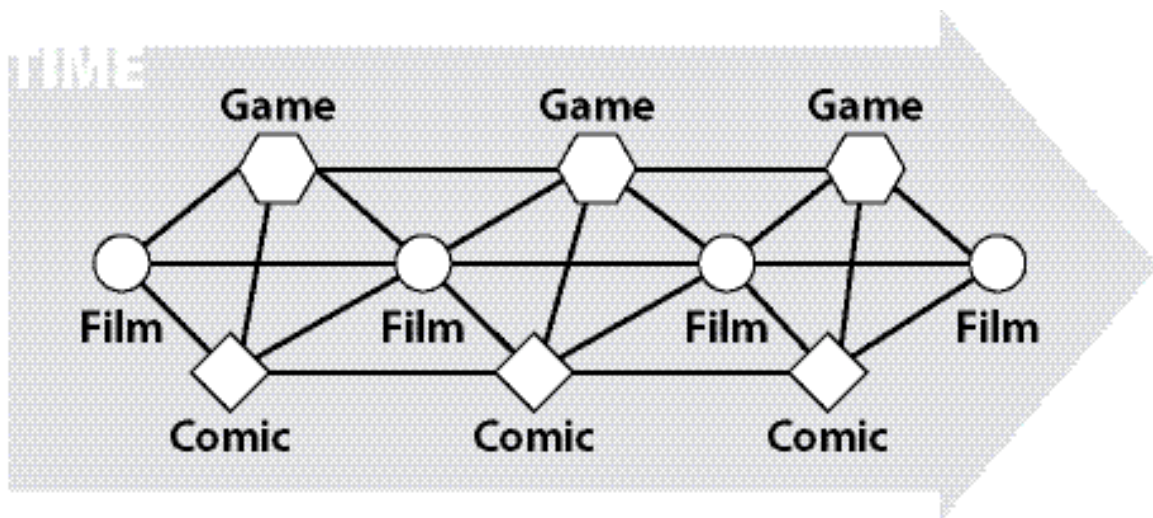
Although each component can be experienced individually, they all clearly exist in

relation to each other in the larger transmedia story. An audience member could

theoretically consume just the games, just the films or just the comics, but the

connections between them mean that experiencing the other media forms will improve the experience as a whole.

This thesis will use Jenkins' "distinctive and valuable" definition as its primary operating cornerstone, but studies of this type of storytelling to date suffer somewhat from a lack of consensus over terminology. Matt Hanson, the founder of the digital film festival onedotzero, refers to the practice as 'screen bleed' in his 2003 book *The End of Celluloid: Film Futures in the Digital Age:*

> Originally a technical term (when non-broadcast safe colors, which are very bright or color-saturated, bleed into other areas of the screen), screen bleed is a useful term to appropriate to describe a modern narrative condition where fictive worlds extend into multiple media and moving image formats. I believe the condition of screen bleed is proliferating due to the immersive 3D worlds we explore as game players and digital media consumers. This is why all-encompassing mythologies are the most resonant with contemporary audiences. After all, if a gaming experience is so involving, so *cinematic,* why shouldn't we expand the experience into film or interactive online worlds, where each strand of narrative offers a new dimensional layer? (Hanson 47)

Mimi Ito, meanwhile, refers to the *Pokémon/Yu-Gi-Oh* transmedia model as an example of a 'media mix':

> By linking content in multiple media forms such as video games, card games, television, film, *manga* books, toys, and household objects, *Pokémon* created a new kind of citational network that has come to be called a "media mix"… Rather than spoon-feed stabilized narratives and heroes to a supposedly passive audience, *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh* invite children to collect, acquire, recombine, and enact stories within their peer

networks, trading cards, information, and monsters in what Sefton-Green has called a "knowledge industry". These media mixes challenge our ideas of childhood agency and the passivity of media consumption, highlighting the active, entrepreneurial, and technologized aspects of children's engagement with popular culture.[3]

In his 2005 PhD thesis *Learning to Speak Braille: Convergence, Divergence and Cross-Sited Narratives,* Marc Ruppel refers to transmedia stories as 'cross-sited narratives', declaring them to be "a unique product of cultural and economic convergence, a process of narrative convergence". Ruppel defines 'cross-sited narratives' as "multi-sensory stories told across two or more diverse media (film, print literature, web, video games, live performance, recorded music, etc.)". Confusingly, however, at the end of his presentation he lists among his further questions "How is cross-siting different from adaptation? Transmediation?"

Christy Dena, a PhD student in the School of Letters, Art and Media at the University of Sydney, Australia also takes issue with some of the finer points of Jenkins' definition, preferring instead the terms 'cross-media entertainment' and 'transfiction':

By transfiction I refer to stories that are distributed over more than one text, one medium. Each text, each story on each device or each website is not autonomous, unlike Henry Jenkins' transmedia storytelling. In transfiction (a term to counter Jenkins', though they should be the other way around!), the story is dependent on all the pieces on each medium, device or site to be read/experienced for it to be understood. Basically, no single segment will be sufficient. These will vary between being experienced simultaneously and sequentially. Examples we see now are parallel narratives with TV shows that you can participate with by

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[3] http://www.itofisher.com/mito/archives/ito.intertextual.pdf

answering a quiz on the Web, mobiles, etc (especially here in [Australia]).
But, we'll see stories, not just games being experienced this way. In
consequence too, we'll see more technologies for having 'hyperlinks'
between media. Using blue-tooth [sic], wireless, infra-red or something.[4]

What Dena describes is perhaps the most stringent definition of transmedia
storytelling. Under Jenkins' definition, each transmedia extension can stand on its own as
an individually enjoyable entity – so one could play *Enter The Matrix* or watch *The
Animatrix* without seeing the original *Matrix* films and still enjoy each of them
independently. Under Dena's 'transfiction' definition, however, the independent media
forms couldn't stand on their own any more than an individual chapter of a novel taken
out of context.[5] Dena's transfiction might be graphed as follows:
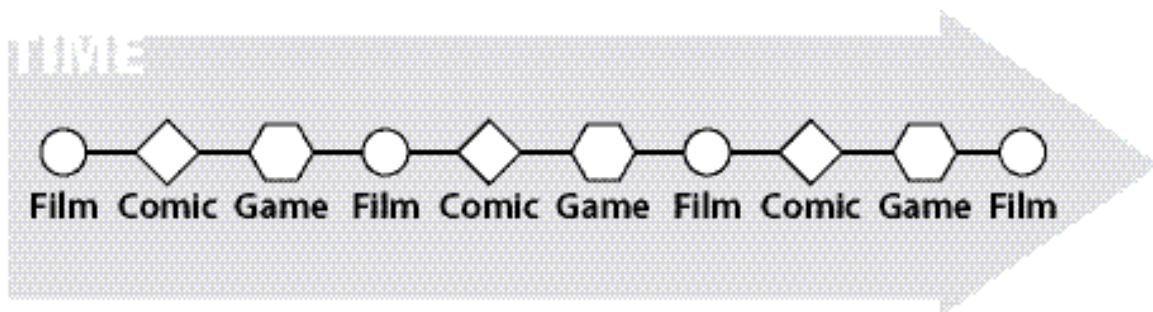
I would argue that Dena's transfiction is actually a subset of Jenkins' transmedia
storytelling. While not all transmedia storytelling might be considered transfiction due to
the ability of each extension to stand on its own (a decision often made for pragmatic

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[4] http://www.cross-mediaentertainment.com/index.php/2006/01/06/writing-predictions-for-the-next-decade/

[5] It's worth noting that what Jenkins observes is less a factor of aesthetics and more one of pure practicality; as transmedia storytelling continues to develop and proves itself to be economically viable, more and more instances may trend towards the more closely-linked interdependency described by Dena's 'transfiction'.

reasons more than aesthetic ones, given the nascent nature of transmedia storytelling), all transfiction would be instances of transmedia storytelling.

Dena also uses the term 'cross-media entertainment' as an umbrella term encompassing both her notion of transfiction, Jenkins' idea of transmedia storytelling, endeavors like ARGs (alternate reality games), and a number of other new media enterprises. Still other academics use the term 'transmedia' interchangeably with 'cross-media', or even 'multimedia'. Examples of this can be found in Sara Gwenllian-Jones' essay "Virtual Reality and Cult Television" included in Gwenllian-Jones' and Roberta Pearson's *Cult Television* (2004, University of Minnesota Press), in Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games* (1991, University of California Press) and throughout Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative Across Media* (2004, University of Nebraska Press). To my mind, Jenkins' terminology is probably the most appropriate due to the common uses of 'trans' as a prefix as opposed to 'cross'; when discussing a form where audiences are expected to follow a narrative across media forms, a sense of transportation is evoked, along the same linguistic lines as *transatlantic* or *transcontinental*. Of course, by the same token we do say 'cross-country trip' instead of 'trans-country trip', so a certain degree of this may always be in flux.

To further complicate matters, I think that there may also be a need to distinguish between different types of transmedia storytelling based on how they were first designed. There is often a noticeable aesthetic difference between those transmedia narratives that were designed with transmediation in mind and those that weren't. A story intended to be told across multiple media types, or crafted with later expansion in mind, will often be woven with a notably different mindset from one that's originally intended to be a self-

contained independent narrative. As I write this, the rules of storytelling in mass media are changing; new pitches for television series are required to include some component for mobile media or Internet-enabled TV from the get-go, and those that don't already have these extensions often have them grafted on. If we aim to evaluate how well these resultant works succeed in this age of transition, it may be important to consider at what stage of development this transmediation occurred to evaluate how well the authors used certain narrative techniques such as negative capability or migratory cues (a term Ruppel proposes for hints in one media form to look for additional content in a different extension) or how well the extensions are grafted onto an unsuspecting 'virgin' media form. If they are done from the outset, we can be rigorous in our criticism; if they were forced in later, we should be more forgiving.

To this end, I'd like to propose the term 'hard' for transmedia narratives designed as such from the outset. Examples of this might be anything Christy Dena might consider to be 'transfiction,' such as Orson Scott Card's transmedia franchise *Empire*, or the upcoming *Final Fantasy XIII* series of video games. 'Soft', then, would represent transmedia narratives that are only created after some original media component proved successful, like the spin-off video game *Final Fantasy VII: Dirge of Cerebus* or the eighth season of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* currently being published in comic format by Dark Horse Comics. That said, the terms 'hard' and 'soft' run the risk of suggesting some implicit value judgments that I don't mean to imply. A better pair of terms for this pre-experience and post-experience classification schema could easily be lifted from philosophy: *a priori* (before the experience) and *a posteriori* (after the experience) transmedia forms. However, this doesn't leave room for a necessary third

term to represent expansions done as a part of a co-ordinated transmedia expansion *following* the success of an initial form – a 'second wave' of expansion done *a posteriori,* but crafted as a whole entity from that point forward in the same mode as an *a priori* project might have done from the beginning. Therefore, we need a blend of the two types, part hard and part soft.

Allow me to suggest we add to this fine, distinguished academic lexicon: '*chewy.'*

I'm only half joking. Under this model, the *Matrix* franchise would be considered 'chewy', since the Wachowskis were allowed to develop their hard transmedia plans only after the blockbuster success of the initial film. We should not examine the first component of their franchise, *The Matrix,* as closely for the planting of migratory cues utilizing negative capability because the producers were not yet aware that they were working on a transmedia narrative. We can, however, more rigorously examine the remaining components, including *The Animatrix, The Matrix Reloaded, The Matrix Revolutions, Enter the Matrix,* the *Matrix* comics, and so on for such cues.

This murky terminology is only one example of how far critical study of transmedia/cross-media/cross-site storytelling still has to go. Additional examples include what to call 'open world' versus 'closed world' narrative structures, how exactly we define 'primary', 'secondary', and 'tertiary' components versus perhaps a 'complete franchise', 'canonical' elements versus 'apocryphal' elements, and so on. There are many such questions that have yet to be sufficiently addressed, but perhaps the most obvious is, simply, why is transmedia storytelling anything new?

1.2 Adaptation vs. Transmediation

When the topic of transmediation is first breached in conversation, often the initial response is something along the lines of, "Oh, like the *Lord of the Rings* films!"

Well, no. Not quite.

Retelling a story in a different media type is *adaptation*, while using multiple media types to craft a single story is *transmediation*. For example, Peter Jackson's film versions of *Lord of the Rings* are adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels. While this shares some of the same benefits as transmedia storytelling, primarily the creation of new 'access points' to a narrative world through alternative media types, it differs from transmedia storytelling due to the lack of one of the key components in Jenkins' definition: distinction.

Before I go too far, let me first concede that adaptations of a work are never identical to the original work. Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, for example, had many fans screaming *"There were no elves at Helm's Deep!"* Tom Bombadil never graced the screen in Jackson's film, and the ghost army never fought at Minas Tirith in Tolkien's book. These changes often reflect both the benefits and disadvantages inherent in particular media types – Tom Bombadil was excised from the film due to time constraints,whereas the battles with the elves and ghost army were most likely added to take advantage of the opportunity for spectacle provided by the film medium (and a healthy budget for special effects).

Another critical aspect of adaptation, albeit a more abstract one, is that every time a story is adapted into a different media form, it's a reinterpretation. As William Uricchio advises in conversation:

No one ever 'saw' Frodo or the rest: every casting decision, every image, every sound, 'translates' Tolkien's words, and is but one of an infinite number of such translations or embodiments or performances; and these, it seems to me, are profound 'changes' in their own right.

Still, the general narrative thread is recognizable as the same in both media, as the film and the book share what Kamilla Elliott might call a 'genetic' link[6]; the same characters are depicted doing essentially the same things, speaking essentially the same dialogue in essentially the same places, although they are 'deformed' by the varying inherent characteristics of each form. Elliott argues that adaptation is essentially a divorce of form from content in much the same way as a spirit might be separated from its body. In her essay "Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma", Elliott describes multiple models for considering adaptations in this ectoplasmic fashion: a 'psychic model' suggests that the 'spirit' of a story can migrate from one body to another, as from a novel to a film; a 'ventriloquist model' suggests that a film grants the spirit of the novel a new voice; the aforementioned 'genetic model' suggests that the novel and the film share a similar 'deep structure' similar to DNA; a 'merging model' suggests that the spirits of both film and novel combine into one entity in the mind of the audience; an 'incarnational model' suggests that the invisible spirit of text aspires to visualize itself in film; and a 'trumping model' suggests that the spirit of the novel had been misplaced all along, and was always meant to really be a film.

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[6] "Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma," *Narrative Across Media,* pp. 230-33.

Note the absence of a 'reincarnation' model on Elliott's list. Jackson's films are a retelling of Tolkien's story, not a continuation of it; regardless which of Elliott's spooky models one prefers to apply, the films do not pick up where the novels leave off. While adaptations may bring new audiences to a story, and may serve as components of a branded franchise that stretches across multiple media forms, adaptations do not stand as distinct components of some larger shared narrative arc.

SIDEBAR: TRANSMEDIATING THE BIBLE

Another, much older example of transmediation versus adaptation might be found in a somewhat unexpected place: the stained-glass windows of cathedrals. In the Middle Ages, to compensate for widespread illiteracy the church provided parishioners with multiple ways to experience the stories in the Bible. These took the form of hymns, sermons, artifacts, and, perhaps most spectacularly, enormous stained-glass windows. Are these transmedia extensions? One might argue that since a parishioner could first experience the story of Genesis through a rose window, then Exodus through a sermon, then Leviticus through hymns, and then Deuteronomy through paintings, the Bible has always been a transmedia franchise – but this teeters on the precipice of subjectivism. There is a difference between how one person chooses to experience a narrative and how the narrative was designed to be experienced. If Genesis only existed as stained glass, Exodus as spoken words, Leviticus as music and Deuteronomy as brushstrokes on canvas, then the Bible would objectively be a transmedial franchise. One certainly could compile a transmedia version of the Bible, but that would itself be an adaptation of the

existing text. This is ripe for debate and could easily be extended into a doctoral thesis all on its own.

With this distinction in place, it becomes possible to recognize the difference between Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films and the Wachowskis' *Enter The Matrix* video game, since Jackson's trilogy adapted Tolkien's existing story while *Enter The Matrix* contributed an original chapter to the Wachowskis' story. So this addresses the question of why transmedia storytelling is a relatively new form – but it doesn't answer the next logical question, "Why is this happening now?"

1.3 Why Now?: New Stories for a New Audience

According to Christy Dena, cross-media production was born from technological advances, specifically the widespread availability of the Internet and computers advanced enough to enable users to easily copy, paste, move, alter, and remediate content across a growing number of devices.[7] "Such transmedia forms emerged when the awareness and penetration of a large range of technologies and artforms reached a pivotal point," Dena writes. "That moment was, quite poetically, the penultimate year of the 20th century: 1999."

Dena lists multiple examples of early transmediation from 1999, beginning with the work of telematic artists Paul Serman and Andrea Zapp and the first Nokia Game, which followed the adventures of the fictional snowboarder Sisu across mobile phones, magazines and TV advertisements. She agrees with Jenkins' consideration of *The Matrix*

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[7] Dena, Christy. "Patterns in Cross-Media Interaction Design: It's Much More Than a URL..."

as "the first major implementation of the transmedia approach", but also highlights two other narrative examples, *Homicide: Life on the Street* and *The Blair Witch Project:*

> [U.S.] viewers of the NBC television show *Homicide: Life on the Street,* were treated to a special "crossover episode". It was not a crossover of worlds or brands, instead, it was an intraworld, cross-platform traversal. On the 3rd and 4th of February, detectives started investigating a webcast killing. These detectives were not those seen on air though, they were the second shift detectives who existed only on the Net. The *Second Shift* detectives deemed the case closed, but then the detectives on the television show reopened the case in their television episode called "Homicide.com," which was broadcast on Feb 5th. The Net detectives then concluded the case the following week on the 12th and 19th online.

> In the same year there was another website that would drive audiences to another medium: the cinema. *The Blair Witch Project* instory website chronicles the story of three film students who have gone missing after trudging through a forest investigating stories of a witch. To further solidify the fiction in reality, a mockumentary, *Curse of the Blair Witch,* was aired on the Sci-Fi Channel just before the release of the film *The Blair Witch Project: a horror film produced by Haxan Films,* also delivered as a documentary.

Dena concludes:

> Since this pivotal year, transmedia forms have flourished. We've seen enhanced television, locative arts, pervasive gaming, alternate reality games, interactive dramas and more being produced by corporations and individuals, experienced in small local groups and by millions

internationally. As I mentioned earlier, the Net was a strong facilitating force in this emergence. Indeed, irrespective of the platform, audiences are often referred to the Net with a URL in the credits of a film or show, SMS or on a cereal box. Sometimes a URL is enough to motivate a cross-platform traversal and sometimes not; and of course not all referrals are directed towards the Net.

In *Learning to Speak Braille,* Marc Ruppel seems to agree, declaring that transmedia storytelling (or, in Ruppel's terminology, 'cross-sited narratives') is "a unique product of cultural and economic convergence, a process of narrative convergence". Ruppel quotes Niklas Luhmann as follows:

The higher complexity of a new level of development makes it possible to reinvest the old (in this case, print) with a new meaning, as far as it lets itself be integrated. New technological achievements do not necessarily mean the forceful negation of older media, but rather their recombination.

It's possible to view the rise of transmedia storytelling as a descendent of the 'multimedia' that had everyone buzzing in the 1990s. As processor power increased and the cost of storage space and media creation plummeted, computers became an increasingly viable delivery mechanism for multiple media forms: first text, then images and music, and most recently video. The addition of interactivity and the collective intelligences afforded by instant access to communities of like-minded individuals via the Internet results in the perfect environment for just such 'recombination' to occur, which can then give rise to increasing complexity in narratives – both in aesthetics and in media forms.

As Jenkins observes in *Convergence Culture*:

Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.

In "Transmedia Storytelling 101", a post to his weblog, Jenkins continues this observation concerning collective intelligence:

Transmedia storytelling is the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence. Pierre Levy coined the term, collective intelligence, to refer to new social structures that enable the production and circulation of knowledge within a networked society. Participants pool information and tap each other's expertise as they work together to solve problems. Levy argues that art in an age of collective intelligence functions as a cultural attractor, drawing together like-minded individuals to form new knowledge communities... Transmedia storytelling expands what can be known about a particular fictional world while dispersing that information, insuring that no one consumer knows everything [and] that they must talk about the series with others (see, for example, the hundreds of different species featured in *Pokémon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh*). Consumers become hunters and gatherers moving back across the various narratives trying to stitch together a coherent picture from the dispersed information.[8]

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[8] http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html

The Internet may have accelerated transmedia development, but it wasn't necessary for transmedia narratives to flourish, as evidenced by the "Netless" development of complex narrative franchises like *Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings,* and *Star Trek.* Notions of narrative complexity have been plaguing authors, audiences, and literary critics alike for centuries. As Marc Ruppel observes in *Learning to Speak Braille*, transmedia stories "[resemble] the ideal text so long theorized by Barthes and others as requiring a corresponding ideal reader to comprehend its whole".

Returning to literary theory, the fields of structuralism and narratology may be the most heavily invested in the rise of transmedia storytelling. The French literary theorist Gérard Genette's notions of hypertexts and hypotexts are refinements of Kristeva's aforementioned model of intertextuality. In his 1982 text *Palimpsestes,* Genette examines how 'second-degree' hypertexts are intertextually connected through influence, allusion, or more direct methods to earlier hypotexts. An example of this would be the hypertextual connection between James Joyce's *Ulysses* and its hypotext, the original Homeric poems. Under this theoretical model, it's possible to classify the primary media components of a transmedia franchise (the six *Star Wars* films) as hypotexts and the secondary media components (the books, comics, TV shows and so on) as hypertexts. Similarly, what serve as hypotexts within these franchises are also hypertextually linked to earlier influences external to the franchises, such as how Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress,* Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* and the film serials of *Flash Gordon* all served as well-known hypotextual inspirations for George Lucas as he was creating *Star Wars.* Transmediation is a more distinct subclass of hypertextuality; since Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films are hypertextually

connected to the hypotext of Tolkien's books, the distinction must be made that while all

transmedia stories have intertextual connections, not all intertextually (or hypertextually)

connected stories are transmedia storytelling. Still, these types of relations and

connections were being made (and heatedly debated) long before the Internet was

invented.

A second counterargument against a purely technocentric causality can be boiled

down to something far simpler and much less highbrow: *money*. While the Internet

certainly makes the creation of these Barthesian 'ideal readers' much, much easier, as

Jenkins observes in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, transmedia storytelling's

increased popularity is also due to franchise-hungry corporations. A 2005 article on

Forbes.com, "*Star Wars'* Galactic Dollars", estimates the *Star Wars* financial breakdown

as follows: $6.52B in global box office sales, $700M in books and other publishing,

$2.8B in home video sales, $1.5B in video games, and a whopping $9B in toys. This

places the estimated value of the *Star Wars* transmedia brand at $20.52B, or

$20,520,000,000, for those of us who like to see all the zeroes.[9]

This drive for transmedia franchises is further accelerated by corporate

deregulation that began during the Reagan administration. As Eileen Meehan describes

in "'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!': The Political Economy of a Commercial

Intertext", through various mergers and acquisitions megacorporations such as Viacom,

Time Warner, and Disney have developed divisions for the creation of comics, films, TV

shows, toys, clothing, video games – in short, all the components of a transmedia

franchise. By creating and nurturing franchises that can utilize multiple arms of these

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[9] http://www.forbes.com/business/2005/05/12/cx_ah_0512starwars.html

corporate giants, not only is more business generated for the conglomerate as a whole, but the percentage of profits retained by the parent corporation is greatly increased, instead of being diluted by outsourcing the creation of any of these components to other potential competitors. As Jenkins notes on his blog, "Modern media companies are horizontally integrated - that is, they hold interests across a range of what were once distinct media industries. A media conglomerate has an incentive to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many different media platforms as possible. Consider, for example, the comic books published in advance of the release of such films as *Batman Begins* and *Superman Returns* by DC (owned by Warner Brothers, the studio that released these films). These comics provided back-story which enhanced the viewer's experience of the film even as they also help to publicize the forthcoming release (thus blurring the line between marketing and entertainment)."[10]

Whatever the primary driving factor behind the current upsurge in transmedia storytelling, just watching the form grow and take shape is thoroughly exciting. An appendix at the end of this thesis lists a number of transmedia storytelling franchises, which certainly appear to be increasing in popularity at an amazing rate. It's easy to hypothesize that these trends will continue, leading both creation and consumption of transmedia narratives to explode as the Millennials, the first generation to grow up with widespread access to high-speed Internet connections, come into their own as storytellers and consumers. The emergence of Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) can already be partially attributed to just these characteristics, and Jenkins, Dena, and Ruppel all view ARGs as one form of transmedia storytelling.

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[10] http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html

Still, the commercial and corporate scenario described above raises another interesting conceptual challenge: when Wal-Mart carries not only the *Star Wars* films, novels and video games, but also *Star Wars* toys, clothing, toothbrushes, even breakfast cereals, where does all of this *stuff* fit into the notion of transmedia storytelling? What does it really mean to make a "distinctive and valuable contribution"?
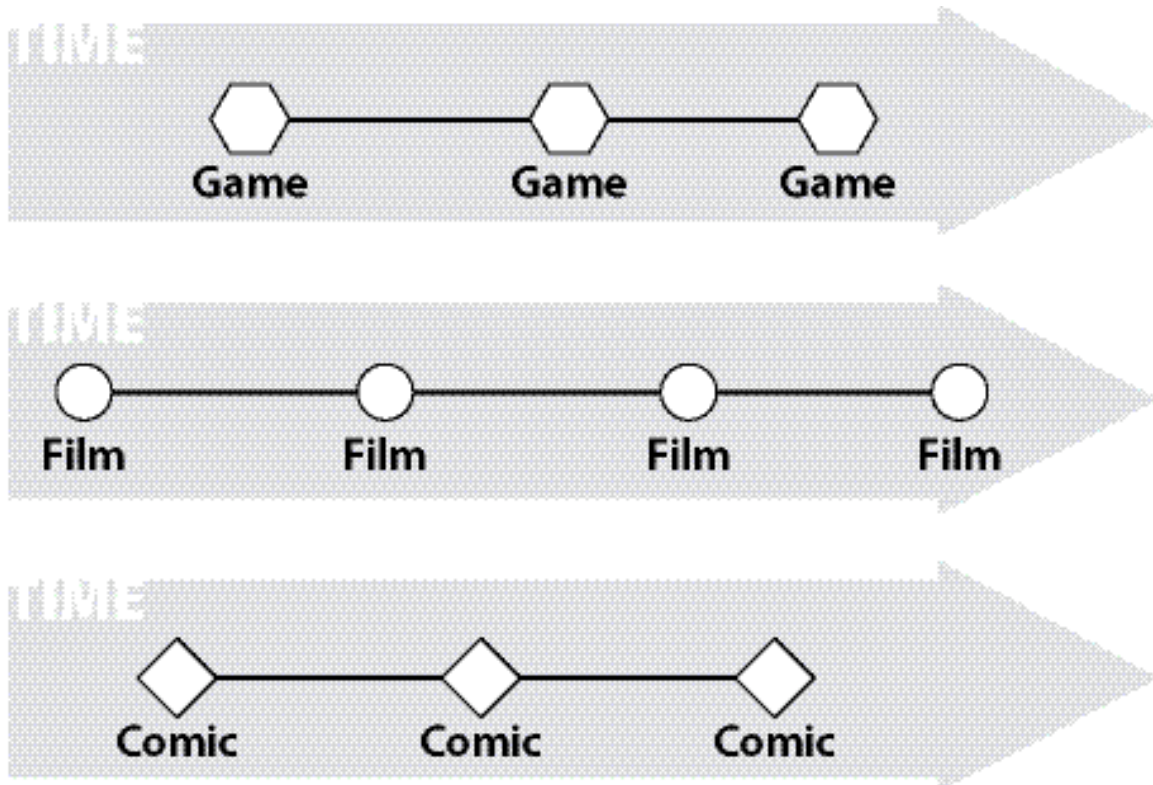
1.4 "Distinctive and Valuable Contribution"?

During my time in the Convergence Culture Consortium at MIT, we frequently made the mistake of shortening 'transmedia storytelling' to 'transmedia'. This is a mistake. A box of *Star Wars* cereal isn't an example of transmedia storytelling unless it somehow makes a distinct and valuable contribution to the story being told in *Star Wars,* but it *is* an example of transmedia *branding*. By the same token, continuing a news story from television onto mobile devices and into print is a form of transmedia storytelling, but not the same kind of fictional storytelling I'm considering in this thesis. The term 'transmedia' should be considered an adjective, not a noun.

One example of transmedia branding that I'll return to at great length in Section 3 of this thesis is Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*. The character was first introduced to the world in comics in 1993, but since then the character has been spun off into feature films, novels, toys, video games, and a series of animated films. *Hellboy* is the perfect example of a transmedia brand; when Mignola franchised his characters to other creators like Guillermo del Toro (the film), Christopher Golden (the novels) and Tad Stones (the animated films), he also encouraged those creators to take the character in new directions and to pick and choose from the official 'canon' as written by Mignola in the comics. As

a result, one character dies early on in the film and the comics, but not in the animated films; another is a love interest for Hellboy in the film, a good friend in the comics, and jailbait in the animated movies. For *Hellboy* fans, all of these components do *not* contribute to a single, overarching story, and in fact can prove detrimental to understanding the franchise as a whole because it can be difficult to remember what exactly has happened in which continuity.

A transmedia *brand* (in general; this graph does not represent *Hellboy* specifically) might be graphed with three separate timelines for three separate media::

It is this relationship to a single, unified transmedia story that Jenkins uses to determine whether or not a transmedia extension makes a "distinctive and valuable contribution", but isn't "valuable" subjective? Both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* are

examples of multibillion-dollar transmedia brands that have plenty of questionable

extensions, which suggests that even *bad* cross-media or transmedia extensions can prove

to be profitable. I'd like to refine Jenkins' definition by suggesting that transmedia

narratives can be evaluated by how well they set themselves apart from transmedia

branding through *narrative cohesion* and *canon*.

Both the *Star Wars* and the *Star Trek* franchises center on successful primary

media components that spawned secondary media spin-offs. To use Kristeva and

Genette's terminology, the *Star Wars* films and the *Star Trek* TV shows are the

successful hypotexts that spawned hundreds of hypertexts.[11] The trouble is that the vast

majority of these hypertexts, the books, games, toys, comics, and so on, may contribute

great value to the amount of fun being had on the playground and the amount of cash in

the producers' coffers but only questionable value to the *overarching story*. This is

because most of these extensions are not considered – or permitted – to be canonical.

In the *Star Wars* universe, for example, these secondary media components

included the *Heir to the Empire* trilogy of novels by Timothy Zahn, the *Shadows of the

Empire* novel by Steve Perry, the *Droids* and *Ewoks* television series, a series of books-

with-records for children, and even a series of comics published by Marvel – one

particularly memorable issue of which featured a female Darth Vader menacing Luke and

his friends. All of this was condoned, even encouraged, by George Lucas (who made an

even bigger fortune off the licensing fees), but when it came time to create the Special

Editions and the trilogy of prequels, Lucas refused to be constrained by the 'Expanded

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[11] Genette, *Palmpsestes,* and Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and the Novel." For examples of
the breadth of the *Star Wars* franchise, visit the *Star Wars Databank* at
http://www.starwars.com/databank/ and, for *Star Trek,* visit the *Star Trek* wiki *Memory
Alpha* at http://memory-alpha.org/en/wiki/Main_Page .

Universe' that had grown up around his creations, opting instead to pick and choose from this apocrypha. As Lucas says in an interview in the August 2005 issue of *Starlog:*

> **STARLOG:** The *Star Wars* Universe is so large and diverse. Do you ever find yourself confused by the subsidiary material that's in the novels, comics and other offshoots?
>
> **LUCAS:** I don't read that stuff. I haven't read *any* of the novels. I don't know anything about that world. That's a different world than my world. But I do try to keep it consistent. The way I do it now is they have a *Star Wars Encyclopedia.* So if I come up with a name or something else, I look it up and see if it has already been used. When I said [other people] could make their own *Star Wars* stories, we decided that, like *Star Trek,* we would have *two* universes: My universe and then this other one. They try to make their universe as consistent with mine as possible, but obviously they get enthusiastic and want to go off in other directions.[12]

If the primary *auteur* behind the franchise considers all of these spin-off works optional, how then are audiences supposed to treat them? Dedicated, 'hardcore' fans of a property are likely to make the mental separation between the 'two universes' Lucas describes and happily open their wallets nevertheless, but pity the poor casual fan who enjoyed *Return of the Jedi* enough to pick up an authorized *Star Wars* novel, then found himself completely bewildered when *The Phantom Menace* directly contradicted the events in the book. It doesn't take very many of these experiences for casual fans to develop a diminished opinion of these secondary media types – consequently, creating 'tiers' of canon leads directly to tiers of perceived narrative value.

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[12] "New Hopes", *Starlog,* August 2005.

> **SIDEBAR: ELSEWORLDS AND BEYOND**
>
> This is not to say that there isn't a perfectly valid place for out-of-continuity stories. DC Comics' *Elseworlds* series of graphic novels features brilliant re-imaginings of their popular characters, such as a Victorian-era Batman in Brian Augustyn, P. Craig Russell and Mike Mignola's *Gotham by Gaslight* or Mark Millar and Dave Johnson's *Superman: Red Son,* which posits what would have happened if the infant Superman had crashed in Russia instead of Kansas. As Janet Murray notes in *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* "these efforts assume a sophistication on the part of the audience, an eagerness to transpose and reassemble the separate elements of a story and an ability to keep in mind multiple alternate versions of the same fictional world" (40). Each of these stories are fascinating in their own right, and the books do make a distinctive and valuable contribution – but not to the same story as the primary franchise. They are highly enjoyable not as extensions but as reinterpretations, and as such have more in common with adaptation than transmediation.

Will Brooker's 2002 book *Using the Force* includes an excellent short chapter in which he examines how the issue of canon is treated by fans on *Star Wars* message boards. Brooker opens by quoting Steve Sansweet's opening to the *Star Wars Encyclopedia:*

> Just what is *Star Wars* canon, and what is not? The one sure answer: the *Star Wars Trilogy Special Edition* – the three films themselves as executive-produced, and in the case of *Star Wars* written and directed, by George Lucas, are canon. Coming in a close second we have the

authorized adaptations of the films: the novels, radio drama and comics. After that, almost everything falls into a category of quasi-canon.

Brooker's chapter examines the fan response to the tangled mess that is *Star Wars* continuity. For example, the aforementioned novel *Shadows of the Empire* introduces a new heroic character named Dash Rendar and his ship, the *Outrider*, as well as a new villain named Prince Xixor. These characters' exploits were chronicled not just in the novel, but also a series of comics by Dark Horse Entertainment, a video game by LucasArts for the Nintendo 64, and a series of action figures by Kenner. Despite all this, the events and characters from *Shadows of the Empire* were apocryphal, at least according to Sansweet's definition, until the Special Edition of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* in 1997 added a shot of the *Outrider* rising into the sky over Mos Eisley. As expected, the BBSes exploded with fan debates. Brooker fills page after page with stories of fans bickering over whether or not the single shot of the *Outrider* 'canonizes' *Shadows of the Empire*, over whether Lucas swiped the name of the Imperial homeworld, Coruscant, from Timothy Zahn, and how exactly a hierarchy of authority might be constructed to determine whether or not something really is considered 'canon'.

Star Wars geeks fighting amongst themselves is nothing new, but such bickering is in no way restricted to *Star Wars*. As Brooker notes:

Debates over what constitutes an official text in the fictional universe, as opposed to quasi-official or apocryphal material, are not unique to the Star Wars community. My 1999 study of Internet science-fiction fandom used the network of bulletin boards around the *Alien* films as an example of debating the canon. It cited fans who treated the third movie as "a

parallel, overlapping universe" rather than as part of the real *Alien* narrative, or who accepted the Dark Horse comic books as more valid than *Alien Resurrection.*

In *Star Wars,* canon seems to be determined almost purely by the whims and decisions of the singular *auteur* behind the franchise, but what happens when that particular seat is empty? William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson tackle this issue in their book *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media.* In their chapter "I'm Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise", Uricchio and Pearson examine the many forms that Batman, Robin, and the Joker have taken over the years and consider the tangled web of determining what is and what is not considered 'canon' in the bat-universe. Creators working with the Batman in different media have differing opinions as to what exactly the 'ur-text' defining canon should be:

> The highest profile Batman, the latest site of fifty years of bat-hype, appeared in the Warner Bros. film. The scriptwriter, Sam Hamm, claimed that the pervasiveness of this particular Batman granted him automatic authenticity. "What you wind up doing when you're putting an existing character in a major Hollywood film is you're essentially defining that character for a whole generation of people; and most people have certainly heard of Batman, but they are probably not that familiar with it. So what you're doing becomes sort of *ipso facto* canonical." (183)

The writers of the comics, of course, had other ideas:

> ...The Batman film has been declared conclusively non-canonical, indicating that the DC staff, at least, believes that the comic books truly

define the character. The explicit disavowal of the Warner Bros. film appears even in the comic book adaptation written by O'Neil, the Batman editor, and published by DC. The initial splash page shows a strip of film, bearing key frames drawn from the Batman movie, superimposed over an audience in a movie theatre. In the first dialogue balloon on the page, and an audience member says "...it's just a movie, for heaven's sake." The back cover also features a film strip design with further scenes from the movie. Editor/writer [Dennis] O'Neill said that he intended these film strips to bracket the adaptation and distinguish it from DC's continuity. (193)

The root of the problem, according to Pearson and Uricchio, is that "unlike some fictional characters, the Batman has no primary urtext set in a specific period, but has rather existed in a plethora of equally valid texts constantly appearing over more than five decades" (185). They continue:

Neither author, nor medium, nor primary text, nor time period defines the Batman... Consider, for example, Sherlock Holmes, James Bond, and Philip Marlowe. Despite these characters' appearances in films, and even their continuation in literary form beyond their creators' deaths, their central identity resides in a series of literary urtexts penned by single authors and set in single time periods. Hence, were one seeking to define Sherlock Holmes, one would turn not to the latest in a series of numerous pastiches but would turn to the fifty-six short stories and four novels of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle written between 1887 and 1927.

The bat-verse is a particularly hairy example (Uricchio and Pearson propose a set of five identifying characteristics to serve as a Guide to Identifying Your Bats) but even in less

convoluted case studies, like the *Star Wars* universe, the perceived distinction in narrative value between the central canon and the apocrypha remains.

This is where a crucial distinction can be made concerning true transmedia narratives like *The Matrix,* and can be considered a first step toward establishing an aesthetics of transmedia storytelling*:* **each component of a transmedia story is designed as canonical from the outset.** While it's still possible to argue for a distinction between 'primary elements' (the films) and 'secondary elements' (the comics, the video games, the anime, and everything else) in the franchise, plot points were revealed in the secondary components that greatly enriched one's understanding of what was happening in the primary components. Fans that consumed these additional components came away with a fuller understanding and a better experience of the world as a whole.

Contrast this to the prevailing sense that most spin-off content is largely optional. As Jenkins notes in his 1993 article:

> The current licensing system typically generates works that are redundant (allowing no new character background or plot development), watered down (asking the new media to slavishly duplicate experiences better achieved through the old), or riddled with sloppy contradictions (failing to respect the core consistency audiences expect within a franchise). These failures account for why sequels and franchises have a bad reputation. Nobody wants to consume a steady diet of second-rate novelizations!

Were *The Matrix* like any 'ordinary', non-transmedia franchise, the films would stand on their own independent of all the secondary cruft, and these additional media components would be treated by the moviegoing public as so much optional cash-grubbing fluff. As O'Neill's audience might cry, "...It's just a (comic/novel/game), for

heaven's sake!" Instead, the two-part animated short film "The Second Renaissance" included in *The Animatrix* tells the story of the rise of the robot civilization and sets the stage for the final act in *The Matrix Revolutions*. *Enter The Matrix* tells what happens to the *Osiris*, the craft piloted by Jada Pinkett Smith's character in *The Matrix Reloaded*. "The Kid's Story," another short in *The Animatrix*, introduces The Kid, the gangly boy that greets Neo (and the audience) in *Reloaded* like an old friend. The transmedia story is the combination of all of these – and, by capitalizing on negative capability to fill in any remaining gaps, it truly is greater than the sum of its parts.

By setting each of these extensions in canon, audiences gain some sense as to where each component falls in relation to the others. Even if the extensions of one media type don't incorporate any *explicit* references to events that occur in extensions of other media types, then the shared timeline does provide *implicit* connections between them, as might be graphed as follows (again, this graph is a general representation):
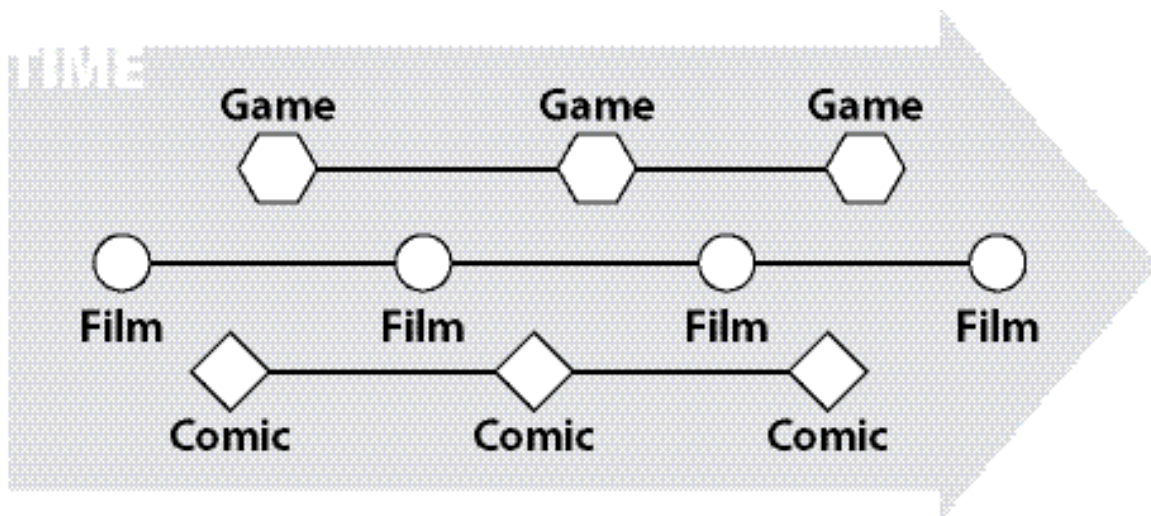

However, the Wachowskis did use elements of Dena's transfiction (see section 1.2) to establish narrative links between the extensions. Both Jenkins and Ruppel trace the course of a letter across multiple components of the franchise. This letter, which tells

of an upcoming attack by the machines on the human city of Zion, makes its debut in *The Animatrix* "The Final Flight of the Osiris", in which "the protagonist, Jue, gives her life trying to get [the] message into the hands of the Nebuchadnezzar crew" (Jenkins 102). The letter then serves as what Alfred Hitchcock would call the key MacGuffin in the video game *Enter The Matrix*, which begins with a mission to fetch the letter from a guarded post office inside the Matrix. *The Matrix Reloaded* begins with the characters having received the letter and discussing "the last transmissions of the Osiris". Ruppel refers to these intermedial hooks as 'migratory cues', "the means through which various narrative paths are marked by an author and located by a user through activation patterns".[13]

If we consider the course of the letter to be a narrative thread of its own, its story is *definition* transfiction, perhaps the truest form of transmedia storytelling: its opening chapter is told in anime, its second chapter is told in a game, and its third chapter is experienced in a feature film. Each of these components makes a distinct and valuable contribution to the narrative whole, demonstrating the power of carefully orchestrated transmedia storytelling. Further, by establishing these migratory cues between the different extensions, the bonds between each of the extensions are strengthened and the increased value in experiencing the franchise as a whole becomes more readily apparent to an audience. The story of the letter in the *Matrix* franchise might be graphed as follows::

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[13] http://www.glue.umd.edu/~mruppel/oralex_presentation_2.4.pdf
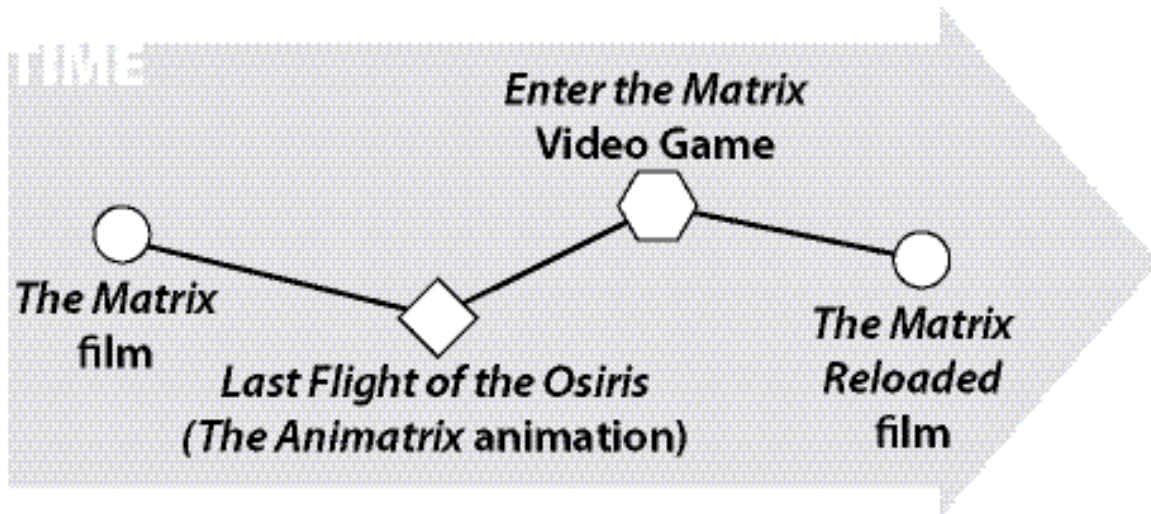
However, this example of the letter brings us to a critical step toward establishing a rough aesthetics of transmedia storytelling: when we talk about the *Matrix* franchise as an example of transmedia storytelling, whose story is it?

1.5 From Plot to Character to World

In Part VI of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher ranks the importance of a tragedy's components as follows:

> …Most important of all is [Plot,] the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy;

there may be without character. …The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place.

Aristotle is arguing that it's more important to focus on the *actions* of the players – the *what happens,* the plot – rather than on the *qualities* – the personalities and emotions – that distinguish the players onstage into separate characters. This assertion feels questionable, but it's possible to understand Aristotle's line of reasoning. It's possible to tell a rousing story of two nations at war and focus on the action without ever really getting to know any of the generals or soldiers on the battlefield. Such a story might be greatly improved by the addition of character depth, better enabling the audience to identify with the players, but without plot, without actions upon the stage, drama falls apart.

That said, a storyteller's priorities begin to shift if the end goal changes from telling one good story to keeping an audience engaged for multiple stories. Audiences enjoy a thrilling plot, but they become more deeply engaged with good, solid characters. Consider the epic adventures of heroes like Hercules: a single solid character can keep audiences coming back for more over and over again. Aristotle would argue that it's the actions that Hercules takes that makes for good drama, which is true, but without some degree of character development and differentiation there's no reason to keep coming back for the "next episode" – the character could be easily exchanged for any number of musclebound adventurers. Modern action filmmakers have proven that audiences are drawn to things blowing up, such as in the *Die Hard* or *Indiana Jones* films, but many audiences are more compelled to see another *Die Hard* or *Indiana Jones* film not to discover what the director will blow up next, but how the character will personally react

to those fireworks. It's not merely the action taken by the character, but *how* and *why* that character reacts that way. Uttering "yippee-ki-yay" as a building explodes or cracking a whip to fend off a Nazi are both actions, yes, but they are *character actions;* they are actions infused with the personalities, emotions, and motivations of these specific characters. Watching a zeppelin explode is interesting, but watching Indiana Jones *react* to a zeppelin explode is more interesting, especially once we've become emotionally invested in Dr. Jones.   This is the same logic that fuels most popular narrative entertainment, from the stories of Sherlock Holmes to each week's episode of *House, M.D.* – it's not just *what* happens, but *how* it happens, and to, and by, *whom*.

Transmedia narratives, however, are indicative of a new shift in emphasis. The entertainment industry has learned that yes, popular recurring characters can increase repeat revenue, but better still is a rich story world that can host multiple sets of recurring characters, as in *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Intriguing, well-rounded characters will engage audiences to a certain extent, but captivating universes will bring those same audiences back for multiple *series'* worth of content. For example, in his text *Star Trek: Parallel Negatives,* Chris Gregory describes the franchise's world as follows:

> The complex history of alliances and conflicts between the major players
> in galactic politics – the Federation, the Klingons, the Cardassians, the
> Romulans, the Borg, and the Dominion – now forms a constantly shifting
> political backdrop to the action, and often provides motivation for the
> stories. (21)[14]

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[14] Quote discovered in Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson's *Cult Television,* p. 89.

In the *Star Trek* franchise, the Klingon characters introduced in the original *Star Trek* become allies in *Star Trek:The Next Generation,* as evidenced by the presence of Lt. Commander Worf on the bridge of the Enterprise. Tribbles, the tiny fuzzy menaces introduced in a classic episode of *Star Trek* ("The Trouble with Tribbles")*,* reappear to plague Sisko and his crew in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* ("Trials and Tribble-ations"). The villainous Borg that are introduced in *The Next Generation* ("Q Who?") reappear in *Star Trek: Voyager,* the feature film *Star Trek: First Contact* and, in a nifty bit of continuity-massaging, the prequel series *Enterprise* ("Regeneration"). One battle with the Borg, the Battle of Wolf 359, becomes a legendary event in the *Star Trek* world: it is first introduced in a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode ("The Best of Both Worlds, Part II"), is later revisited in the pilot episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* ("Emissary"), and is later referenced in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* ("Family"), the feature film *Star Trek: First Contact*, and in *Star Trek: Voyager* ("Unity"). Outside of canon, the battle is also referenced in Peter David's *Star Trek* novel *Vendetta* and in the video game *Star Trek: Borg*.[15] All of these events are introduced in individual narratives or episodes with different protagonists, but they all make valuable contributions to the greater metanarrative of the *Star Trek* universe.

A similar example can be seen in the *Star Wars* franchise, even if we only include those components that are considered strictly canon: the six feature films and the two seasons of the animated *Clone Wars* television series. Despite Lucas' later assertions that the story of *Star Wars* is really the rise, fall, and eventual redemption of Anakin Skywalker, most audiences will assert that the story of *Episode I, II,* and *III* tell the story

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[15] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Wolf_359

of Anakin Skywalker, while *Episode IV, V, and VI* tell the story of Anakin's son Luke. This is because in *A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back,* and *Return of the Jedi,* Anakin Skywalker – now Darth Vader – is a *secondary character*. The primary character of these films, the avatar through which the audience experiences this particular galaxy a long, long time ago and far, far away is Luke. But, of course, Luke hasn't even been born in *The Phantom Menace, Attack of the Clones*, the majority of *Revenge of the Sith,* and the entirety of *Clone Wars*. So perhaps the 'story' of the entire *Star Wars* franchise isn't really about Anakin *or* Luke. If we consider a story to be about how a series of events change something, then the *something* being changed over the course of the *Star Wars* franchise is the *world*. (Or, in this case, the galaxy.) The grand narrative of the *Star Wars* franchise is too epic to be considered the story of just one Skywalker, as evidenced by all the Expanded Universe stories that take place centuries before and after the six feature films. Instead, *Star Wars* fans return again and again to find out how the world develops; we do so through recurring characters that serve as our avatars, but even when a wholly new set of characters are introduced (such as in the recent Dark Horse comic series *Legacy of the Force,* which is set 140 years after the last film) we are still invested in the character of the world.

This philosophy becomes more tangible in transmedia narratives, especially when each extension is designed to stand more or less on their own. In the earlier example of the letter in the *Matrix* transmedia narrative, Neo only appears in a few of the components. His appearance in *Enter the Matrix* is extremely limited, and he doesn't appear in any of the short animated films in *The Animatrix*. Yet if one were to ask what the 'story' of *The Matrix* would be, the obvious answer would be "the story of Neo as he

saves the world."   On closer examination, however, this doesn't bear out – the story of the *Matrix* films is the story of Neo, yes; the story of the *Matrix* franchise, however, is the story of the fall of humanity, the rise of the machines, and their continual conflict. The story of the *franchise* is the story of the *world*.

This, then, becomes my second proposed aesthetic of transmedia storytelling: when developing a narrative that's meant to extend across multiple media forms, the world must be considered a primary character of its own, because **many transmedia narratives aren't the story of one character at all, but the story of a world**. Special attention must be paid to developing a stage upon which multiple storylines (often in different media types) can unfurl, and every story must maintain the consistency of that world.   This is the careful crafting of what Daniel Mackay calls 'imaginary-entertainment environments': "fictional settings that change over time as if they were real places and that are published in a variety of mediums… each of them in communication with the others as they contribute towards the growth, history and status of the setting" (29).

Part of this reasoning is purely practical, since transmedia storytelling often involves multiple teams of people working in multiple media. The *Matrix* franchise, for example, involved development teams for the games, for the films, for the animations, for the comics, for the websites… Taking the time at the outset to set down the rules, histories and general character of the world in which each of these extensions is set goes a long way toward maintaining a sense of consistency across the franchise. Canon and continuity are key – while strict continuity may feel constrictive, wantonly breaking these things is as dangerous as misrepresenting a recurring character. Audiences may have

their suspension of disbelief shattered, which then lessens their investment in the narrative franchise. Dissatisfaction results not only in lost interest, but lost revenue for the franchise as well.

The same process used in developing strong characters – determining how and why each particular character acts – can also be applied to the greater world. As Sara Gwenllian-Jones writes in her essay "Virtual Reality and Cult Television":

> In the fantastic genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and speculative fiction, elaborate constructions of emphatically alternate realities are central narrative devices, meticulously imagined and described. In literature, the fantastic cosmologies of Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast, Ursula K. LeGuin's Hain universe, Gene Wolfe's Urth, and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth are not merely exotic backdrops to linear narrative events but vivid and dense semantic domains that saturate character, themes, action, and plot. In addition to furnishing atmosphere and the spatial dimensions that support the narrative, they also have dynamic functions, shaping characters' experiences, inflecting plotlines, and supporting intricate networks of cross-connections through which narrative events resonate. (83)

While worlds may lack agency, worlds can still be heroes, villains, or tricksters; worlds have philosophies, histories, and motivations; worlds have tones, moods, and nuances. The character of worlds plays itself out in colors, in shapes, in scents, in tastes, in sounds, in textures, but perhaps most of all in philosophies. The world of *Star Trek* is a fantastic one of hope and optimism; the world of *The X-Files* is a more realistic one of dark cynicism; and the world of *Labyrinth* is an erratic one of magic and humor. An extension to the *Star Trek* universe that's a gritty, realistic horror movie like *The Ring*

would be jarring; an extension to *The X-Files* that featured Mulder and Scully trying to restore a mystic balance would be odd; a *Labyrinth* extension with David Bowie running around on a spaceship with a lightsaber would be deeply bizarre. This is not to say that each of these stories couldn't *happen* – in fact, some of these could be incredibly interesting – but they would need to be done in such a way that they made concessions to remain consistent with the tone of the world. A *Star Trek* horror story could be done within the confines of the Holodeck; an *X-Files* story could be set within a virtual reality or via a dream sequence brought about by an Indian shaman; I'm sure a more gifted storyteller than I could figure out a way for a *Labyrinth* sci-fi film to be done… Somehow.

This is *also* not to say that *all* transmedia narratives need to focus on the world as the primary character; it is easy to imagine a smaller, self-contained transfiction story that begins and ends with one primary character. However, a storyteller charged with creating a story open to eventual transmedia expansion should be aware that while the story he or she is currently writing may focus on one character, a different storyteller might focus on someone completely different, in a completely different era. The trick is to build enough compelling texture, opportunity and character into the larger world to bring audiences back again and again no matter what media form future extensions may take, and to do it gracefully. Science fiction author M. John Harrison warns of the dangers of putting too much worldbuilding down on the page:

> Every moment of a science fiction story must represent the triumph of
> writing over worldbuilding.

Worldbuilding is dull. Worldbuilding literalizes the urge to invent. Worldbuilding gives an unnecessary permission for acts of writing (indeed, for acts of reading). Worldbuilding numbs the reader's ability to fulfill their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done.

Above all, worldbuilding is not technically necessary. It is the great clomping foot of nerdism. It is the attempt to exhaustively survey a place that isn't there. A good writer would never try to do that, even with a place that is there. It isn't possible, & if it was the results wouldn't be readable: they would constitute not a book but the biggest library ever built, a hallowed place of dedication & lifelong study. This gives us a clue to the psychological type of the worldbuilder & the worldbuilder's victim, & makes us *very afraid.*[16]

Subjecting readers to "the great clomping foot of nerdism" is bad, but the development of a full, well-rounded world with its own internal logic and consistency is critical, especially in any enterprise that involves multiple authors.   So how, then, does one go about building a world without all the foot-clomping? One approach is the skillful use of negative capability.

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[16] http://uzwi.wordpress.com/2007/01/27/very-afraid/

SIDEBAR: *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

Perhaps the most extreme example of the shift toward world-building can be seen in possibly the most successful video game of all time, Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*. The world in which *WoW* is set had already been developed through the first three games in the *Warcraft* series, plus a number of additional extensions such as toys and companion books. The world even has recurring characters – the Orc chieftain, Thrall; the tragic warriors Illidan and Price Arthas, and so on. Yet the main thrust of *World of Warcraft* isn't to follow these characters' stories, but to develop your own character as you explore the world in which those characters live and interact with other players. The growth of Thrall, Illidan, and Arthas happens at a glacial pace, if at all, through expansion packs and software patches; it's the player's progress toward level 60 and beyond that keeps them playing the game and happily shelling out fifteen dollars a month. *World of Warcraft* proved so successful, commercially and critically, that the nascent massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre exploded soon afterwards. Character arcs come in a distant second when developing these MMORPGs; the main thrust is to develop a world so compelling that it will keep players (and their friends) playing constantly, and just as constantly ponying up those monthly subscription fees.

1.6 Negative Capability and Migratory Cues in Transmedia Storytelling

> I happened to remark to a man who was sitting beside me at dinner the
> other night that I was reading Grimm in German of an evening but never
> bothered to look up a word I didn't know, 'so that it is often great fun' (I
> added) 'guessing what it was that the old woman gave to the prince which
> he afterwards lost in the wood'.
>
> – C. S. Lewis, *On Stories*

Closely attached to the concept of worldbuilding in transmedia storytelling is the notion of negative capability. The term 'negative capability' was first used in a letter from the poet John Keats in 1817. In it, he writes:

> I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects;
> several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what
> quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature and
> which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative
> Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties,
> Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...

When applied to storytelling, **negative capability is the art of building strategic gaps into a narrative to evoke a delicious sense of 'uncertainty, Mystery, or doubt' in the audience.** Simple references to people, places or events external to the current narrative provide hints to the history of the characters and the larger world in which the story takes place. This empowers audiences to fill in the gaps in their own imaginations while leaving them curious to find out more. In *Convergence Culture,* Jenkins quotes media scholar Mary Beth Haralovich and mathematician Michael W. Trosset:

Narrative pleasure stems from the desire to know what will happen next, to have that gap opened and closed, again and again, until the resolution of the story.

Haralovich and Trosset are actually referring to the way TV shows like *Survivor* rely on chance to keep audiences guessing, but the same idea can be easily reapplied to the use of negative capability in narratives. This is also in line with the "reader response' school of literary theory, which posits that reading is far from a passive activity. As Janet Murray writes in *Hamlet on the Holodeck:*

> The pleasurable surrender of the mind to an imaginative world is often described, in Coleridge's phrase, as "the willing suspension of disbelief." But this is too passive a formulation even for traditional media. When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely "suspend" a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively *create belief.* Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than question the reality of the experience. (110)

Many critics, Murray and Sara Gwenllian-Jones among them, liken this to a form of crafting mental encyclopedias about the fictional worlds. As audiences consume multiple components of a large narrative franchise, they construct vast databases of information in their minds to connect each new piece with what they have experienced earlier. In her essay "Virtual Reality and Cult Television", Gwenllian-Jones describes how "the implicit aspects of the fictional world are, in imagination, rendered explicit;

gaps are filled in; inconsistencies are smoothed out by means of plausible explanations that are in keeping with the interior logics of the fictional world; creative interventions are made". (92)

As Jenkins notes, "We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story."[17]

Truly immersive worlds motivate audiences to engage more deeply with the texts. The structuralists in the audience are likely to draw connections between this active engagement and the 'writerly texts' of French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes. In his 1970 text *S/Z,* Barthes draws a distinction between the *scriptible* and the *lisible,* or 'writerly' texts and 'readerly' texts – writerly texts, according to Barthes, are those texts that rely heavily upon the audiences to provide any semblance of meaning, while readerly texts are those that require very little work on the part of the audience and afford very little room for individual interpretation. Barthes admits that examples of writerly texts are difficult, if not impossible, to find, and that they exist primarily as a utopian model. Readerly texts, by contrast, "make up the enormous mass of our literature" (*S/Z* 5). Not surprisingly, since in his essay "The Death of the Author", Barthes advocated divorcing the author from the text and leaving the meaning of the text to be determined by the readers, he places writerly texts far above readerly texts in his hierarchy of value.

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[17] http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html

I agree with Barthes up to a point. Increasing the amount of reader engagement through techniques like negative capability can make a text more 'writerly', or, as Marshall McLuhan might have put it, can make it more 'cool' or 'low-definition' as it requires more work on the part of the audience. However, I disagree with Barthes' privileging the agency of the reader over the skill of the author. To my mind any story is a fine, subtle *pas de deux* between storyteller and audience. Rather than promoting one at the expense of the other, as Barthes seems to do in his championing of writerly texts, I view stories as *communications* between a transmitting party and a receiving party. Constructing a text is, therefore, carefully crafting a collection of concepts chosen to best represent a message, or an *experience,* that the author wishes to convey in the way that the author wishes it to be conveyed. I agree with Barthes that the reader plays a critical role, and that no two readers are likely to derive precisely the same meaning from the same text. I disagree, however, with the value judgments that are often ascribed to him, such as the derisive comments Richard Howard makes in his preface to the 1974 Richard Miller translation of *S/Z:* ".If we were to set out to write a readerly text, we should be no more than hacks in bad faith".[18] I find this to be overly unkind. I think that a writerly text is simply a *different* type of object than a readerly text, not an inherently *better* one, in the same way that impressionist art is simply a different type of art than the works of the baroque era. If we were to follow Barthes' logic out to its illogical ends, then by *reductio absurdum* we can disprove Barthes' declaration that 'writerly' texts cannot be found in bookstores – they're the blank books near the registers of any Barnes and Noble.

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[18] Barthes xi.

To put it another way, I think that the decision to create a writerly or readerly text isn't so much a question of creating works of varying quality, but creating experiences of a different nature. Some might accuse me of being too much of a relativist, but I think that there are appropriate times for readerly texts as well as appropriate times for writerly texts. Stating that a writerly text is inherently better than a readerly one is akin to claiming that a video game is inherently better than a film because of its interactivity, or, more directly, that a radio drama is better than a film because of its increased degree of involvement for an audience. I do, however, believe that an otherwise readerly text can often be improved by making it more writerly – and, as I think Barthes' own writing proves, very writerly texts can also often be improved by making them more readerly. This, to me, is the challenge that many theorists often fail: the creation of new classification structures and terminologies for media types is artistically useless if they do not lead to the improvement of actual media.

One example of 'writerly' texts in popular media can be found in horror. In 1981 Stephen King published a rough guide to the genre called *Danse Macabre*, in which he broke down 'scary' into three degrees: terror, horror, and revulsion. Working from simple to complex, revulsion is the plain-and-simple gross-out: the squish of a thumb plunging through an eyeball, or the splutch of an alien's crown bursting through a man's chest. Horror works on a slightly more complicated level, as the demonstration of something physically wrong: the shuffling, dragging step of a zombified loved one, treading slowly to keep their parts from dropping off, or a baseball diamond crafted from an eviscerated corpse with a cheerful pitcher weighing the head in his glove. Finally, terror is the

"finest" type of spook-out, because it operates almost exclusively within the imagination

of the audience. According to King:

> The finest [level] is terror, that emotion which is called up in the tale of
> The Hook and also in that hoary old classic, "The Monkey's Paw". We
> actually see nothing outright nasty in either story; in one we have the hook
> and in the other there is the paw, which, dried and mummified, can surely
> be no worse than those plastic dogturds on sale at any novelty shop. It's
> what the mind sees that makes those stories such quintessential tales of
> terror. It is the unpleasant speculation called to mind when the knocking
> on the door begins in the latter story and the grief-stricken old woman
> rushes to answer it. Nothing is there but the wind when she finally throws
> the door open... but what, the mind wonders, might have been there if her
> husband had been a little slower on the draw with that third wish? (34)

The same type of psychology comes into play when directors of horror movies

refrain from showing the monster until they absolutely, positively have to. As long as the

thing remains unseen, it operates at the level of terror. What's making those horrible

scritch-scratch noises on the other side of the door? One woman in the audience may

harbor a deep-seated fear of spiders, so her imagination may create a four-foot tarantula

scraping its mandibles across the wood. The guy next to her may have been traumatized

by a snake when he was a kid, so his brain might cook up an enormous writhing python

dragging its fangs across the door. The fella in the seat beside him might secretly be

terrified of aardvarks... Terror, the most writerly of these classes, trades on the same

basic psychology as negative capability – anything the audience member imagines

themselves will be infinitely more *personally* scary than anything the director could dream up.

The trick, of course, is to use these writerly approaches as a lure to bring audiences back when those gaps are filled in, and then provide a tale good enough - and riddled with enough new gaps - to keep them coming back for more. This is the aspect of negative capability that is key to transmedia storytelling: how to provide hooks for the storyteller to return to later for another gripping tale. There are many examples of contemporary storytellers using negative capability to great effect: at the end of the TV series, Joss Whedon left *Firefly* fans wondering about the true story of Reverend Book, exactly how the browncoats failed, and what horror had befallen poor River Tam. Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* is rife with negative capability, hinting at the cause of Destruction's departure, how Delight became Delirium, and how the family had lost the original Despair. And, of course, perhaps the most famous example is how George Lucas used negative capability with a remarkably deft hand in his original *Star Wars* trilogy: how did Anakin Skywalker become Darth Vader? What was the Old Republic? What were the Clone Wars? Who or what is Boba Fett, and what's the story with that strange armor? All of these unanswered questions are opportunities for new stories to be told.

Negative capability ties directly to Ruppel's migratory cues, which I touched on near the end of section 1.3. To recap, migratory cues are "a signal towards another medium – the means through which various narrative paths are marked by an author and located by a user through activation patterns". While negative capability need not actually lead to anything at the moment in which it's written into the story, it clears a space in the narrative for those cues to be planted. Ruppel uses the letter in the *Matrix*

franchise as a sample of a migratory cue – when it's mentioned at the beginning of the second *Matrix* film, Ruppel argues that it exists as a hint for viewers to look for more information on the letter in *The Animatrix* and *Enter The Matrix*. Yet a considerable number of audience members watching that scene are unlikely to consume either of those two pieces of media. Thanks to negative capability and the 'writerly' nature of the text, the story continues to function without audience members having experienced either the anime or the video game, as they can imagine their own answer to the question of where exactly that letter came from. They retain the option to go and track it down, and their understanding (and enjoyment) of the story would be increased by their doing so. One possible way to merge these terminologies is to understand any reference to external people, places or events as utilizing negative capability to craft *potential* migratory cues, and become *actualized* as migratory cues when those extensions are made available.

To sum all of this thinking about transmedia aesthetics up into one (admittedly long) sentence:

A storyteller looking to craft a potential transmedia narrative should carefully craft the world in which that story exists, and then make passing references to elements in that world during the course of the narrative to simultaneously spark audience imaginations through negative capability and provide potential openings for future migratory cues.

That said, this idea still remains awfully broad. In order to gain the most traction with this concept, it needs to be further refined. To that end, let's revisit something else that Roland Barthes and the structuralists did extremely well: classification systems.

1.7 Six Classes of Hermeneutic Codes

The majority of Barthes' 1970 text *S/Z* is an attempt to describe what is actually happening when readers experience Balzac's 'readerly' short story "Sarrasine". By subdividing the story into 561 shorter sections called lexias, and then analyzing them using what Richard Howard calls the "five notorious codes"[19]: *hermeneutic, semic, proairetic, symbolic,* and *cultural,* Barthes aims to display all the possible readings that could be taken away by a reader. These five codes break down more or less as follows.

Hermeneutic codes are the elements in a text that introduce, further, and conclude the mysterious elements running throughout the text; these are similar to the "gaps" that Haralovich and Trosset introduced at the beginning of this section. *Semic,* or *semantic* codes (based on your translation) are relatively simple connotations – suggestions, or implications, of other things. *Proairetic,* or 'action' codes, are those that, as Peggy Rosenthal notes in her article "Deciphering S/Z", refer "to the patterning of actions according to a sequence that is already known (from everyday experience, from other literature)"; they discuss physical actions and motions.[20] *Symbolic* codes refer to the themes that run throughout the text, often in the case of recurring visual imagery. *Cultural* codes are references to the types of 'voices' that are passing through the text, not

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[19] Barthes ix.
[20] Rosenthal 132.

so much our usual notions of author or character voices but *non-personal* voices; general

philosophies and phrases that are common to the culture of the language.

I am less interested in semiotics than in the potential of these codes as tools that

storytellers might use to better understand how their stories work. Of these, the

hermeneutic codes are the most directly connected to negative capability. These are, as

Barthes describes, lists of "the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be

distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed" (*S/Z* 19).

In other words, these are the parts of a text that keep an audience flipping pages by

continually posing and answering new questions, opening and closing gaps in the

narrative structure. As each new question is posed, the imaginations of the audience

spark to life, positing possible answers and asking even further questions.   'Where did

Han Solo come from?', 'What will happen to Han Solo?', and 'What is Coruscant like?'

are all examples of the kind of questions posed by a writerly text using hermeneutic

codes and responded to in the mind through the imagination's capacity to handle negative

capability.

To more accurately examine what's happening here, let me suggest six possible

classes into which these hermeneutic codes could be sorted. Much like Barthes does at

the beginning of his analysis, I too have to build in a disclaimer: these are, obviously, not

the *only* classes into which such references might fall. Please consider these to be only a

starting point. It's also worth noting that many of these cues are not mutually exclusive,

especially given the multi-media nature of a transmedia franchise. While Barthes' *S/Z*

concerned itself with text, any examination of a transmedia franchise has to remember

that a single shot or line of dialogue can contain multiple types of hermeneutic codes in multiple formats: audio, visual, or, as we'll see, even metaphysical.

      Cultural. Cultural hermeneutic codes are questions raised by costumes, architecture, artwork, and other elements that refer to greater cultures. An example of this might be Boba Fett's armor in *Star Wars*: dangling from Fett's belt are a number of pieces of fur that fans will tell you are Wookiee scalps. How were they attained? Fans will also tell you that Fett's strange-looking armor is an artifact from an earlier Mandalorian war. Who were the Mandalorians? How did Fett come by this armor? Did he steal it? Did he earn it? Did he buy it? Other examples might be tapestries, statues, or old, abandoned buildings that are each loaded with narrative cues.

      It's unfortunate that Barthes himself lists 'Cultural' as one of his codes, however, the applications here are somewhat different. As Raymond Williams notes in his *Keywords,* "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (87). Barthes describes his cultural codes as "references to a science or a body of knowledge; in drawing attention to them, we merely indicate the type of knowledge (physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary, historical, etc.) referred to, without going so far as to construct (or reconstruct) the culture they express" (*S/Z* 20). Here I mean by "culture" those creations attributed to the 'cultural' components of a society – again, such as fashion, architecture, art, and so on. 'Artistic' doesn't completely capture it, and 'aesthetic' is too heavily linked to the notion of beauty; a cultural hermeneutic code can be a suggestion of something quite hideous. Minus a better term, we'll simply have to progress with this lexical conflict intact.

Character. Character hermeneutic codes refer to characters or aspects of characters that do not appear on screen. The most famous example of this is most likely Godot from the play by Samuel Beckett. For most of the first *Star Wars* movie, Anakin Skywalker exists only in the stories that Obi-Wan tells a wide-eyed Luke. Until Sean Connery shows up in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves,* King Richard only exists as a series of references made by other characters in conversation. Audiences wonder about who these characters are, and what their stories would be like. Character codes can also refer to histories, fates, or motivations of characters.

Chronological. Just like they sound, chronological hermeneutic codes concern events that happened in the past, or in the future. The Clone Wars are an excellent example of this in the *Star Wars* films; the Battle at Wolf 359 is another example when it is mentioned in conversation in episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager* and the film *Star Trek: First Contact.* Other examples might be the forging of the One Ring in *Lord of the Rings,* the creation of the gates by the Ancients in *Stargate SG-1,* or the conversion of Delight to Delirium in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series. In the earlier example of Boba Fett's armor, the explanation that it's a relic of the Mandalorian war is both a cultural hermeneutic code and a chronological hermeneutic code.

Geographic. Geographic hermeneutic codes are questions about important places that either don't appear in the main story or appear only briefly. Examples would include the home planets of the Klingon and Vulcan races in the early seasons of *Star Trek*, the surface of Princess Leia's adopted home planet of Alderaan in *Star Wars Episode IV: A*

New Hope, or Shangri-La in the first half of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*. These are

often places that characters mention wistfully.

Environmental. Environmental hermeneutic codes are references to the flora,

fauna, or other scientific components of the world. These differ from Geographic

hermeneutic codes because these often *do* appear on-screen, just briefly enough to leave

audiences wanting to know more about them. Still, there is quite often overlap between

Geographic and Environmental codes. Environmental hermeneutic codes commonly

serve more as world-building components than as hooks for additional stories, but it is

certainly possible to imagine how such an extension could work – a tale about how

tauntauns are raised or captured in *The Empire Strikes Back,* for instance, or the Rancor

monster or the Sarlacc pit in *Return of the Jedi*.

Ontological. Perhaps the rarest hermeneutic codes make the audience wonder

about the very existential nature of the story they're consuming. Examples of this

include Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler,* the 1999 horror film *The Blair

Witch Project,* the lonelygirl15 phenomenon, ARGs, and the dream-logic nature of *The

Wizard of Oz, Alice in Wonderland,* and *Labyrinth*. Stories like *The Dark Crystal* escape

ontological questioning by clearly framing themselves in a world separate from our own.

Obviously, the import of these hermeneutic codes will vary from instance to

instance, and even from reader to reader. For example, it's impossible to rank

Chronological cues over Character cues, because in the course of a single film the

emphasis can shift from one to another, just as Kristin Thompson observes comes to pass in Vittori de Sica's 1948 film *Ladri di Biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves)[21]. It's just as impossible to categorically rank Character hermeneutic codes over Environmental hermeneutic codes because a clever storyteller could tell an entire series of linked stories based not on recurring characters but upon an object, such as Francois Girard's 1998 film *The Red Violin*[22].

In his essay "On Stories", from which the epigraph to this section was taken, C. S. Lewis grapples with the issue of ranking the import of what drives audiences through stories and finds that, in fact, it varies from person to person. As he writes, "If a man sensitive and perhaps over-sensitive to Romance likes least that Romance which is, by common consent, the most 'exciting' of all, then it follows that 'excitement' is not the only kind of pleasure to be got out of Romance. If a man loves wine and yet hates one of the strongest wines, then surely the sole source of pleasure in wine cannot be the alcohol?" (7)

By understanding the ways that a storyteller can propel an audience forward through a narrative – these hermeneutic codes – we can improve the intertextual connections between components in a transmedia narrative and increase audience motivation to make the jump from one component to another.

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[21] *Breaking the Glass Armor,* pp. 207-211.

[22] Of course, a clever academic could then counter that the violin is itself a character, and similarly that my earlier assertion that the world is the most important character in the story renders both Geographic and Environmental codes into Character codes, but that's a thesis for another paper.

So how do these codes relate to negative capability and Ruppel's migratory cues? According to Barthes, the hermeneutic codes should all be fulfilled in the course of the narrative – a variation on the "if a gun appears in Act I, it had better be fired by Act III" rule of thumb common in screenwriting. In transmedia narratives, however, the key is to leave a number of the hermeneutic codes unresolved to serve as *potential* migratory cues, relying upon the audience's capacity for negative capability to fill in the gaps until an extension actualizes one or more migratory cues. In a transmedia story, the gun may not go off in Act III of the film, but it might go off in Act I of the comic book.

Returning to *The Matrix,* then, the moment when the letter is delivered in the *Matrix* franchise is a chronological hermeneutic code that leads our imaginations to wonder where the letter came from. Our capacity for negative capability allows us to fill in those gaps with possible stories until the *Enter the Matrix* video game is released, at which point the moment of receiving the letter changes from a potential to an actual migratory cue.

These aesthetics should help in the development of any intertextual franchise, but should prove especially useful in transmedia franchises that suffer from increased resistance to narrative continuation due to a kind of 'media form inertia'. Changing media forms will almost always meet with more resistance than simply continuing on in an established media form, which is why increasing the narrative value of each component through writerly seeding and payoff is so critical in a transmedia narrative.

Allow me, then, to revisit my earlier proclamation and suggest a more precise revision:

A storyteller looking to craft a potential transmedia narrative should carefully craft the world in which that story exists, and then make passing references to other cultures, characters, events, places, sciences or philosophies of that world during the course of the narrative to simultaneously spark audience imaginations through negative capability and provide potential openings for future migratory cues.

It's impossible to perform here an analysis of the Henson properties that would be half as exhaustive as Barthes' examination of the codes in *Sarrasine,* due to both time and space restrictions and because the very beauty of negative capability is that the number of possibilities audiences can dream up to fill in the gaps is almost infinite. However, with these concepts and classes serving as a rough form of transmedia aesthetics, we can now perform a rough examination of *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* and evaluate the transmedia franchises the Jim Henson Company is building around each one. Both of these properties had already been established as early proto-transmedia franchises with companion books published at the time of each film's release. These two extensions stand in stark contrast to one another, however, in how they utilize negative capability – or, more effectively, how one property uses negative capability very skillfully and the other almost willfully doesn't. By examining both of these properties in turn, first through the primary film (or hypotext) and then through the transmedia extensions (or hypertexts) *The World of the Dark Crystal* by Brian Froud and J.J. Llewellyn, *Goblins of Labyrinth* by Brian Froud and Terry Jones, and *Return to Labyrinth* by Jake T. Forbes and Chris Lie, we can see how the skillful use of

worldbuilding and negative capability prove critical when nurturing a transmedia

franchise.

II. Transmedia Storytelling at the Jim Henson Company

Following the sale of the Muppets to Disney in 2004, the Jim Henson Company found themselves searching for a new primary source of income. While reviewing their remaining franchises, they came to their 1980s dark fantasy films *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* and they noticed something interesting – despite neither film being a blockbuster smash during theatrical release, sales of each film on VHS and DVD remained strong decades later. Fan websites for both properties were still scattered across the Internet, as was fan fiction. Something about these two films resonated so deeply with audiences that they not only remained enjoyable to their original audiences, but those audiences were now sharing them with their children.

To wax poetic for a moment, perhaps this connection is somewhat primordial – both of these films are tales woven of classic stuff, reminiscent of a time when people would gather around a storyteller spinning tales of magic and demons and worlds beyond.[23] Perhaps the connection is derived from a human explorer instinct, a need to seek out the mysterious, and in a day and age when so much of our world has been mapped, plotted, charted, dug up, examined, analyzed, lost, and dug up again, there remains a deep-rooted part of us that longs for something mysterious and exciting to be hiding behind that tree or to be waiting around the next curve in the road.

This is a sensation that Jim Henson himself knew well.

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[23] Henson would revisit this concept more directly in the 1987 TV series *The Storyteller*.

2.2 *The Dark Crystal*

In 1982, The Jim Henson Company released *The Dark Crystal*, which invited audiences to explore the dark, shadowy, and wonderful world of Thra. Henson's first feature film opens with a narrator intoning a somber welcome over composer Trevor Jones' eerie chords: "Another world, another time, in the Age of Wonder. A thousand years ago this land was green and good, until the Crystal cracked. For a single piece was lost, a shard of the crystal. Then strife began, and two new races appeared..." There is little to no connection between this fictional world and our world, not even any "a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away", so *The Dark Crystal* sidesteps the ontological class of hermeneutic codes discussed in section 1.7. In his 1997 book *The Creature Shop: No Strings Attached*, Matt Bacon recounts the tale of how Henson approached the creation of *The Dark Crystal*:

> Work began [on *The Dark Crystal*] in 1979. "I wanted to create the world
> first," said Henson in 1985. "The visual world. What the creatures looked
> like... what the whole place was. I wanted to start with that, and let the
> story grow." (21)

Henson soon enlisted the help of fantasy illustrator Brian Froud, who was also interested in creating a complete, well-developed world. Bacon continues:

> Determined to create a fully realized world, Henson was aiming to give
> the impression that *The Dark Crystal* was simply filmed on location on
> another planet. "In the real world, there's lots of stuff in the background,"
> he said. "When we created the world, we had to put depth in it. We did a

lot more than we needed to." Henson and Froud worked out a map of the

world of *The Dark Crystal*, marking animated swamps and living

mountains, working out the colour schemes, flora and fauna of each area

in nit-picking detail.

By beginning with the world, and letting the story grow organically as the

creatures in that world themselves evolved, Henson and Froud were exploring an early

proto-form of the aesthetics of transmedia storytelling I described in section 1.5. Henson

and Froud worked together for five years to create the world of Thra from whole cloth,

complete with its own rich history, mythology, geography, astronomy, its religions, its

botany, even its languages. By maximizing the conceptual scope of the world in which

their story was set, they enabled nearly every frame of the film to spark the imaginations

of their audiences through myriad references to the rich, enticing world beyond the edge

of the screen. Even such things as bizarre botany and zoology served as springboards for

the imaginations of audience members through environmental hermeneutic codes.

As Froud writes in his introduction to the recently reissued collector's edition of

The World of the Dark Crystal:

One of the great challenges of designing *The Dark Crystal* was to create a

world that had never been seen and yet could be instantly accepted as a

real place with a history and an ancient philosophy. I created a cosmology

with meaningful symbols that could penetrate the very fabric of the

costumes and the film's architecture; every visual element imparted

information of this particular world's past, its ideas, and its destiny. (9)

Henson himself weighs in on the philosophy behind the movie's creation in a *New York Times* piece written by Aljean Harmetz and published on August 23, 1982, four months before the film's release:

> "The great challenge," said Mr. Henson, who is co-director of "*The Dark Crystal*" with his long-time associate, Frank Oz, "was to create a complete world that doesn't exist and make it seem real, to create all the life forms on that world, their history, and their way of moving."

Henson riddles *The Dark Crystal* with hermeneutic codes and negative capability. As is fitting for a primarily visual storyteller, many of the potential points for future migratory cues can be found in the design of the world itself. Cultural hermeneutic codes include crumbling ruins that feature friezes of past Gelfling culture, varying types of architecture, and even the cosmology depicted in Aughra's observatory. Much like the way Lucas refers to the Old Republic and the Clone Wars in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, Henson fills *The Dark Crystal* with hints as to what life was like before the Crystal cracked, and the dark thousand years that followed under the Skeksis' rule. As the film begins, the narrator hints at events that have dwindled the Skeksis' numbers to ten, "a dying race ruled by a dying emperor imprisoned by themselves in a dying land". The voice paints with broad strokes the story to date, changing a marionette sitting by a pool into the last of the Gelflings, raised by the Mystics, sadly playing his pipe while his teacher lies dying...

The movie is less than ten minutes in and audiences are already wondering about the larger world in which the story is set. Where did the Dark Crystal come from? How did it break? Could there be more than one Crystal? What were Jen's parents like? Why

did the Skeksis kill Jen's family? What was it like to be raised by the Mystics? What do the symbols that cover nearly every inch of the Mystics' homes, clothes and artwork mean?

Some of these questions are answered as the film continues, but nowhere near all of them – and more are introduced as we go. When we meet the one-eyed, monstrous wise woman Aughra, we wonder at her allegiances and her origins. Who is she? *What* is she? Where did she come from? We learn of the Skeksis' genocide of Jen's people and we see the ruins of the Gelfling culture, but we're left wondering what Gelfling society was like before the purge. When we meet the girl Gelfling Kira, we wonder if there might be any other Gelflings in the world, or even in the universe, and why only female Gelflings get to have wings.

Much like Jen, the audience is taken on a whirlwind tour of the world of Thra, all the while being titillated by questions and hints and mysteries. The voyage Jen undertakes is a classic hero's journey, which is not at all a bad thing – narrators often provide audiences with a main character who is exploring the fantastical world for the first time themselves, to serve as an avatar of sorts for the audience. As Joseph Campbell argues in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces,* we've seen this particular formula play itself out for centuries, in stories from Greek mythology to George Lucas' *Star Wars*. As the main character expresses awe at the wonders that unfold before him, we in the audience are invited to do the same thing.

Actual audience reception to the film, however, was mixed. Henson's son Brian remembers the film as 'polarizing opinion': "People who liked it loved it, but others were not so keen" (Bacon 15). One scathing review of the film, written by Vincent Canby and

published in the December 17, 1982 edition of the *New York Times*, snipes that *The Dark Crystal* "aims, I think, to be a sort of Muppet *Paradise Lost* but winds up as watered down J.R.R. Tolkien." Still, the film's impact continues to be felt even today – largely as a result of all the time and energy Froud and Henson spent making the world so imaginatively fertile. Froud notes this happily, again in his foreword to the collector's edition of *The World of the Dark Crystal*:

> It had always been our intention to create a tale with the weight of myth; a
> story that felt as though it had been told many times before in another
> land, another age, another world; a story whose profound, universal truth
> is revealed in the retelling. Since the movie continues to be used in
> philosophy, religion and metaphysics classes as well as in film seminars,
> we seem to have succeeded. (9)

As the Jim Henson Company returns to Henson and Froud's world for both the forthcoming manga prequel *Legends of the Dark Crystal* and the feature film sequel *Power of the Dark Crystal*, we will soon see how well this carefully-seeded world will bear additional fruit. Still, even without those extensions we can begin to evaluate *The Dark Crystal* as a transmedia franchise by examining how the film's use of worldbuilding, negative capability, and possible migratory cues facilitated the creation of *The World of the Dark Crystal* and other transmedia extensions. By using the six classes of hermeneutic codes described at the end of Section 1 to analyze the film, scene by scene, we can begin to map out the intertextual bonds across the franchise.

2.3 Ninety-Seven Hermeneutic Codes in *The Dark Crystal*

The value of these one hundred hermeneutic codes becomes readily apparent when we begin to evaluate the other extensions in the *Dark Crystal* franchise. If we evaluate the effectiveness of an extension by its value to the story, we can further evaluate the extent of that value by how well it picks up on the hermeneutic codes left unanswered by the original text. If the hypertext is canonical, if it maintains the character of the world, while answering some of the questions and raising new ones, then we can say that the extension enriches our experience of the hypotext and has made a valuable contribution to the franchise. Note that this approach cannot take into consideration the quality of the *storytelling* – an extension can fulfill all the above requirements and still not be fit for fishwrap. As with any kind of formalist approach to what is essentially an art form, user mileage may vary.

TDC.001 "The Age of Wonder"
00:00:30. Chronological. "A thousand years ago, this land was green and good, until the crystal cracked." What was that time like? How did these two new races, the Mystics and the Skeksis, appear? Where did they come from? What happened when the Skeksis took control of the crystal? ***Important.***

TDC.002 Inside the Castle of the Crystal
00:01:15. Cultural. The architecture of the Castle of the Crystal is tattered and ancient, but also geometrically interesting. Who built it? What do the strange foreign symbols on the illuminated ring on the floor of the Crystal Room mean?

TDC.003 "A Shaft of Air and Fire"
00:01:30. Geographic, Environmental. What's beneath the castle of the crystal?

TDC.004 The look of the Skeksis

00:01:35. Cultural. The clothes of the Skeksis are faded and worn, but also regal. What do they signify? Who made them? What do their "harsh and twisted bodies" look like? What are these things? Birds?

TDC.005 "For a thousand years they have ruled… Yet now, there are only ten."

00:01:50. Chronological. The Skeksis have ruled this land for a thousand years – what was that time like? There are now only ten; how many were there at the beginning? Did they die, or did they leave? If they died, how? If they left, where did they go? **Important.**

TDC.006 "A dying race, ruled by a dying Emperor, imprisoned within themselves, in a dying land…"

00:01:50. Environmental. Why is everything dying?

TDC.007 "As they ravage the land, so too they learn to draw new life from the sun… through the power of their source, their treasure, their fate… the Dark Crystal."

00:02:18. Cultural. How does this work?

TDC.008 "Today a new emperor must seize the throne."

00:02:55. Cultural. How is the emperor of the Skeksis chosen? How many emperors have there been before him?

TDC.009 The art of the Skeksis

00:03:00. Cultural. What do the scepters of the Skeksis signify? Why do they all look different? What do the fashions of the Skeksis represent?

TDC.010 "…And here, far from the castle, the race of Mystics came to live in a dream of peace."

00:04:00. Cultural, Chronological. Were the Mystics driven here, or did they go peacefully? What was their migration like?

TDC.011 The art of the Mystics

00:04:25. Cultural. What does the beautiful sand art of the Mystics represent? What are the circles? What are the symbols? What are the strange sculptures?

TDC.012 "…Yet now there are only ten…"

00:04:30. Chronological. How did the Mystics die? Why? How many of them were there to start with?

TDC.013 The look of the Mystics

00:04:40. Cultural. What are these strange animal things? What do the sworls on their clothes represent? What is their culture like? Who are these Mystics as individual characters?

TDC.014 "…Today the wisest of the Mystics lies dying."

00:04:47. Cultural. How and why is the Mystic elder dying?

TDC.015 The music of the Mystics

00:04:57. Cultural. The Mystics use a sort of group chant to summon Jen; does this mean anything specific? Are there different tones for different messages? Does each Mystic only know one note?

TDC.016 The culture of the Mystics

00:05:00. Cultural. We see the Mystics doing various things, primarily associated with weaving and throwing pottery on a potter's wheel. What is Mystic culture like? Why do they like the things they do? What is their food like? What is their religion?

TDC.017 "In the valley of the Mystics there lives a Gelfling, Jen."

00:05:30. Geographic, Cultural, Environmental. What's a Gelfling? Why is he living here? Where is the Valley of the Mystics? What is all this strange flora and fauna around Jen? What is the music he's playing?

TDC.018 "The Skeksis killed his family…"

00:05:35. Chronological. Why did the Skeksis do this? Why did the Mystics take him in?

TDC.019 "There is a prophecy…"

00:05:38. Chronological. Who told the prophecy? What is it?

TDC.020 The room of the Mystic Elder

00:07:10. Cultural. What are all these signs, talismans and other objects in the room of the Elder?

TDC.021 "…The Skeksis killed my mother, and father."

00:07:32. Character. What were Jen's parents like?

TDC.022 The magic of the Mystic Elder

00:07:55. Cultural. The Mystics are called 'wizards' by the narrator, and here the Elder makes a crystal appear from the bowl of green liquid. How does their magic work? Where do they get their power?

TDC.023 The Crystal Shard

00:08:07. Chronological. How did the Crystal break? What happened when it did? What is the Shard for?

TDC.024 "Aughra holds the shard…"

00:08:35. Character. Who is Aughra? *What* is Aughra?

TDC.025 "We may meet in another life, but not again in this one."

00:09:15. Cultural. What is the religion of the Mystics like?

TDC.026 The death of the Emperor

00:10:57. Cultural. Who are these characters? Why is the Emperor dying?
What is the religion of the Skeksis like? What is their morphology like? Why
does the Emperor crumble?

TDC.027 The death of the Mystic Elder

00:12:30. Cultural. When the Elder vanishes, Yoda-like, where does he go?

TDC.028 The music of the Mystics

00:13:02. Cultural. What does the music of the Mystics mean?

TDC.029 The land of the Dark Crystal montage

00:14:20. Geographical. Where are these places Jen is crossing?

TDC.030 "We're all with you…"

00:15:05. Cultural. What are the political factions of the Skeksis?

TDC.031 Trial by Stone

00:15:20. Cultural. How did the Trial by Stone come about? (**ANSWER:
TDC.008.** *How is the Emperor chosen?*)

TDC.032 Slaves of the Skeksis

00:15:45. Cultural. What are these poor, miserable creatures that serve the
Skeksis?

TDC.033 "By the Law – he must pay!"

00:18:17. Cultural. Who writes the Skeksis laws?

TDC.034 Morphology of the Skeksis.

00:18:48. Cultural. Again, what *are* these Skeksis creatures? Are they birds?

(**ANSWER: TDC.004:** *what do their 'harsh and twisted bodies' look like?*)

TDC.035 "Banished!"

00:19:00. Geographical, Cultural. The Chancellor is banished to where?

TDC.036 The call of the Crystal

00:19:36. Cultural. How exactly does the Crystal communicate? Is it sentient? Are the Skeksis the only ones who can hear the Crystal call?

TDC.037 The crab monster

00:19:42. Environmental, Character. What is that *thing* in the back of the room that looks like an enormous crab?

TDC.038 "A Gelfling… Alive?!"

00:20:24. Cultural. Why do the Skeksis fear Gelflings?

TDC.039 "The Prophecy says a Gelfling will destroy us!"

00:20:28. Cultural, Chronological. How can a single Gelfling destroy the Skeksis? (**ANSWER: TDC.018:** *why did the Skeksis kill Jen's family?* **TDC:038:** *why do the Skeksis fear the Gelflings?* **and TDC.019:** *what is the prophecy?*)

TDC.040 "Garthim, attack!"

00:20:37. Environmental, Character. What *is* that thing? (**ANSWER: TDC.037:** *what is that thing in the back of the room that looks like an enormous crab?*)

TDC.041 Rock creatures

00:22:12. Environmental. What are those strange anemone-like creatures on the rocks?

TDC.042 Aughra

00:23:10. Character. What exactly *is* Aughra? Why does Aughra only have one eye?   What language is Aughra occasionally speaking? **(ANSWER: TDC.024: *who is Aughra?*)**

TDC.043 The Observatory

00:25:20. Cultural. How does Aughra know so much about astronomy?

TDC.044 "How else could I make the prediction?"

00:26:19. Cultural. Is Aughra the one who told the prophecy?

TDC.05 The Great Conjunction

00:26:24. Chronological. What was the power of the Great Conjunction? How old *is* Aughra, anyway? What happened when the three suns aligned the time before that? What made this one great?

TDC.046 The Next Conjunction

00:26:41. Chronological. "Another conjunction coming up… Anything could happen!" What will happen?

TDC.047 "What do I do with the Shard?"

00:27:25. Chronological. **(ANSWER: TDC.023: *what is the Shard for?*)**

TDC.048 The Garthim Assault

00:30:00. Character. Did Aughra survive the Garthim assault?

TDC.049 The Chamberlain's motivations

00:30:40. Character. Why doesn't the Chamberlain capture Jen?

TDC.050 "At last the Crystal calls… It is time to return to the Castle!"

00:30:58. Character. How can the Mystics hear the Crystal? (**ANSWER: TDC.036:** *Are the Skeksis the only ones who can hear the Crystal call?*)

TDC.051 The creatures of the world

00:31:00. Environmental. What are all of these strange creatures?

TDC.052 "Now I've got the Shard, but what do I do with it?"

00:32:30. Chronological. What is the Shard for?

TDC.053 Stranger in the Swamp

00:33:20. Character. Who is this strange, cloaked creature?

TDC.054 Sharp, pointy teeth

00.34.13. Environmental, Character. What is this creature with the multiple rows of teeth and the great big roar?

TDC.055 Fizzgig

00.34.46. Environmental, Character. What *is* Fizzgig? Are there more of him? Where did he come from? (**ANSWER: TDC.054:** *what is this creature with the multiple rows of teeth and the great big roar?*)

TDC.056 Kira

00:35:00. Character. Where did Kira come from? What is the language she's speaking? What's her story? How did she escape the Skeksis' genocide? (*ANSWER: TDC.053: who is the strange cloaked creature?*)

TDC.057 Kira's parents

00:35:28. Character, Chronological. Kira's mother is taken by the Garthim, but she doesn't mention her father. What were her parents like? Who were they?

TDC.058 The young Gelflings

00:35:50. Environmental, Cultural, Character, Chronological. Who are these strange creatures that raised Kira?   Kira can speak with flowers? What happened to the rest of the Gelflings? We know the summary, but what were the events? Did any other Gelflings escape? If so, where did they go?

TDC.059 The Nebrie

00:37:05. Environmental. What in the *world* is a Nebrie? Do they have a culture? How can Kira speak with animals?

TDC.060 The eating habits of the Skeksis

00:37:30. Cultural. What all do the Skeksis eat? How do they get their food? Is it raised for them by their servants? Do the Garthim hunt for it?

TDC.061 Aughra and the Skeksis

00:40:54. Chronological, Character. What is the relationship between the Skeksis and Aughra? She doesn't seem to fear them, but they seem to fear her; what history do they have with each other? What are Aughra's allegiances?
(ANSWER: TDC.048: *did Aughra survive the Garthim assault?*)

TDC.062 The Crystal bats

00:42:15. Environmental. What are these Crystal bat things?

TDC.063 The music of the Gelflings

00:42:42. Cultural. Do Kira and Jen remember the songs of the Gelflings, or are they making that up?

TDC.064 River creatures

00:43:10. Environmental. What are these creatures in the river?

TDC.065 Crystal Bat Hunt: "What the Crystal bats see, the Skeksis see too…"

00:43:52. Environmental. Are the Crystal bats raised by the Skeksis, or are they magical? (**ANSWER: TDC.062:** *what are these Crystal bat things?)*

TDC.066 The Podlings

00:44:37. Environmental, Cultural, Character. What are these Podling creatures? What was their relationship with the Gelflings? What is the language that they're speaking? What is their culture like? (**ANSWER: TDC.059:** *who are these creatures that raised Kira?)*

TDC.067 The fate of the Podlings

00:47:30. Character, Chronological. What will happen to the Podlings captured by the Garthim?

TDC.068 The Chamberlain's motivations II

00:48:44. Character. Why did the Chamberlain save the Gelflings from the Garthim?

TDC.069 The Houses of the Old Ones

00:51:22. Chronological, Cultural, Character. Who were the Old Ones – Jen and Kira's ancestors? What was the old Gelfling Empire like?   What was their culture like?

TDC.070 "Bad things happened in here once…"

00:51:58. Chronological, Cultural. What was the fall of the Gelfling city like? Who once sat on the Gelfling throne?

TDC.071 The prophetic mural

00:52:59. Cultural, Chronological. Who carved the mural? Who first told the prophecy?

TDC.072 The Chamberlain's motivations III

00:53:52. Character. Is the Chamberlain's offer of friendship and peace to be trusted? **(POSSIBLE ANSWER: TDC.049, TDC.068: *what are the Chamberlain's motivations?*)**

TDC.073 Landstriders

00:55:25. Environmental. What are these 'landstriders' things?

TDC.074 "…The Podlings taught me."

00:55:42. Character. Can Kira speak to any animal? Can the Podlings? **(ANSWER: TDC.058: *how can Kira speak with animals?*)**

TDC.075 Draining the Podlings

00:57:30. Character. Is the draining process reversible? **(ANSWER: TDC.032: *what are these poor, miserable creatures that serve the Skeksis?* and TDC.067: *what will happen to the Podlings captured by the Garthim?*)**

TDC.076 Aughra in the Dungeon

01:00:27. Character. What's going to happen to Aughra? **(ANSWER: TDC.061: *what are Aughra's allegiances?*)**

TDC.077 "Wings! I don't have wings!"

01:02:15. Character. How come only girl Gelflings get to have wings?

TDC.078 The rear entrance

01:02:53. Cultural. Who sculpted the face on the water tunnel into the Crystal Castle? Who built the Crystal Castle?

TDC.079 The bond

01:05:02. Character. Why is it that when the Chancellor's hand is wounded, a Mystic hand is wounded as well?

TDC.080 Jen's fate

01:05:19. Character, Chronological. Will Jen survive the cave-in?

TDC.081 The Chamberlain's motivations IV

01:05:22. Character. Was the Chamberlain's plan to capture the Gelflings all along, or did he only turn on the Gelflings after Jen stabbed him in the hand?

TDC.082 The Chamberlain's return

01:05:52. Character. What is the Chamberlain's true intention? The Chamberlain seems to protect her, but only for a few moments before he releases her to be drained. **(ANSWER: TDC.049, TDC.068, TDC.072, TDC.081: *what are the Chamberlain's motivations?*)**

TDC.083 Kira's fate

01:07:55. Chronological, Character. Will Kira be drained?

TDC.084 Jen's survival

01:08:08. Chronological, Character. Will Jen save Kira in time? **(ANSWER: TDC.080: *will Jen survive the cave-in?*)**

TDC.085 "You have the gift!"

01:09:45. Character. Is Kira's ability to speak to animals an in-born talent, or was it learned? **(ANSWER: TDC.074: *can Kira speak to any animal?*)**

TDC.086 Death of a Skeksis, death of a Mystic

01:11:29. Character. How deep is the connection between the Skeksis and the Mystics? Why are they linked?

TDC.087 Power over the Garthim?

01:15:07. Character. How does the Mystics' music have power over the Garthim? Is it magic, or something else?

TDC.088 "Now we will live forever!"

01:18:57. Character, Chronological. The new emperor claims that if the Conjunction passes with the Crystal broken, the Skeksis will live forever. Earlier, Aughra claimed that the same event would result in the Skeksis gaining power over the stars. How do they know this?

TDC.089 The death of Fizzgig?

01:20:32. Character, Chronological. Just when Fizzgig proves his usefulness, he is thrown down the Crystal shaft. Will Fizzgig survive?

TDC.090 The death of Kira?

01:21:37. Character, Chronological. Kira sacrifices herself to throw Jen the Shard, then falls to a Skeksis. Can Kira be revived?

TDC.091 The Garthim collapse

01:22:27. Environmental. Why do the Garthim collapse when the Crystal is healed? How are they empty? Were they powered by Skeksis magic the whole time?

TDC.092 Healing the Podlings, redecorating the Castle

01:22:56. Environmental. The Podlings seem to regain their senses once the Crystal is healed, and the Crystal Castle begins to shed its worn, jagged exterior.

Is everything the Skeksis had done being reversed? **(ANSWER: TDC.075:** *is the draining process reversible?***)**

TDC.093 Aughra and Fizzgig are saved

01:23:33. Character. The freed Aughra finds Fizzgig hanging from the Deflector in the Crystal shaft. **(ANSWER: TDC.076:** *what's going to happen to Aughra?* **and TDC.089:** *will Fizzgig survive?***)**

TDC.094 The return of the UrSkeks

01:25:10. Character, Chronological, Cultural. What was the UrSkek civilization like before the breaking of the Crystal? What are the UrSkeks chanting? **(ANSWER: TDC.086:** *how deep is the connection between the Skeksis and the Mystics?* **and TDC.090:** *can Kira be revived?***)**

TDC.095 The departure of the UrSkeks

01:27:36. Character, Chronological. Where do the UrSkeks go when they leave? What will happen to them?

TDC.096 The future of Jen and Kira

01:28:02. Character, Chronological. What will happen to Jen and Kira now? Will the Gelflings repopulate? Who will live in the Crystal Palace?

TDC.097 The Crystal of Truth

01:28:02. Chronological, Environmental. What powers does the restored Crystal have? What will happen if it's broken again? Who will watch over it?

2.4 *The World of the Dark Crystal*

The companion book *The World of the Dark Crystal*, released the same year as the movie, answers some of the questions raised in the film – and, in true storyteller's fashion, raises more questions through the answers. The book is less a straightforward story and more of a guidebook, written by J. J. Llewellyn and loosely framing a collection of the art that Froud created during the film's five-year gestation, showing us the art, architecture, language, flora and fauna of Thra. One part narrative and one part *Fodor's Guide,* while not a direct chronological continuation of the film it nevertheless makes a more 'distinctive and valuable' contribution to the franchise than a simple '*Art of The Dark Crystal*' book might have done, a fact that Henson and Froud both realized. Froud describes the genesis of the book in his introduction to the recently-released Twentieth Anniversary Edition of the text:

> As the filming and editing drew to a close, Jim and I had time to review the vast amount of material that had been stockpiled in the effort to create the film's world. We realized that the images themselves could stand on their own as a companion to the film – not as an example of a "making-of" book but as a volume about the world of *The Dark Crystal* itself. This text would allow the reader to enter much more deeply into the history, philosophy, and arcane aspects of the world we had created in such detail. The book would allow readers to explore, at leisure, many of the images that appear only fleetingly on the screen and to study the meanings of the symbols scattered throughout the film. It would make second, third or tenth viewings of the film a far richer experience. And so *The World of the Dark Crystal* was born. (9)

In a review of the recent collector's edition of the text, *Publisher's Weekly* turned up its nose at the book's narrative elements, but begrudgingly acknowledged the work's value to fans of Henson and the film:

> This lavish, oversized picture book revisits the collaboration between [Brian] Froud, prominent fairy artist, and Jim Henson, Muppeteer, in the creation of their cult favorite *The Dark Crystal*. Reissued after 20 years, this portfolio of sketches and backdrop paintings retains a certain mystique, crammed to the margins with moss-covered runes and medieval diagrams, and peopled by the movie's menagerie of grotesque, shambling puppets. Unfortunately, the narrative fails to support the elaborate art direction, offering a dim echo of *The Lord of the Rings* with none of the complexity or scope. The long-nosed Gelflings and vulturish Skeksis – as well as the whole hodge-podge of occult symbols and carefully antiquated tools – come across as strangely arbitrary, constantly reaching for a profundity that never appears. But for the many fans of the movie and young children interested in fantasy-adventure, the book will satisfy greatly.

'Satisfy greatly', indeed: the book received a Hugo nomination for Best Non-Fiction Book when it was originally released in 1983. Even now the contents of *The World of the Dark Crystal,* the groundwork that Henson and Froud laid over two decades ago, may wind up becoming the bedrock upon which The Jim Henson Company's future is built. In a recent statement, JHC co-head Lisa Henson is quoted as saying "*The Dark Crystal* created its own world. We are now going to fully explore this universe through the sequel film, which will be followed up with an animated series as well as interactive games and other media." While how well these upcoming extensions are executed

obviously remains to be seen, a would-be transmedia storyteller would do well to study the richness and detail of the world that Henson and Froud built, and how it continues to sustain new creative and commercial development a quarter of a century later.

Using our own proposed formula for evaluating a transmedia extension, how well does *The World of the Dark Crystal* hold up? Again, the format I'm proposing here for this evaluation consists of four key questions: *is the extension canonical* (does it 'officially' enrich the story?), *does the extension maintain the character of the world* (does the tone match, or is it jarring?), *does the extension answer questions left unanswered by the preceding text(s)* (do we add knowledge to our mental encyclopedias with this extension?), and *does the extension raise new questions* (does it open up new avenues for additional expansion?).

Is the extension canonical? Yes. In the introduction, J.J. Llewellyn writes, "It would be inappropriate at this stage to give a complete account of the circumstances that led to the recognition of the Aughrian petroglyphs and the manuscript of the Book of Aughra." The rest of the text is written in Aughra's words, with footnotes ostensibly written by Llewellyn as he explains how that culture's languages, cultures and sciences translate onto our own. By all accounts, *The World of the Dark Crystal* is considered canon.

Does the extension maintain the character of the world? Mostly. There are a few points where the text veers a little away from the tone of *The Dark Crystal,* most notably, again, in Llewellyn's footnotes and introduction. Near the end of his

introduction Llewellyn writes, "…Where we have translated 'Of the dead I will not speak; their presence may be felt anywhere, learn from them yourself' – a version that brings out all the sense of Aughra's words – a literal version giving only the simplest meaning of each word would read 'Dead. Could be anywhere, then. [Silence].'" Which, of course, is a quote from the film itself and something of a joke, which strains the suspension of disbelief somewhat. The introduction of ontological hermeneutic codes into the franchise by the book feels somewhat awkward.

There are a few other places like this, but for the most part the book truly is in keeping with the tone of the film. The text is written in a fantastic tone, at once both reverent and a little melancholy, which is fitting for a story meant to be told by Aughra as she remembers the history of Thra. The art itself is rich and thoroughly detailed, complete with translations of the symbols and textures that can be found everywhere in the film. The book even includes overlays to demonstrate the strange geometry Froud built into his designs, and the artist's visuals are often exquisitely colored using paints and pencils; there are no computer images here, and only a few photographs that feel occasionally diegetically strange.   For the most part, the text feels truly linked to the narrative world of the film.

Does the extension answer questions left unanswered by the preceding text(s)? This is where *The World of the Dark Crystal* positively shines. The text addresses literally dozens of the hermeneutic codes described in the close analysis of the film above. The majority of these are Cultural in nature, as the book spends a great amount of time on the cultural significance of the clothes, music, architecture and

artwork of the Skeksis (TDC.009, p. 29; TDC.075, pp.94-95, 102-105, 108-113), the

Mystics or urRu (TDC.010, p. 43; TDC.011, p. 25 and p. 54; TDC.013, TDC.015, pp.49-

51; TDC.015, p. 49 and pp. 84-85; TDC.027, p. 51; TDC.011; p.53), Gelflings

(TDC.069. pp.43;-44;TDC.070, p.13), and even the Podlings (TDC.065, TDC.066,

pp.46-47). We learn the names and professions of each of the urRu (TDC.013, pp.49-51)

and their Skeksis counterparts (TDC.004, pp.90-91), including descriptions of their

general philosophies and relationships. We learn about their traditions, their religions,

and even their foods (p.75). We learn about the geography of the world of Thra

(TDC.017, p. 14) and about the history of Aughra (TDC.024 and TDC.042, p.17). We

also learn about the culture and the histories of the UrSkeks (TDC.001, TDC.097, pp. 20-

30, a large amount about what happened before the Crystal cracked (TDC.001, TDC.002,

TDC.005, TDC.042 and TDC.043, pp. 19-20), *how* exactly the Crystal cracked

(TDC.001, p.30), and we are given a few hints as to what life was like after the Crystal

was healed by the Gelflings (TDC.014, TDC.095, TDC.096 and TDC.097, p. 130).

Does the extension raise new questions? The book doesn't go as deeply into the

Geographical cues, but it does include a map and, among other things, further describes

what lies beneath the castle. Of the few bits and pieces of information that the Jim

Henson Company has released so far about the upcoming sequel film, *The Power of the

Dark Crystal,* one notable bit is that the main character is a girl made of fire, which is in

keeping with the revelation in *The World of the Dark Crystal* that the shaft over which

the Crystal was suspended leads down to the Lake of Fire (TDC.002, p. 57).

The book also answers the question of how many urRu and Skeksis there were originally, when the Crystal cracked – there were eighteen – but it doesn't explain how eight of these pairs died before the beginning of the film (p. 20). Aughra defers from providing those details, thus leaving them open for future expansion. It's possible that these eight remaining characters didn't even die at all, which would provide an opening for the urRu and the Skeksis to return as individual races in an upcoming extension. The book also doesn't go into the history and the culture of the Gelflings much, which leaves another area ripe for expansion.

Most notable, however, may be the book's hints at the history and the culture of the urSkeks before they came to Thra. The book suggests that the eighteen original urSkeks are from another world, and came to Thra in order to use the planet's three suns to unlock the power of the Crystal. These eighteen had been outcasts from an idyllic society that rejected them due to some presence of darkness in their souls; they came to Thra before the last Great Conjunction to build a device that would use a beam of light from the Crystal to divide each of them into good and evil halves, thus purifying themselves and enabling them to reassimilate into urSkek culture. Unfortunately, this proved disastrous, giving birth to the urRu and the Skeksis. This is an excellent example of answers providing more questions – a good storyteller could have a field day with stories of how the eighteen originally were cast out, and how they found the planet of Thra at all, and what their journey would have been like. (pp. 22-30, 43)

The book also only provides slight hints as to what happens after the end of the film. It tells us that "the heavens were fair, the Suns glorious, the earth fruitful, the air

like a cloud of gold", but it doesn't say what happened to Jen and Kira (p. 130). These are openings that I suspect will be explored by *The Power of the Dark Crystal.*

The World of the Dark Crystal isn't a perfect transmedia extension, partly due to the very reason that I mentioned at the beginning of this section. Narratively speaking it's significantly weaker than a full-length novel might have been, and it doesn't serve as a pure prequel or sequel to the original hypotext. Still, even in its limited state it adds a remarkable amount of value to the franchise. It provides us with more information about characters we care about (although it admittedly tells a great deal more about Aughra, the Skeksis, and the urRu, and less about Jen and Kira), and it provides audiences with a massive amount of additional historical context. This, as well as the cultural and scientific explanations, gives the book a sort of 'decoder ring' sensibility. After reading *The World of the Dark Crystal,* rewatching *The Dark Crystal* is a radically altered experience. The book greatly enriches our understanding of Henson and Froud's universe, and as such I think it stands as a terrific example of early transmedia storytelling.

2.5 *Labyrinth*

Responding to numerous critics and a questionable box office draw, Henson's second fantasy film for adults, 1986's *Labyrinth,* moved away from the wholly alien nature of *The Dark Crystal* and added human actors and actresses into the mix. From a narrative standpoint, *Labyrinth* provides audiences with a much more real-world starting point. This is a narrative tactic deployed in all kinds of fantastic 'portal stories', including

Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz,* J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and, of course, the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix*. Many of these stories succeeded in creating a sense of complete reality in their additional worlds, but the tone of *Labyrinth* stands in stark contrast to *The Dark Crystal*. While Henson and Froud spent years developing a world for *The Dark Crystal* rich with negative capability and wide open for expansion, *Labyrinth* must have provided Jake T. Forbes, the author of the manga extension *Return to Labyrinth*, with a serious headache due to one simple narrative, and possibly simply aesthetic, decision with far-reaching effects: the design of Sarah's bedroom.

We first meet our heroine when she's wandering in a park, dressed in a long dress and spouting poetic lines that would be perfectly at home in a swords-and-dragons tale. There is some brief confusion as to whether the girl truly is on a fantastic quest or not, but it is quickly revealed that she is simply attempting to memorize lines from a book (which we later learn is titled, naturally, *The Labyrinth*). A few short scenes later we see the bookshelf in her room where she got it. A long, slow pan across Sarah's room serves as an overture of sorts for the rest of the story – just as an overture integrates little snippets of the music yet to come in the show, Sarah's bedroom is full of toy versions of characters from the rest of the film. There's a bronze Hoggle, a stuffed Sir Didymus, and even a toy version of one of Fierys, the strange red things that like to detach and play sports with various body parts. There's a doll on her desk that looks strikingly like David Bowie's Jareth, the Goblin King, and hanging on her wall near her bed is a print of M.C. Escher's paradoxical stairwells, which, of course, is echoed in one of the final scenes of the film.

Aesthetically, this is both interesting and kind of nice – it's even something of a hidden 'Easter egg' if viewers don't notice it until later viewings. But once this is noticed, it begins to lend a sense of dramatically lessened negative capability to the rest of the film. *Labyrinth* intentionally uses a form of dream logic in much of its structure, and offers no clear distinction as to where the real world stops and the fantasy world begins. The goblins simply appear in cut scenes while Sarah is talking to the crying Toby. They can hear her, but it's not obvious where exactly they are – they're not clearly in a dark closet, or under the bed, or anyplace in particular; they're just in a dark area, sleeping. When she begins to talk about the Goblin King, one of them wakes up and rouses the others. Further, they can hear her, but she can't hear them until it's too late.

Sarah's first tip that something is wrong comes when she lays the wailing baby down in his crib to go to sleep and walks out the door – only to have the crying child fall abruptly silent as soon as she steps out of the door. The transition is too fast to be natural, like someone clicking off a radio. When she re-enters the room, she finds that the weather has changed, the baby has disappeared, and there are things skittering about in the shadows. A heartbeat later a white owl beats its wings against the nursery window, then proceeds to blow open the door and transform itself into its human form of David Bowie. (Well, mostly human.) The Goblin King attempts to convince Sarah to forget the child, but she refuses until the Goblin King finally relents and offers her a deal: if she can make her way through the *Labyrinth* to his castle in only thirteen hours, she can have the kid back.

Up to this point there has been an increasingly strange vibe going on. Everything is pretty solidly real until the first cut scene where the goblins wake up, in whatever

between-the-worlds-limbo they exist. Then they observe, until the wish is made and Sarah leaves the room, which is when they act – but at this point it's still off-camera, so their agency is still, from an audience's standpoint, fairly indirect. Then, when Sarah re-enters the nursery, we see the goblins and Sarah share the same space, but they are continually darting across the shots, just out of sight, and both Sarah and the audience struggle to get a good look at them. It isn't until the Goblin King himself shows up that these fantastical creatures display any physical interactivity on-screen with Sarah. Jareth has no qualms interacting with Sarah, though – he offers her trinkets, threatens her with snakes, and eventually brings her through the looking glass completely in one extremely disorienting shot. When Jareth proposes the deal, the scene abruptly changes from the nursery to a hill overlooking the labyrinth. Even more remarkable is how Sarah takes all of this in stride. Not only doesn't she scream and panic that she's suddenly, impossibly, someplace completely different – she even knows where she is, as evidenced by her asking, "Is that the castle beyond the Goblin City?" This world is strange, yes, but it is also intimately familiar to her.

From an aesthetic standpoint, this is all quite cool. However, it is also extremely limiting. Instead of negative capability, Henson and company are doing an excellent job of suggesting this fantasy world is restricted to Sarah's own mind. This is worsened by the distinctly dreamlike transition into the alternate world, which is bookended near the end of the movie by Sarah's return to the real world performed by her waking up. True, the final scenes of the movie show her friends from the fantasy world offering to return to her "should you need us" (which they then do for a fairly ridiculous party scene featuring the heroes and monsters of the story laughing together and wearing silly hats) but this

only further confuses the distinction between the worlds. If anything, *Labyrinth* is a tale about a girl who slips into a strange world of her own dreams. This isn't to say that such a story couldn't be extended, but it does start to place limitations on the extent to which such a franchise could grow.

Like *The Dark Crystal*, *Labyrinth* appears to provide audience members with its fair share of negative capability opportunities. Not long after Sarah enters the labyrinth, she meets the gruff, melancholy Hoggle, a rumpled, not-quite-human creature using a spray can full of poison to kill fairies. We find out soon enough that this isn't as barbaric as it sounds (the fairies turn out to bite) but we don't know where Hoggle came from. Is he another of the Goblin King's stolen children? If not, what exactly is he? Is he a Goblin, or something else? Did he have anything to do with building the labyrinth, or is he just a gardener? David Bowie's Jareth, the Goblin King, presents a similar set of questions. Where did Jareth come from? Who was the Goblin King before him, and why isn't Jareth a Goblin himself? The labyrinth itself also offers a number of opportunities for additional storytelling: where is the labyrinth physically located? What's outside the labyrinth? Who built it?

The bizarre way that *Labyrinth* both leaves audience members dangling (is it a dream or isn't it?) and simultaneously weakens its own possibilities for extension (if it is a dream, then Hoggle, Jareth and the labyrinth simply didn't exist before Sarah fell asleep, so they don't *have* stories before the film begins) seems to offer a prime opportunity for some sort of transmedia extension to step in and clear things up. And, in fact, hope for just such an event is offered in the form of another companion volume that, much as *The World of the Dark Crystal* did with *The Dark Crystal*, saw release near the

same time as the film. However, as will be demonstrated in 2.7, this state of affairs is actually worsened by the distinctly odd *Goblins of Labyrinth*. First, though, let's use our classification system of hermeneutic codes to examine how the hypotext is constructed.

2.6 Ninety-Four Hermeneutic Codes in *Labyrinth*

As we move through *Labyrinth*, several patterns become readily apparent: first, that Henson and Froud have moved away from the extensive world-building they used to develop *The Dark Crystal*, and second, that *Labyrinth* focuses much more on individual characters. There are more individuated heroes, and most of the heroes – particularly Sarah, Hoggle, and Sir Didymus – experience some degree of character growth. Still, the questionable ontological status of the narrative and the aggregation of the goblins make further transmediation complicated.

L.001 The Girl in the Glen
00:03:00. Geographical, Character. Where are we? Who is this girl? Why is there an owl flying around in broad daylight?

L.002 "Give me the child…"
00:02:58. Character. What is this child?

L.003 "Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered…"
00:03:01. Chronological. What dangers? What hardships? What has taken place before this?

L.004 "I have fought my way here to the Castle beyond the Goblin City…"

00:03:06. Chronological, Geographical. What was the journey like? What
battles? Where is here? What is the Castle? Where is the Goblin City? What is
the Goblin City?

L.005 "…To take back the child that you have stolen…"

00:03:11. Chronological, Character. Who is the 'you' the girl is addressing?
How did they steal the child? When did they steal the child?

L.006 "…For my will is as strong as yours, and my kingdom is as great…"

00:03:17. Character, Geographical. What does she mean by will? What is this
kingdom she refers to? Is the kingdom 'hers' as a citizen or as a ruler?

L.007 Thunder

00:03:24. Character. Is the thunder caused by the child-stealer?

L.008 The Book

00:03:35. Character, Ontological. What is this book the girl is carrying with
her? Is that a *script?* Who wrote it? Is this some diegetic, extra-worldly artifact?
Is this a fantasy being played out in the real world?

L.009 Walking the dog

00:03:48. Character, Ontological. As the girl is revealed to be a girl taking her
dog, Merlin, for a walk through the park as she practices her lines for a play,
many of the potential migratory cues listed so far appear to slam shut – the girl is
just a girl, there have been no dangers nor hardships, no battles, no journeys, no
Castle, no Goblin City, no stolen child, no kingdom, no child-stealer. What is
going on here? (**ANSWER: L.001:** *where are we, who is this girl?*, **L.002:** *what
is this child?*, **L.003:** *what dangers, what hardships, what has taken place
before this?*, **L.004:** *what was the journey like, what battles, where is here, what
is the Castle, where is the Goblin City, what is the Goblin City?*, **L.005:** *who is*

the 'you' the girl is addressing, how did they steal the child, when did they steal the child?, L.006: what does she mean by will, what is this kingdom she refers to, is the kingdom 'hers' as a citizen or a ruler?, L.007: is the thunder caused by the child-stealer?, L.008: what is this book, is that a script, is this a fantasy being played out in the real world?)

L.010 Running late

00:03:54. Character, Chronological. Why is it being 7 o'clock bad?

L.011 Running through the rain

00:04:10. Geographical. Where are we, exactly? It resembles a small town, perhaps in New England; the USPS mailbox tells us we're probably in America, but where?

L.012 House and Home

00:04:51. Character, Geographical. The girl appears to live in a quite nice house, but the woman on the porch is less so. Who is the woman on the porch? What is her relationship to the girl?

L.013 "Sarah, you're an hour late…"

00:05:11. Character, Chronological. We find out the girl's name is Sarah. What is she late for? **(ANSWER: L.001:** *who is this girl?,* **L.010:** *why is it being 7 o'clock bad?)*

L.014 "Your father and I go out very rarely…"

00:05:16. Character. The woman is either Sarah's mother or stepmother (or a live-in lover, although given the context in which this film was made [1980s family-friendly fare] that seems doubtful). **(ANSWER: L.012:** *who is the woman on the porch, what is her relationship to the girl?)*

L.015 "…And I ask you to baby-sit…"

00:05:19. Character. Baby-sit for whom? **(ANSWER: L.013:** *what is she late for?)*

L.016 "You should have dates at your age!"

00:05:31. Character. How old is the girl?[24]

L.017 "She treats me like a wicked stepmother in a fairy story…"

00:05:37. Character. Is the woman Sarah's mother or her stepmother?[25]

L.018 Sarah's Bedroom

00:05:52. Character, Ontological. **Important.** We see all these toys at this stage of the film, the books, the dolls, the labyrinth, the art, the music box, and we hear the music, but at this stage it's interesting because of the questions they *don't* raise: we only see them as the toys and trinkets of a young girl. Where did Sarah get these toys? Who made the toys?

L.019 The Notebook

00:06:16. Character, Chronological. **Important.** The notebook, coupled with the clippings on Sarah's mirror (see L.20), is one of the biggest elements of negative capability in the entire film. The actress in the notebook is clearly not the woman that greeted Sarah at the door, and Sarah has drawn hearts and notes saying "MOM" all over the pages. This suggests that either the woman downstairs is Sarah's (wicked) stepmother or that Sarah is simply wishing that this 'Linda Williams' actress *were* her mother. The presence of a photograph on the left page with the woman and what appears to be a younger version of Sarah

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[24] And are the boys at her school *blind?* This is *Jennifer freaking Connelly* we're talking about here! (Sorry, child of the '80s, you know. Back to the academic professionalism now.)

[25] Note the structure being worn on the sleeve here – Henson seems to be attempting to influence a new generation of Propps and Warners at a young age.

suggests that Linda Williams *is* her mother. More disturbing are the repeated images of David Bowie in some of the other clippings; the man in the clipping at the upper right of the two-page spread is clearly the father figure from downstairs, but that's the only appearance he makes on these pages. The man in the other photos is David Bowie in an unnamed role with her mother – with titillating headlines like "ONSTAGE KISS" and "LINDA WILLIAMS: 'ON-OFF' ROMANCE! BACK TOGETHER?"   Coupled with another headline, "WILLIAMS LOVE, IT'S ALL OVER", this suggests awfully disturbingly that Bowie is either her real mother's new love interest or was her love interest *before* she hooked up with the man downstairs – which would make Bowie her real father. In either case, this sets up the rest of the film as ripe for a cross-gendered Oedipal reading. **(TENTATIVE ANSWER: L.017:** *is the woman Sarah's mother or her stepmother?*)

L.020 The Mirror

00:06:21. Character, Chronological. **Important.** The same collection of clippings reappears on Sarah's mirror, including a headshot of her mother, a photo with the two women and Merlin, and a shot of Sarah and the man downstairs with her mother notably absent – in fact, the photo is cropped so to make the absence even more pronounced. Also on the mirror is the photo of Sarah's mother with the man downstairs and the 'ONSTAGE KISS" photo of her mother with David Bowie. What happened between her mother and David Bowie? What happened between her mother and the man downstairs? Who is Sarah's real father?

L.021 "…We fed Toby and put him to bed…"

00:06:32. Character. The baby the man downstairs was holding is apparently named Toby. Is Toby Sarah's brother or stepbrother? **(ANSWER: L.015:** *baby-sit for whom?*)

L.022 "We'll be back around midnight."

00:06:41. Chronological. What happens at midnight?

L.023 "Lancelot! Someone's been in my room again!   I hate that!"

00:06:50. Chronological, Character. Who, or what, is Lancelot? Who stole Lancelot?[26]

L.024 Lancelot on the floor

00:06:54. Character. Although Sarah doesn't call the bear by name, it would appear that the bear on the floor by Toby's crib is Lancelot. Who stole Lancelot – Toby or Sarah's parents? **(ANSWER: L.023: *who, or what, is Lancelot?*)**

L.025 "…Whose stepmother always made her stay home with the baby…"

00:07:20. Character. **(DEFINITIVE ANSWER: L.017: *is the woman Sarah's mother or her stepmother?*)**

L.026 Waking the Goblins

00:07:47. Character, Ontological. We see the Goblins for the first time here, but their state of existence is deliberately vague. Where are the Goblins? Do they actually exist? Are they in the room with Sarah? Are they on some neighboring plane of existence? How can they hear her? Why are they all sleeping? What's happening here? Who are these goblins?

L.027 "…The King of the Goblins would keep the baby forever and ever and ever and turn it into a Goblin…"

00:08:10. Character, Ontological. This is the first time the King of the Goblins is mentioned, but we begin to seek links between the story Sarah is currently telling Toby and the one that she was reciting at the beginning of the film. This suggests that this is the person being addressed by the character Sarah was play-acting in the park. **(IN-STORY ANSWER: L.005: *who is the 'you' the girl is addressing?*)**

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[26] And why did the scriptwriters feel "I hate that!" was a necessary line of dialogue?

L.028 "I'll say the words!"

00:08:40. Character, Ontological. What words? What would the words do? Is this story Sarah is telling now the same as in the book? Is she making it up? Would the words do anything?

L.029 "Is she going to say it?"

00:08:49. Chronological, Ontological. The Goblins, at least, seem to think that the words will do something, but it's unclear as to where these guys *are,* or if they're even *real.*

L.030 "Goblin King, Goblin King…"

00:09:00. Chronological, Character. What's going to happen? **(ANSWER: L.028: *what words?)***

L.031 "Where'd she learn that rubbish?"

00:09:16. Ontological. Was the writing in the book wrong? Is Sarah making it up? Is she misremembering what it says in the book? What are the right words? **(ANSWER: L.030: *what's going to happen?)***

L.032 "I wish the goblins would come and take you away right now."

00:09:55. Chronological, Character. What are the right words going to do? **(ANSWER: L.032: *what are the right words?)***

L.033 Ceasing the crying

00:10:04. Chronological, Character, Ontological. Why did Toby stop crying? **(ANSWER: L.032: *what are the right words going to do?)***

L.034 Powerless

00:10:35. Chronological. Who cut the power?

L.035 A strange cry

00:10:57. Character, Ontological. Whatever's in Toby's crib just made a sound that doesn't sound like Toby. Did Sarah turn Toby into a goblin? What's in Toby's crib?

L.036 The vanishing child

00:11:24. Character. How did the crib come to be empty? Where did Toby go? **(ANSWER: L.035: *what's in Toby's crib?*)**

L.037 Goblins in the bedroom

00:11:26. Ontological. This is a turning point in the narrative on a metaphysical level – the first time Sarah and the Goblins appear in the same frame, proving them to be on a shared level of existence. Did Sarah go to the Goblins' world? Did the Goblins come to Sarah's world? Have the Goblins and Sarah always lived in the same world?

L.038 From an owl to a man

00:11:58. Character, Cultural, Ontological. Is the owl that flies through the door the same owl as the one in the park? How does the owl turn into a man? Who, or what, is the owl-man? What do his clothes represent? His makeup?

L.039 "You're him, aren't you? You're the Goblin King!"

00:12:10. Character. The owl-man doesn't reply verbally, but his smirk suggests Sarah is correct. How does Sarah know him? How does he know her? Why isn't the Goblin King a goblin himself? **(ANSWER: L.038: *who, or what, is the owl-man?*)**

L.040 "I've brought you a gift."

00:12:41. Character. Why is the Goblin King giving Sarah a magic crystal? Is Sarah special?

L.041 The mercurial Goblin King

00:13:20. Character. The crystal's transformation into a snake is symbolic of the Goblin King's transformation from ambiguously benevolent into vaguely malicious. Is the Goblin King good, evil, or a trickster?

L.042 "He's there, in my Castle."

00:13:50. Geographical, Ontological. We see the Labyrinth and the castle of the Goblin King for the first time. Where is the Labyrinth in relation to Sarah's house? Did Sarah travel to some other dimension? Is Sarah dreaming? What's beyond the Labyrinth? Where exactly is the Labyrinth?

L.043 The mysterious vanishing house

00:14:00. Geographical, Ontological. Where did the house go? Where did Sarah and the Goblin King go? How did Sarah and the Goblin King get there? How will Sarah get home?

L.044 "You have 13 hours in which to solve the Labyrinth before your baby brother becomes one of us forever…"

00:14:24. Chronological. Who made this rule? Is it a 13-hour process? Is the process reversible? Why isn't Sarah panicking?

L.045 The peeing gnome

00:15:08. Character. Who is this odd gnome-like creature?

L.046 "Oh. It's you."

00:15:15. Character. How does the gnome know Sarah?

L.047 The true nature of fairies

00:15:24. Character. Why is the gnome killing fairies?

L.048 "Shows what you know, don't it?"

00:15:50. Character, Environmental. If fairies bite in the Labyrinth, what else is unexpected about this place? **(ANSWER: L.047: *why is the gnome killing fairies?*)**

L.049 Introducing Hoggle

00:15:55. Character, Cultural. What's Hoggle's story? Did he help build the Labyrinth? Is he a Goblin? Where are his allegiances? What is Hoggle? What does his outfit signify? **(ANSWER: L.045: *who is this odd gnome-like creature?*)**

L.050 The metaphysics of the Labyrinth

00:16:57. Environmental, Ontological. Wasn't that a plain wall a moment ago? How can the Labyrinth not obey physical laws? Is this just a dream?

L.051 The creatures of the Labyrinth

00:18:26. Environmental. What are the strange eye-creatures on the wall?

L.052 The worm turns

00:20:21. Character. What's the worm's story? Are there more like him? Do the worms have a culture? Why is the worm British?

L.053 Goblin dance, magic dance

00:22:40. Character. Who are these goblins? Were they once human? What are their stories? They're visually interesting, but few of them have any truly differentiating characteristics. We're curious about who these creatures are, but none of them are fleshed out into individual characters – they are almost exclusively presented in the aggregate.

L.054 Floor monsters

00:24:28. Environmental. Who are these tiny men under the floor tiles?

L.055 The Door Guardians

00:26:38. Character. Who are these twin two-headed jokesters? What are they? What's their story? Who wrote the rules that they mention? What is their relationship with each other? Where did they come from?

L.056 The Helping Hands and the Oubliette

00:29:00. Character, Environmental. What are the helping hands? Who was the Oubliette built to hold?

L.057 Hoggle's motivations

00:30:33. Character. Whose side is Hoggle on? Is he here to help or hinder? Is he only helping out of greed?

L.058 The False Alarms

00:33:16. Environmental. What are the false alarms? Where did they come from? Were they always these stone creatures?

L.059 Hoggle's motivations II

00:34:18. Character. Who is Hoggle really working for?

L.060 The Bog of Eternal Stench

00:35:12. Geographic. **Important.** This is the first time we hear of the Bog of Eternal Stench, and is a key use of negative capability in the film. Where is it? What is it?

L.061 The Cleaners

00:35:55. Environmental. What are the cleaners? What's their story?

L.062 Hoggle's motivations III

00:36:57. Character. Whose side is Hoggle on? Whom is he lying to?

L.063 Naming the Goblin King

00:37:28. Character. Hoggle is the first one to let slip the 'real name' of the Goblin King: Jareth. Is that a human name? A Goblin name?

L.064 Details on the Bog of Eternal Stench

00:37:36. Geographic. **Important.** Henson revisits the Bog of Eternal Stench in this exchange between Hoggle and Sarah, fleshing out some of the details but raising more questions. How can it make you stink forever if you only touch it once?

L.065 A Wise Man and his Hat

00:38:53. Character, Cultural. What is the old man's story? Where is he from? What are his allegiances? What's the story of his hat? Are they the same creature? What is their relationship? Do all members of his people, or species, have talking hats? What purposes do his clothes serve? How do they know Spanish?

L.066 Goblin Knights

00:41:10. Character, Environmental. What are these strange mounted riders with the critters at the end of their sticks?

L.067 The Suspended Beast

00:41:25. Character. What is this roaring beast? Why is he being tormented by the Goblin Knights? How does the beast control the rocks? Is he friend or foe?

L.068 Hoggle's motivations IV

00:41:42. Character. Is Hoggle a friend or just a cowardly mercenary?

L.069 Ludo

00:43:22. Character. What is Ludo? **(ANSWER: L.067:** *what is this roaring beast?)*

L.070 The Doorknockers

00:45:08. Character, Environmental. As Sarah says, where did they come from? Have they always been doorknockers?

L.071 More Goblins

00:47:23. Character, Environmental. Again, we're presented with more Goblins, but none of them are named, nor really differentiate themselves as characters outside of the aggregate.

L.072 Losing Ludo

00:48:11. Geographical, Environmental. Where does Ludo go when he disappears? Another Oubliette? How does he get out? Where did the hole go?

L.073 Hoggle's motivations V

00:48:32. Character. Hoggle turns to run to Sarah's aid when she calls, but stops short when he's confronted by Jareth. Jareth gives Hoggle a peach to give Sarah. Will Hoggle give Jareth's peach to Sarah? Jareth threatens to turn Hoggle into the Prince of the Land of Stench. Will he?

L.074 The Fierys

00:50:57. Environmental, Character. What are these bizarre dancing creatures that can detach their heads and pop out their eyes? Are they malevolent? What are their stories? Who wrote their rules? What's this game of theirs?

L.075 Arriving at the Bog of Eternal Stench

00:54:57. Environmental, Geographical. We finally see the Bog of Eternal Stench, but, of course, we can't smell it. What does it smell like? Is it inside or outside the Labyrinth? Why does it smell so bad?

L.076 Reunited with Ludo

00:56:28. Character, Chronological. Where was he? How did he get to the Bog of Eternal Stench?

L.077 Sir Didymus

00:57:22. Character, Cultural. Who is this odd, fox-like creature? Are there more of him? Who stationed him at the bridge? Whose side is he on? Why can't he smell the Bog? How did he lose his eye? What does his uniform signify?

L.078 "Rocks friends!"

01:01:39. Character. How did Ludo befriend the rocks? **(ANSWER: L.067: *how does the beast control the rocks?*)**

L.079 Ambrosius

01:02:06. Character, Environmental, Ontological. Isn't Sir Didymus' canine steed actually Merlin, from the beginning of the film? Why doesn't Sarah recognize him?

L.080 The Poisoned Peach

01:04:00. Environmental, Character. What effect will the peach have on Sarah?

L.081 Dancing in the Ballroom of the Goblin King

01:05:30. Environmental, Geographic, Character, Ontological. Sarah seems to fall asleep after taking a bite of Jareth's poisoned peach, but the transition into the dream sequence is very odd. One of the bubbles that Jareth sends to Sarah shows the ballerina from the music box that we saw way back in Sarah's bedroom (L.018). Is this a dream in a dream? What happens to Ludo and Didymus while Sarah's dreaming? Is the dance between Sarah and Jareth meant to suggest some form of romantic involvement between them, or is the look in Jareth's mismatched eyes more parental, as suggested back in L.019 and L.020? Is it possible that Jareth is also Toby's father? Is Jareth's ambiguous motivation really

the result of a paternal desire to gain custody of his children? **(ANSWER: L.080:** *what effect will the peach have on Sarah?)*

L.082 In the Junkyard

01:09:42. Geographical, Ontological. How does Sarah get from the Bog to the Junkyard? Does the dream sequence truly capture her in a magic bubble and transport her there? If so, did Hoggle and the others simply follow the bubble, or…?

L.083 Hoggle's motivations VI

01:09:44. Character. Hoggle's remorse shows a change in motivations from a combination of greed and fear to the purer motivation of friendship.

L.084 The Junkyard Lady and Sarah's Bedroom

01:10:30. Character, Ontological. What is this strange creature? What are her motivations? What are her alliances? Why doesn't Sarah remember what she was doing? How did the Junkyard Lady open a door to Sarah's bedroom? We are once again presented with the issue of whether or not any of this is a dream; she thinks it is (and the visual cues in the room are once again hinting that it all might be, including a "Slashing Machine" record cover that recalls the Cleaners in L.061) but when she opens the door again the Junkyard Lady crosses over – or shows that she's never left.

L.085 The Goblin City

01:15:30. Geographical. We don't see much of the Goblin City. What's it like? Who built it?

L.086 The Giant Guard

01:15:50. Environmental, Character. What is the giant guard creature? Is the giant guard a robot or a Goblin? Who built it?

L.087 Hoggle to the Rescue

01:16:55. Environmental, Character. **(ANSWER: L.086: *is the giant guard a robot or a goblin?*)**

L.088 Hoggle's motivations VII

01:18:50. Character. Hoggle's shift over to purer motivations is better, but will they stay that way?

L.089 The Battle at the Gates

01:20:01. Environmental, Character. Who are all these goblins? Again, they're presented in the aggregate and not as individual characters.   Will our heroes survive?

L.090 "Hi-ho, Silver!"

01:26:27. Character, Ontological. How does Didymus know a *Lone Ranger* reference? Can citizens of the Labyrinth receive American TV signals?

L.091 Jareth's magic

01:28:10. Character. Jareth's magic is as dreamlike as the rest of the film; the M.C. Escher-inspired room of the castle features Jareth and the others walking up walls, defying gravity and, at one point, walking through Sarah. Is this something he learned, or is it a power inherent to the Goblin King?

L.092 The final confrontation

01:30:45. Ontological. The final confrontation between Jareth and Sarah is deeply strange; the castle dissolves and the two are left on a fragment of stone that seems to hang in the void. The dialogue here is pulled straight from the beginning of the film, which seems to be the real magic words. What is happening here? Where are they? "Fear me, love me, do as I say and I will be your slave" is a very parent-to-child relationship – is that a clue?

L.093 Back to the Real World

01:33:10. Ontological, Character. As the clock strikes 13 in the Labyrinth and Sarah defies Jareth's power over her, she is returned to her house as the world dissolves. She finds Toby safe and sound in his crib, where she gifts Lancelot to her baby brother. Is she really back in the real world? Was it all just a dream? **(ANSWER: L.043: *how will Sarah get home?)***

L.094 Reconciliation of the worlds

01: 34:10. Ontological, Chronological, Character. In one last flash of dream logic, we see Sarah disassembling the links between the 'real' world and the world of the Labyrinth – she's removing the clippings from her mirror and putting away the toys. But then Ludo, Hoggle, and Didymus appear in her mirror to say goodbye – but she declares that she needs them and the walls collapse again. Not just the wall between the two worlds this time, but the wall between the two opposing factions from the rest of the film; her bedroom is filled with both her friends and some of her foes, including a random collection of Goblins, the Fierys, and other creatures. So which is it? Was all of this a dream? Is this *still* a dream? What happens to Sarah now? Can her parents hear the Goblins at play in her room?

I'll return to these codes shortly to compare the structure of *Labyrinth* to that of *The Dark Crystal,* but first let's examine how these codes build the structural connections between the film and its two textual extensions.

2.7 *The Goblins of Labyrinth*

Like *The World of the Dark Crystal*, *The Goblins of Labyrinth* is a somewhat thin narrative laid over a coffee table book of Brian Froud's artwork, but much like the film, the book suffers from some odd creative choices. True, Froud does critters better than

humans, but *The Goblins of Labyrinth* all but completely ignores the humans from the film. Instead, the book is a menagerie of the bizarre goblin characters that are scurrying about in the background.

While *Labyrinth* was more of a farce than *The Dark Crystal*, with more attention being paid to the songs (and David Bowie's codpiece) than the construction of the world, *The Goblins of Labyrinth* is even more farcical due to its textual bits being authored by ex-Monty Python member Terry Jones. Still, even when that degree of intentional craziness is taken into consideration, the book falters as a transmedia extension because of its weak capitalization on unresolved hermeneutic codes from the film (of which there are many). Some of the film's main characters appear in a few of the featured paintings (the infant Toby graces the cover of the original edition) but the text of the book ignores them completely. Fans looking to find out more about Ludo or Sir Didymus, Hoggle or Jareth will be sorely disappointed.

This is not to say the book is wholly without merit. Brian Froud's Afterword to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition does include this bit of insight:

> As we moved deeper into the concept of the film, Jim felt strongly that he wanted a charismatic figure to play the goblin king. We all agreed that David Bowie, with his protean persona, was perfect for the part. We needed an actor who not only could be fully immersed into the dream world of the labyrinth, but also could, as a famous personality, bring to the part deep resonances of our real world. This is the key to Jareth the goblin king's character. He is Sarah's inner fantasy, a figure made up of her daydreams and nightmares...

When I first met David Bowie, it was in his dressing room. The workshop
had made him a little flute out of bone. His immediate response was
delight, and he leaped up onto the dressing table, crouched down, and
played some notes. It was an astonishing transformation. Before me
hunkered an evocation of Pan. My instinct was to step back as my heart
leaped. David laughed his "Bowie" laugh and stepped back down. The
spell was broken and he was just David again; but I had momentarily been
transported to an ancient mythological space, where fauns and satyrs were
tangible. Our goblin king was no longer a figment of our creative
imaginings but now manifest in the form of Mr. David Bowie. (140-149)

While the mental image of David Bowie scaring the trousers off poor Brian Froud
is entertaining, this is pretty much the only place where Jareth is mentioned in the text,
and a guide to the labyrinth's goblins that fails to mention their king seems to be a quite
flawed guide indeed.

What the book *does* do is create its own mini-mythology with its own warped
sensibility. Through interrelated entries in a sort of goblin encyclopedia, we are granted a
sense of Goblin history, geography, and the arts – even if said arts appear in the form of
'tripe bugling':

In the grand tradition of goblin tragedians and tripe-buglers, Gibbergeist
has performed in every goblin theatre this side of the Terrible Howling
Gulf. His interpretations of such classic goblin tragic heroes as King Fear
and that bleakest of all tragic figures – the Wobbling Window Cleaner –
are legendary... (32)

This presents a curious challenge to our evaluation method. Does *The Goblins of Labyrinth* make a "distinct, valuable" contribution to the whole? Let's apply our four questions.

Is the extension canonical? It would appear to be so.

Does the extension maintain the character of the world? No. This is the first area where *The Goblins of Labyrinth* falters. While it obviously maintains the art style of the film, the book is much, *much* sillier than the film. *Labyrinth* is a more comical film than *The Dark Crystal*, but it still had a dark undercurrent running through it that kept audiences concerned for Sarah's well-being. That sense is largely gone here.

Does the extension answer questions left unanswered by the preceding text(s)? This is the second area where *The Goblins of Labyrinth* fails. Where *The World of the Dark Crystal* had a narrative thread running through it that served to further explore the mythology of the world, including events prior to the film and hints as to what came afterward, *The Goblins of Labyrinth* is almost exclusively a collection of short biographical sketches of the Goblins in the film. This is problematic for the text as an extension because it focuses all of its attention on background characters from the film with whom audiences have made very little emotional connection. If any of the hermeneutic codes from the film are addressed, they're L.026: *who are these goblins?*, and L.053: *what are their stories?* The trouble is, as I noted in L.053, none of the goblins in the film differentiated themselves as individual characters, or even had names.

Reading this book doesn't provide audiences with any greater understanding about any of the characters that we have come to know, and it doesn't provide any additional information about the history of the Labyrinth. While it's interesting to find out more about a few of the characters that had vaguely interesting-looking designs, for the most part no one other than the most hardcore Henson or *Labyrinth* fan will derive any great amount of encyclopedic growth from this text.

      Does the extension raise new questions? This is the final area where the text falters. Not only does the text not answer any great questions from the film, but it also fails to break any major new ground for future storytellers to expand upon. While most of the goblins described in the text are faintly amusing, they suffer from the same problem as the goblins in the film – they all simply blend together too easily into an aggregate of quirky little puppets, instead of emerging as individual, well-rounded and engaging characters.

      In short, while it is certainly distinct, the narrative value of *The Goblins of Labyrinth* is called directly into question. The text is entertaining, but its wanton disregard for the hermeneutic codes offered by the film results not in a greater sense of understanding, but with a growing sense of disarray. *The Goblins of Labyrinth* falls victim to the worst thing that could happen to a transmedia extension – an acute feeling of apathy from its readers. Not only does the text feel optional, but by not once mentioning Jareth or any of the other characters (or places) we know from the film it

weakens the bond between the components in the franchise and results in a feeling of fracture between the two, instead of suture (as Roberta Pearson prescribes)[27].

It's worth noting that the damage from such a flawed extension can often prove to be compounding, as demonstrated by the 2006 manga extension, *Return To Labyrinth*.

2.8 *Return to Labyrinth*

In this new chapter in the *Labyrinth* mythos, years have passed and now Sara's brother Toby takes center stage. We rejoin the family to find Toby a sullen teenager, struggling through everyday misadventures like a school play and a math test, but with one crucial difference: every time Toby wishes for something, it comes to pass, albeit not the way that Toby might have hoped for. It is soon revealed that despite Sarah's rescuing Toby from the Labyrinth as an infant, Jareth has never lost interest in the child, and has instead been serving as a sort of invisible 'Goblin Godfather' as the boy grew up. Now Jareth has come to claim the boy, but Toby renounces him – so, much as in the film, Jareth lures the boy into the labyrinth in pursuit of something lost. This time around it's a paper instead of a child that serves as Hitchcock's MacGuffin, but the effect is the same.

Once inside the labyrinth, Toby meets a different batch of bizarre characters, including the fairy Hana, the goblin Skub, and Stank, a pup of whatever-Ludo-was. . We're also introduced to a number of other mysterious characters, including an apparent royal rival to Jareth, Mizumi, the Queen of Cups, and her two daughters, Moulin and Drumlin; Esker, Mizumi's zombie-esque servant; and Spittledrum, the major of the Goblin City. We also meet the enigmatic masked girl, Moppet, who might or might not

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[27] Pearson, Roberta. *Nestor's Cup: Expanded Storytelling*.

be human, and find out what has happened to Sarah, Hoggle, Sir Didymus, Ludo, and a number of other characters from the film since we last saw them. All of these things make the book a fun blend of nostalgia and new creativity that serves as a vastly superior transmedia extension than *The Goblins of Labyrinth*, but it does suffer from some odd structural decisions by its author, Jake T. Forbes.[28]

Return to Labyrinth's first structural quirk is how it completely ignores the existence of *The Goblins of Labyrinth*. While Forbes does an excellent job adding new settings, characters, and scenarios to Henson and Froud's universe, his snub of Jones' additions to the world deepens the fractured sense of continuity begun by *The Goblins of Labyrinth*. Instead of each text building on the other to construct a coherent imaginary universe – what Roberta Pearson might call a Platonic narrative world – the discrepancies between them weaken an audience's suspension of disbelief. Transmedia extensions that aren't carefully co-ordinated risk seriously damaging the franchise as a whole.

The second questionable bit is how literally Forbes takes the name *Return to Labyrinth*, so much so that it's very nearly not just a return to Jareth's physical labyrinth, but also structurally a return to Henson's film. Forbes deliberately sets up the beginning of the book with a series of homages to the film so direct that they feel like blows to the head. In a performative echo of the beginning of the film, we first encounter Toby acting out a role, and later hiding away in his room playing with his toys (which will, of course, surely later manifest themselves as creatures in the Labyrinth). Sure, there are differences – Toby is actually on stage instead of performing a part alone in a garden, as

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[28] A quick web search shows that Forbes has extensive experience in the manga form, having edited and adapted over fifty Japanese and Korean series for publishers like VIZ Media, Go! Comi and Tokyopop, which published *Return to Labyrinth*, but *Return to Labyrinth* is also Forbes' debut piece of published fiction.

Sarah did, and Toby's favorite toy isn't a bear named Lancelot but a copy of the video game *Kingdom of Goblins* (three guesses as to what previously-mentioned video game that's a reference to, and the first two don't count), but the overarching feeling is that we've been here before. This teeters on the brink between homage and overt gimmickry. Further, there's a vague sense of being cheated, somehow, in Forbes' decision to simply ignore the 'metaphysical question' of the relationship of the Labyrinth to Sara's mind. *Return to Labyrinth* acknowledges the film's fractured negative capability and opts not to fix it, but to replicate it instead. Simply put, the awkward implementation of ontological hermeneutic codes and negative capability in the film has come back to haunt the franchise.

Still, *Return to Labyrinth* definitely has its strengths. If *The Goblins of Labyrinth* was excised from the franchise, leaving only the film and the comic in dialogue with each other, their connection isn't that bad. Many of the characters from the film do reappear, albeit often in lessened roles. Hoggle, Ludo and Sir Didymus all make appearances in the first volume of the manga series, as do a number of *Labyrinth*'s more obscure characters. It also picks up on some of the negative capability potential from the film. One key plot point (spoiler warning) focuses on Jareth's attempt to get Toby to take his place as the new Goblin King. While this storyline hasn't played itself out yet (the second issue of the series has yet to be published as of this writing), it does seem to address one of the key questions I listed in 2.6: why doesn't Jareth, the Goblin King, appear to be a Goblin himself? Forbes also demonstrates his skill as a storyteller by deftly introducing more questions than he answers in his opening volume: a mysterious girl in a goblin mask is introduced, as is a potential nemesis for Jareth, and hints are

dropped about what exactly it is that lies outside the labyrinth. As a story in its own right, *Return to Labyrinth* is quite entertaining.

There is some question as to how well the book was received, however. One chart composed of Diamond's direct market sales in the U.S. placed *Return to Labyrinth* in slot #10 on the Top 50 manga books for August 2006, and at #40 for graphic novels overall, but it's worth noting that this is for the direct market only, not for more general bookstores like Borders or Barnes and Noble. According to these numbers, the book moved an estimated 2,400 copies when it debuted in August 2006[29]. This is a decent number, but less than half of the #1 title, VIZ Media's *Naruto* #11, which moved 5,519 copies in the same month.

More disturbing, although perhaps more predictable, is the fan reaction to the book. One fan who goes by the handle Laszlo on the Muppet Central forum gave the book a solid thumbs-down, commenting:

> Let's just say: Next time spend more time on QUALITY drawings and a
> better story. I would have preferred half as much pages but better images.
> As it is, it is terrible to look at, which makes it hard to read through.

There's almost a fractal relationship at play here concerning the collaboration between artist and author in the manga and the collaboration between the different media extensions in the franchise. I'll get into this in more detail in section 3, but the basic concept is that any such collaboration is only going to be as strong as its weakest link. The fans kvetch about the shaky art style of the manga before they get to the story, since

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[29] http://www.lovemanga.co.uk/category/manga-sales/).

the art is the most instantly accessible part of the manga. If the art is bad, then the whole production is perceived to be bad. The same can be said about a transmedia narrative: if *The Goblins of Labyrinth* is bad, it's going to have a negative effect on the rest of the franchise. If one were to propose a formula: the damage done by a poor extension may be directly proportional to said extension's degree of importance to the rest of the franchise - in other words, if a weak extension is of minimal importance, then it might be written off and ignored, but if it is considered a canonical, important component of a transfiction narrative, the whole franchise may be in trouble.

To conclude, let's submit the text to our four questions.

Is the extension canonical? A press release from the Jim Henson Company announcing the book billed it as a "sequel manga to *Labyrinth*," which suggests its canonicity.[30]

Does the extension maintain the character of the world? Yes – perhaps even too much so, insofar as the manga directly echoes the structure of the film rather than taking it in a new direction.

Does the extension answer questions left unanswered by the preceding text(s)? Yes. While it's still too early on in the series to determine exactly how many questions the manga will address, it's already hinting at answers to some of the big questions posed by the film, most notably why Jareth, the Goblin King, isn't a Goblin

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[30] http://www.henson.com/company/071505.html

himself. By focusing on characters audiences know and care about, the manga answers

one of the key questions that is almost always left unanswered at the end of the text –

what happens to these characters after the book is closed or the final credits roll?

Does the extension raise new questions? Absolutely. *Return to Labyrinth*

excels by introducing a number of new enigmas that still fit in with the tone of the parent

film. Examples of this include the new villainous characters Esker, Drumlin, Moulin,

Mizumi, and Mayor Spittledrum; Heroic characters like Skub, Hana, and Stank; and

enigmatic characters like the masked Moppet. One geographic hermeneutic code hints at

the existence of "the Patchwork Kingdom"; a Character code leaves us wondering who

exactly Mizumi, the Queen of Cups, actually is; a Chronological code leaves us

wondering what happened 1300 years ago when Jareth took the crown; and, perhaps most

obviously, a "tune in next time" list of teasers at the end of the book promises, in typical

Labyrinth humor, to reveal "What causes the Labyrinth to move? What do Goblins eat?

Where did Ludo come from? What is par for the course on hole 18 of the Bog of Eternal

Stench? These are just a few of the burning questions that will be revealed in *GOBLIN

PRINCE OF THE LABYRINTH!"*

2.9 Contrasting Structures and Opening Worlds

This leads us to wonder, however – is it sufficient for an extension to simply pose

more questions, or *better* questions? As I described in section 1.6, there's no guarantee

that audiences will engage equally with the same questions. In *On Stories,* C. S. Lewis

tells how the hermeneutic codes that drove him through a story were not the same codes

that drove a friend through the same narrative. Still, the types of questions asked will

inherently shape the narrative being developed and result in different levels of

engagement. Let's take a step back and look at the two Henson films at a macro level,

comparing the number and type of hermeneutic codes deployed by each.

	The Dark Crystal	*Labyrinth*
Cultural	37	4
Character	38	72
Chronological	29	12
Geographic	4	14
Environmental	18	19
Ontological	0	23

Keeping in mind that these are the results of just one man's reading through the

films, the numbers above show at a glance the difference in tone between the two films,

reflect the difference in emphasis between them, and hint at the actions taken by Henson

and Froud to correct for the sharp criticisms the press leveled at *The Dark Crystal*.

The five years that Henson and Froud spent developing the world of *The Dark

Crystal*, with special emphasis on their languages, architectures, social structures, and so

on, is very much reflected in the yawning spread of cultural codes between the two films.

When an audience is taken through *The Dark Crystal*, they are treated to a world rich

with alien culture that is internally consistent, sparking their imaginations. *Labyrinth*, on

the other hand, starts in our everyday world, so most of the cultural artifacts are shielded by a Thompsonian 'glass armor' of familiarity, and when we enter the labyrinth there is little to no evidence of language scattered throughout, the architecture is largely the same, and most of the locations inside (the labyrinth, the Goblin City, and the Goblin Castle) lack signs of real culture. The design sensibility of the Creature Shop wins out in the outfits of some of the characters, particularly Jareth, Hoggle, and Sir Didymus, but for the most part the puppets are nowhere nearly as intricately detailed as the Mystics or the Skeksis. This may very well be due to there simply being more of them, and time and budget constraints.

The difference in character codes is also telling: *Labyrinth* has nearly twice as many character codes as *The Dark Crystal*, in part due to a shifted emphasis away from worldbuilding and more toward more traditional character-building. *The Dark Crystal* has its share of interesting characters – Jen, Kira, the Chamberlain, Aughra – but most of its cast are painted with broad strokes. The Mystic Elder only has a few lines before his death, and he is the only one of the Mystics that truly differentiates himself from the rest of the pack. The Skeksis are depicted more individually, gaining more screen time than the Mystics and designed to represent each of the seven deadly sins, but even so the film doesn't nurture character growth in any of them (except perhaps in the Chamberlain and his political rival, the Garthim Master, and even then, the Chamberlain is shown to have not really grown at all - until perhaps his transformation with the others at the very end of the film). Similarly, Aughra and Kira don't appear to change very much either, serving more as set pieces than actual characters. Even Jen doesn't change very much personally

over the course of the narrative, despite learning more about his heritage, finding a potential soulmate, and having saved the world.

Labyrinth, on the other hand, deploys a longer list of individual characters – Sarah, Jareth, Hoggle, Sir Didymus, and Ludo – that are each shown to have some degree of character development over the course of the film. There is some overcorrection at play here, with the character growth of Sarah, Hoggle and Sir Didymus each being particularly heavy-handed (Sarah's revelation that life isn't fair, Hoggle's discovery of friendship, and Didymus' finding that overcompensating through bravura isn't necessarily the best tactic), but nevertheless *Labyrinth* is a much more character-centric film.

Chronologically speaking, *The Dark Crystal* wins by a landslide due to its heavy reliance on historical events and prophecies. This is clearly the result of Henson and Froud's world-building, with *Labyrinth* feeling very shallow from a historical sense. This lends to the dream-logic feeling of the film, but also greatly limits the film's potential for future expansion. If we view each of the hermeneutic codes as a potential migratory cue, chronological codes by their very nature lead off to other stories. The problem with suggesting that this world begins and ends in Sarah's head is, as I've suggested elsewhere, that it cuts off these threads and closes the world. *The Dark Crystal,* by contrast, has literally thousands of years in which to craft further extensions.

Bizarrely, *The Dark Crystal* loses in Geography. Part of this is due to the very nature of the labyrinth*;* while there is little to no indication in the film as to what lies outside of its walls, it's still positioned in such a way that there has to be *something* there. The film also makes continued references internally to the Bog of Eternal Stench, which

finally pay off in the last third of the film, but Henson uses these fleeting references extremely well to build up its foulness (especially when dealing with a medium which obviously cannot transmit a sense of smell without considerable external assistance). Much like the use of negative capability in horror described in Section 1.6, audiences are invited to imagine for themselves what the most horrible stink in the world would be like.[31] More telling, however, is a map of Thra that appears in *The World of the Dark Crystal;* while we're invited along with Jen as he travels from the Valley of the Mystics to the Crystal Castle, the map begins and ends with the territory traversed during the course of the film. There is no reference to what lies beyond the map's edges because Henson and Froud didn't extend their use of negative capability to geography. We *do* get some references to where the UrSkeks came from and where they go after the crystal is healed, and to the Lake of Fire beneath the Castle (which *The Power of the Dark Crystal* promises to capitalize upon), but aside from that, the world of *The Dark Crystal* is pretty much 'what you see is what you get'.

Environmentally, the two films are almost a tie. This is another shift in the developmental process between the two films, and reflective of a shortcoming in our system. While *The Dark Crystal* spends more time on sweeping establishing shots of alien swamps and caverns replete with bizarre creatures, *Labyrinth* goes much further to turn its critters into actual characters. As a puppeteer, Henson was fascinated by developing new and interesting ways to portray movement – the Landstriders in *The Dark Crystal,* for example, were invented after one of the cast members showed up on set one day with a pair of stilts. Both films use hand puppets, finger puppets, marionettes

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[31] Myself, I thought of a combination of beets and pig manure. Whoof.

and so on in the creation of their characters, but many more of the critters in *Labyrinth* have speaking roles – the Worm, for example, is essentially a finger puppet until it's shot in close-up, and the Helping Hands that send Sarah to the Oubliette are all simple gloves that combine into faces, but when they speak they gain character. The creatures in *The Dark Crystal* each have some character, to be sure, but not as much as when they are given speaking parts. Still, they don't quite qualify as full-blown *characters;* this leads the environmental codes in the first film to refer primarily to the dozens of alien plant and animal species Henson shows us in those establishing shots, but to a smaller number of more richly-developed bit parts in the second.

Ontological codes in the two films are where things get hairy. The first sentence in *The Dark Crystal,* the narrator's "another world, another time", immediately drives a stake into the ground concerning the film's ontological existence. We know this world is disconnected from our own, we know this time is not our own, so we have some idea as to how to relate to it. *Labyrinth,* on the other hand, leaves us continually guessing. Ironically, a greater number of codes here does not translate into an increased number of possible migratory cues – in fact, it's quite the opposite. This may not always be the case for all such films, but we've already seen how *Labyrinth's* questionable ontology complicated its later expansion.

Both films are somewhat writerly, in their own fashion – the difference is simply one of emphasis. Where *The Dark Crystal* focuses on worldbuilding, *Labyrinth* focuses on character development. The problem I see with each film is that they both seem to tip too far in their chosen direction. Critics of *The Dark Crystal* bemoaned the lack of characters with which the audience could readily identify; critics of *Labyrinth* bemoaned

its superficiality. The secret, then, must be one of balance – a storyteller looking to lay the groundwork for an intertextual franchise must be sure to leave the doors open for extensions for both the larger world and the individual characters. This, perhaps, is what we can learn from *Star Wars*, *Star Trek, Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and *Firefly/Serenity* – each of these franchises had a strong balance between world-building and character growth, so future expansions could focus on either the world or its characters. Focusing solely on one to the neglect of the other leads to trouble.

Of these three transmedial extensions, then, *The World of the Dark Crystal* appears to be the most successful as a transmedia extension. By operating within canon, building directly off of the hermeneutic codes from the parent film to fill in details on both the characters and the world that the audience already knows and loves, and still opening up new questions for future expansion, the book successfully makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to an audience's understanding of a narrative world. The new data provided by reading the book enriches repeat viewings of the film, and further intrigues and excites the audience members. The story world benefits greatly from the book's existence, making the text feel less like a superfluous grab for more money and more, well, valuable.

By contrast, *The Goblins of Labyrinth* ignores the existing primary characters and focuses on background characters instead. This can work well (see *Star Wars: Tales of the Cantina*) but it falls short here because of how it ignores the parent film almost entirely. Again, a book called *The Goblins of Labyrinth* that doesn't mention the Goblin King clearly has problems. If the pictures were removed, it would be almost impossible to tell that his book has anything to do with *Labyrinth* at all. As a result, audiences gain

no new information about the characters from the film and very little useful new information about the world in which the film was set, leading them to come away with a more fractured sense of the story world than a unified one. At best *The Goblins of Labyrinth* is a fun diversion, but since it offers little in the form of narrative development, it cultivates significantly less audience investment.

Return to Labyrinth, however, revisits the primary characters but ignores *Goblins of Labyrinth* completely. This makes the book feel more valuable to the franchise, and therefore makes the text a more functional transmedia extension of the original film, but ignoring *Goblins of Labyrinth* further disjoints the audience's sense of the story world. A fan of the franchise that reads *Goblins of Labyrinth* and then picks up *Return to Labyrinth* is likely to wonder whether Forbes had done his homework. Worse, the way in which it also willfully ignores the 'closed world' nature of *Labyrinth* weakens the connection between the manga and the original film, which lessens the franchise's sense of coherence even further. Without acknowledging even the possibility that the events in the film could have been a dream, Forbes' narrative structure feels like a cop-out.

This is not to say that Forbes didn't do an admirable job given what he had to work with. His predicament certainly isn't an isolated case; as transmedia storytelling grows in popularity, more and more stories will be revisited for expansion, and great numbers of those are likely not to have been written with such expansion in mind. Any writer that attempts to tell a story set in someone else's universe is likely to have to struggle with this 'open world/closed world' dilemma. To that end, I'd like to suggest three ways to crack open a closed world like *Labyrinth*, ordered by increasing effectiveness in cultivating audience involvement.

IGNORE THE CLOSURE

One option is to do what Forbes did with *The Goblins of Labyrinth*, which is to ignore the issue altogether. By making no mention of Sarah, her bedroom, or pretty much anything else from the film, Forbes' story seems to sidestep the problem. However, as outlined above, this option tends to be the most damaging because it's the least coherent with what has come before. By introducing fissures between components instead of sutures, the entire franchise is weakened.

STYLISTICALLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE CLOSURE

A second, better option is to acknowledge it stylistically, but not narratively. Both *Labyrinth* and Disney's *Return To Oz* include similar stylistic echoes to their precursors without directly acknowledging their impact on the story world. In other words, both sequels simply echo the structure of their predecessors and do a kind of stylized replay – in *Return To Oz* Dorothy sees her captors transformed into characters in Oz just as she did with the farmhands in the first movie, and Toby follows his older sister's footsteps fairly closely in *Return to Labyrinth*. By ignoring the actual question but replaying the steps taken to get there, the assumption is that different market segments may recognize this and accept it accordingly. Children might not notice it, or mind if they do, but parents might accept it as a quirk of the story.

CHANGE THE RULES OF THE CLOSURE

Finally, perhaps the best option is to look for ways to change the parameters of a closed world with a few well-placed questions. A clever storyteller might turn assumptions about the structure of *Labyrinth* on their head by asking, "Which inspired which, the toys or the dreams?" A future extension might feature Sarah wondering how these toys of hers all came to life in this alternate world, then discovering all the toys in her room were made by one company, and in fact were made by one woman – who had also found a way into the other world. Purists may howl at this form of retroactive continuity shifting ('retconning'), but it enables a door that the original story had closed to be forced open. As it is, the only real doorway for future expansion that the original *Labyrinth* left open was the promise for Hoggle and company to return to Sarah in the future if they were needed. (As Forbes hints in the manga, it turns out they were needed – but not by Sarah.) This is why it's important for contemporary storytellers to pay close attention to both the world they're creating and the use of negative capability from the get-go, because laying this groundwork in the original text both enriches the audience's experience and makes future extensions infinitely easier.

There will obviously be other approaches to this problem, and I would be remiss if I failed to mention a fourth option that doesn't fit nicely into the model I just described. This is because it is simultaneously more fracturing than Forbes' ignoring of the problem and yet perhaps even more cohesive with the nature of the world. Option four is, simply put, to celebrate the closure.

CELEBRATE THE CLOSURE

A niggling doubt that's been creeping around the back of my head ever since I first started studying *Labyrinth* is that perhaps some entertainment properties simply shouldn't be analyzed for narrative cohesion. Books like *The Goblins of Labyrinth* are difficult to analyze because, well, the academic study of Monty Python-style thinking is tricky, to say the least. If the *schwerpunkt*, the central purpose, of *Labyrinth* and *The Goblins of Labyrinth* isn't to tell a coherent narrative but to simply entertain through illogical silliness, if the text really isn't meant to serve as an extension of the story world and is only supposed to be another, even more nonsensical farce, then my arguments here are like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. Not only doesn't it work, but it also ruins the Jell-O (and doesn't do the wall any good, either).

Still, if *The Goblins of Labyrinth* is meant to stand as a coherent narrative extension, then it serves as a solid demonstration of why transmedia narratives work best when all of the extensions cohere with one another. As noted in section 1, multi-media franchises are popular in the entertainment industry partly because they provide a number of initial points of access for different types of audiences. The downside to this is that unless each component is done well, each extension also serves as a possible area in which to *lose* audience members. One rule of comics is that the story can be fantastic, but if the art is weak then the book is sunk – because audiences will pick up the book, leaf through it and judge it based on the quality of the artwork. The same goes in reverse: a beautiful book with horrendous dialogue will lose readers in similar quantities. Take this reasoning and multiply it by the five media components listed above and one can see how transmedia storytelling, and especially Christy Dena's transfiction model, runs

exponentially higher risks of losing audience members through shifting media forms. If chapter one is a comic and chapter two is a book and chapter three is a video game, if chapter two is horrendously written, what percentage of audience members will ever play chapter three?

In this way transmedia franchises are the ultimate game of *The Weakest Link*. Just as a comics writer should be careful to ally themselves with only great, solid artists, transmedia creators must be sure that each member of their creative team is able to do the job at a similar quality level, and that each extension in a franchise makes, if not a distinctive and valuable contribution, then one that isn't fracturing and detrimental to the rest of the franchise.

To avoid a fragmented sense of the story world, each transmedia extension should follow the rules of their shared universe, and not conflict with any other extensions. (Comics fans know this as 'maintaining continuity'.) Transmedia storytellers and producers should share notes, resources, and other assets to make sure that each extension plays nicely with the others.

This leads to another observation: transmedia extensions can be created affordably and effectively by reusing resources already developed during the production of the parent narrative. As Jenkins notes in his *Technology Review* article, transmedia storytelling is on the rise due in part to the increased facilitation of reusing assets, such as video footage shot on the film set being used in the video game, or vice versa. Both *The Goblins of Labyrinth* and *The World of the Dark Crystal* are little more than collections of the concept art developed for the films, but by coupling them with a narrative instead of simply packaging them as coffee table books, Henson, Froud and Company further

enriched the worlds they were developing and increased their value as components of a larger narrative.

Again, transmedia storytelling works best in rich, open worlds seeded with negative capability from the get-go. By pre-filling a story with questions about both its world and its characters that can be answered with even better questions, a storyteller can keep audiences intrigued for years. It bears repeating that as I stated in section 1.7, a storyteller looking to craft a potential transmedia narrative should carefully craft the world in which that story exists, and then make passing references to other events, characters or places in that world during the course of the narrative to simultaneously spark the imaginations of his or her audience through negative capability and provide potential openings for future migratory cues. Doing so will facilitate the creation of distinct, valuable contributions to the story world in future extensions – making for better, stronger, more profitable and more enjoyable transmedia storytelling.

Long 140

III. The Future of Transmedia Storytelling: Troubles and Tools

During my time in the Convergence Culture Consortium at MIT, I met a fascinating entrepreneur with whom I began to exchange ideas for how to model a complex system of related data across multiple axes.[32] I had just finished sketching out a proposed diagram on a whiteboard when she nodded and asked, "So what?"

I blinked. "Come again?"

She smiled. "So what? The model you describe is extremely interesting, but what do we *do* with it?"

She was, of course, absolutely correct. Those of us in academia are all too often guilty of merely delighting in new ways to model relations and concepts, but these have minimal impact outside of the ivory tower unless we can make them *actionable*. This third section of this thesis aims to address that very question. How do storytellers and producers *use* hermeneutic codes, negative capability and the other observations I've outlined in the first two sections of this thesis? What are some of the barriers preventing transmedia storytelling from acceptance as a widespread popular media form, and how can we utilize worldbuilding, negative capability and migratory cues to overcome those challenges?

This section examines some possible systems for the delivery, consumption and development of transmedia narratives. While the creation of functioning demos falls

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[32] In this instance, it was financial data and not transmedia narrative data, but the underlying principles are much the same.

outside the purview of this thesis, this section describes some possible conceptual paths
for future development and consumption of transmedia entertainment.

3.2 Delivery and Consumption Systems

As I outlined in sections 1.3 and 1.4, popular entertainment has grown
increasingly more complex over the past decade, from *Twin Peaks* to *The X-Files* to *Lost*,
with the Internet fostering the growth of fan communities around these narratives and
transforming shows like *Lost* and *Heroes* from cult television into popular mainstream
hits[33]. While it is certainly possible to maintain a fan community without such digital
tools, as evidenced by the long-running existence of fan communities for *Star Trek, Star
Wars, Doctor Who,* and *Lord of the Rings,* the near-instant global communication offered
by the Internet facilitates greater degrees of engagement among a much larger number of
people.[34] Forums, blogs and bulletin boards enable fans to track each new development
in these complex narratives and debate them endlessly.

Obviously, this is a boon to transmedia storytelling. If trends continue on their
current course, digital delivery is likely to become the primary mode of media
consumption and management. If this occurs, then greater integration of each component
of a transmedia franchise becomes much, much easier. If each extension is delivered as
digital media, then each extension can have digital links built into them – and if each
extension is intelligently linked, then the hermeneutic codes, negative capability, and

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[33] Recent Nielsen ratings place *Lost* and *Heroes* at #15 and #16 for broadcast television
(season average), with 11.9M and 12.0M viewers, respectively. This is less than half the
ratings for #1-ranked *American Idol,* which has a viewership of 26.9M viewers, but still
defeats *The Sopranos* at 6.8M viewers – and, of course, doesn't take into consideration
DVRs and online video services like iTunes or streaming via abc.com or nbc.com.
[34] For more information on this, see the research of Ivan Askwith (CMS07).

migratory cues I described earlier quickly become opportunities for narrative mapping, a commercialized 'collect-em-all' mesh of intertextual sales points, and a new widespread metric tracking system.

Even if only a little digital technology is introduced into a transmedia franchise, we begin to see greatly increased integration between the extensions and a much improved audience experience. Let's look at how three increasing degrees of digital integration might improve a transmedia franchise.

LIGHT INTEGRATION: THE HUB

Even if each component of a transmedia franchise remains in a purely analog format, a transmedia franchise can still benefit greatly from an official website to provide consumers with tools with which to track each component in the franchise. A site for such a franchise might include the following:

- Bios of each character (additional history, art, and information)

- Maps (context for where each component occurs)

- Timelines (context for when each component occurs)

- Creator commentary (similar to the extras on a DVD)

- Forums (facilitate discussion between fans)

- News (announce upcoming extensions by RSS, txt or email notification)

- Store (order each component in the franchise, plus exclusives)

Even if none of the components themselves are 'Internet-aware', it's easy to see the

benefits of building a central place for consumers to get a mile-high view of the

franchise. Many popular franchises already use websites in this fashion to some degree;

the official website for *Heroes* (http://www.nbc.com/Heroes/) is an excellent example of

a transmedia hub in how it offers not only information on the show's creators, cast and

characters, but also a series of exclusive comics. In the site's own promotional language,

"Pick up where the show leaves off by delving deeper into the Heroes universe with

original graphic novels created by the world's foremost graphic artists! Choose either the

PDF version or the unique Flash version that puts the stories at your fingertips by letting

you explore them in ways never before possible! And who knows… you just might find a

secret or two."[35]

As quoted in section 1.1, Jenkins attributes some of the current rise in transmedia

storytelling to the maturing of the *Pokémon* generation and their taste for cross-media

narrative complexity, but another psychological component of *Pokémon* fans could prove

extremely lucrative to transmedia storytellers: the *collecting*. Software already exists that

catalogs one's media collection by passing the barcode printed on each package under a

webcam, or by entering the ISBN numbers into a form.[36] One of the challenges facing

transmedia storytelling is keeping audiences (and authors) aware of how each extension

relates to every other extension, and where each one fits into the larger story world – so

why not use this same type of technology to tag and manage one's participation in a

transmedia franchise?

Imagine a system that started with similar catalog-building software, only instead

of listing the books and DVDs on your living room shelves, it displayed an enormous

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[35] http://www.nbc.com/Heroes/novels/
[36] For example, Delicious Library by Delicious Monster.

timeline that plotted out where each extension you own in a particular extension fell in relation to the rest of the franchise. It would be possible to display the order in which each extension occurs, which characters appear in each extension, the key plot points of each extension, the setting for each extension, and so on. Extensions that the audience member didn't own would be grayed out, but a one-click button attached to each would instantly order the missing content. If a fan wanted to follow Han Solo's life story across all the extensions in the *Star Wars* universe, with a few clicks (and a well-funded credit card) they could do just that. If the fan wanted to experience every extension that took place on Endor, they could do that as well. If they wanted to experience everything chronologically, they could do that too, quickly and easily – and the system would fill in their narrative maps automatically, showing them which extensions they still had yet to experience.

By linking such a system to an online retailer like Amazon.com, this would also remove the cross-media inventory problem that plagues transmedia franchises – in our current commercial environment, only a very few specialty brick-and-mortar stores are likely to offer the entire *Matrix* franchise set side-by-side on one shelf for possible customers to find, and even fewer are likely to have them properly sequentially ordered so that a would-be transmedia fan could consume them in order. An online ordering system could facilitate niche media franchises due to the same "Long Tail" reasoning described in section 2.1, as well as the most successful sprawling franchises. (Good luck finding a physical store that carries every *Star Wars* spinoff and extension ever created.) Collecting and traversing an entire transmedia franchise would be only a few mouse clicks, some money and a few days' delivery time away – and as outlined in the next

model, 'medium integration', once all the media is delivered digitally, the last third of that difficulty equation, the shipping time, simply drops away.

MEDIUM INTEGRATION: THE CENTRAL DIGITAL DELIVERY MECHANISM

The final bullet point in the previous list, "store", is easily upgraded at the second degree of digital integration. This model begins with the online franchise 'hub' outlined in the 'light integration' model, so consider each of these previous components also present here. Where this model differs, however, is in how *much* it incorporates the web into how the franchise is delivered to, and consumed by, its fans.

In this model, instead of the content being delivered in traditional analog format, the content is delivered digitally. Instead of text or a comic being consumed on paper, the content is delivered via the web. A game component is either delivered through an online delivery mechanism (such as Steam or the Xbox Live Arcade) or experienced as a Flash or Shockwave game online through a browser. Video or musical content is streamed in a browser, downloaded through an online store such as Apple's iTunes Store, or delivered as a video podcast via RSS.

All of the required technological elements for such a system are currently either nascent or already in place, which enables smaller companies to lower the costs of a transmedia campaign by working purely digitally instead of having to invest in the creation of physical objects. Note that the creation of physical objects delivered via postal service should very much remain an option, as a large percentage of consumers are still attached to the idea of an artifact associated with the experience – but books, DVDs, CDs, even associated merchandise like clothing or action figures, can all be produced on-

demand, removing the possible issue of unsold inventory if a franchise doesn't succeed as widely as expected.

As John Perry Barlow, ex-lyricist for the Grateful Dead and co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, is fond of saying, "There's only one media - the bit." Once this philosophy becomes even more widespread, then *transmedia* may become just as taken for granted as *multimedia* has become. Being able to download even the most obscure content quickly not only removes the stigma that is often attached with comic shops and video game stores, but also opens up rural markets that might not be able to get that content from a local store and facilitates impulse purchases that trade on the instant gratification principle. If one of the main challenges facing transmedia storytelling is audience resistance to tracking down unfamiliar content types, instant and anonymous delivery of those extensions may be a huge win. How many more casual, female *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* fans might purchase the new '*Buffy* Season Eight' Dark Horse comics if they could be downloaded anonymously from home without having to face down Comic Book Guy?

HIGH INTEGRATION: TRUE DIGITAL STORYTELLING?

For years, theorists, artists and businessmen have been grappling with two questions: "what is digital storytelling?" and "what is interactive storytelling?" Some argue that the concept of digital storytelling is inherently interactive, but the argument that this interactivity has to manifest itself purely in the form of "the user decides which road the hero takes" is perhaps overly constrictive.

As we've seen, negative capability can be used in a transmedia narrative to position any given component in a larger narrative space, and the same migratory cues that a storyteller builds into a narrative to enable further expansion can serve, in a digital environment, as a series of links or reference points. Push this idea too far and the narrative shifts from a fixed narrative to a video game (which isn't necessarily a bad thing), but if we revisit the cataloging idea from earlier in this section and push it a little further, tracking not just which extensions you've collected but which in-and-out migratory cues you've experienced in each extension, we can imagine a sort of digital notebook that keeps track of what you've discovered in the text as you go along. The story could keep track automatically of which pages you've read so far and enter pertinent information into a digital scrapbook as you go. This provides some real advantages to readers that might put down a story and come back months later – as might be required by a transmedia franchise as each new component requires time to develop and release – and it also offers a possible solution to an issue that's been increasingly haunting producers in recent years: consumption metrics.

New technologies such as Adobe's Apollo (the code name for a new runtime environment that enables Internet-enabled stand-alone applications to be built using only simple Web technologies like HTML and Flash) facilitate the creation of transmedia manager applications. Take that concept of a digital scrapbook and extend it out one step further, developing it into a standalone application that is web-aware and automatically downloads the next component of a franchise when it's called for. An application on a computer can include textual pages, pages of a graphic novel, interactive elements, film clips, music... What if a fan of *Stargate* could visit the Sci-Fi channel's website and

download the *Stargate* application, which would be a manager for any new *Stargate* content delivered to the desktop?

Pushing the content outside the browser has its pluses and minuses; it might add an additional level of copy protection, but it might also subtract the simple web functions of linking and bookmarking.[37] Still, as long as the application remains web-enabled, it can also theoretically record and upload the audience member's consumption patterns. How much time did they spend playing the game portion of the franchise? Did they stop reading the text section halfway through? Did they skip the comic? Did they reread the comic part six times? There are obviously some issues of privacy at stake here, but it is also clearly an area ripe for further development.

Yet another possible function enabled by a transmedia manager application is the possible restriction of availability of new chapters until previous chapters have been consumed. Normally this would seem to be somewhat antithetical – prevent a possible customer from spending money? Sacrilege! – but it's possible to imagine a transmedia campaign taking a page from the Alternate Reality Game (ARG) playbook. Perhaps additional chapters of a story are made available only when certain clues are discovered, or the reader is given a choice as to which direction the narrative unfolds. Perhaps a story unfolds in a certain direction if a player chooses the format of the next chapter – Chapter Four could be consumed as a video or as a comic book, but the ending of the comic differs from the ending of the video. This of course suffers slightly from the eternal

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[37] This is, of course, dependent upon how the software is built; it is currently possible to build an HTML link to a track on the iTunes Store that opens the iTunes application to access it.

challenge of a game writer – maintaining a good story while still facilitating the agency of the player – but it is definitely a powerful new option well worth considering.

Perhaps best of all, each of these new opportunities are in no way limited to only the big multibillion-dollar franchises – they're just as easy for smaller niche properties, or independent transmedia storytellers, to implement.   Increases in interoperability between various web-enabled services are the very backbone of the 'Web 2.0' movement. An enterprising independent storyteller could easily develop a website that used existing tools and services to build an experience much like the one described here. The Adobe Apollo framework is currently a free download, although it is still in the early stages of development; Adobe's own Acrobat and InDesign software enable the embedding of HTML links into PDF files to add intermedial links from one PDF document to another; Apple's QuickTime format has supported embedded links for years; plenty of entrepreneurial bloggers and other online creators make a living off of the referral fees they receive through partnering with online retailers like Amazon.com. The technology is largely in place – the key, I believe, is in how the *content* is crafted to take advantages of the opportunities that the technology affords.

We've looked at some possible ways for worldbuilding, negative capability, and migratory cues to inform the development of systems to deliver and consume transmedia narratives, but what about methods for *creating* them?

3.3 Development Systems: Radial Maps and Mike Mignola's *Hellboy*

There is a hope that Generation Y and the Millennials, the kids who were raised on true transmedia narratives like *Pokémon*, will produce *auteurs* who will create great works of transmedia 'literature'. There already are some storytellers who seem to grasp the opportunities and limitations afforded by each media form. Joss Whedon, for example, seems to be at home writing for television, film, or comics, as evidenced by his *Firefly* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* franchises. Still, just as film or television *auteurs* actually represent a massive number of people working together, transmedial franchises may take those numbers and multiply them by the number of media types in play for any given franchise. A transmedia franchise may have a massive team of creatives at the helm, subdivided into groups who each know the advantages and disadvantages of one particular media type well. For a transmedia franchise to succeed, however, there needs to be a shift in the way these groups co-operate.

To further explore this line of reasoning, let's step away from transmedia storytelling for a moment and focus on the work of a different *auteur*. Graphic novelist Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* is a narrative franchise that deliberately maintains separate continuities for each of its individual media incarnations.

As I briefly described in Section 1.4, *Hellboy* is the story of a demon adopted by American soldiers in WWII and raised as a heroic member of the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense (BPRD). Since the character's debut in *San Diego Comic-Con Comics #2* in 1993, Hellboy has gone on to appear in six graphic novels (and spawn five more in the spin-off series *BPRD*); two 'Weird Tales' comic collections; crossovers with other comic characters including Starman, Batman and the Savage Dragon; video games;

animated movies (the first, *Sword of Storms,* premiered on the Cartoon Network in October 2006 and appeared on DVD in 2007, while the second, *Blood and Iron*, premiered on the Cartoon Network in March of 2007 and is heading to DVD in the summer of 2007); a pen-and-paper roleplaying game; six novels by other authors, including Christopher Golden and Brian Hodge; a parody comic, *Hellboy Jr.;* a collectible card game; a collectible action-figure game; multiple lines of action figures, statues, and other knickknacks; and a feature film directed by Guillermo del Toro and starring Ron Perlman, which was so successful that a sequel, *The Golden Army*, is currently in production. By anyone's standards, *Hellboy* is a successful commercial franchise, and it's also been recognized as a critical success as well, as evidenced by the two Eisners and a Harvey award sitting on Mignola's trophy shelf.

Yet, from a narrative standpoint, explorers of this vast universe will be both compelled and frustrated - compelled because there is such a wealth of content associated with the character, but frustrated because in its 13 years Mignola's creation has racked up a number of inconsistencies and oddities as a result of its not being a true transmedia story. Where does a new audience member *begin?* Yes, Hellboy exists in multiple media forms, but Mignola has very deliberately granted each new extension of the property the freedom to take the universe in a different direction.

For example, in del Toro's 2004 film version, Hellboy finds a romantic interest in fellow BPRD member and pyrokinetic Liz Sherman, which is complicated by the appearance of a new wholly-human handler for Hellboy, BPRD Agent Myers. This is a classic narrative device and del Toro handles it extremely well – it humanizes the monstrous-looking Hellboy for new audiences and sets up excellent interpersonal and

visual fireworks.   This is a love triangle that would make Tom Stoppard cock an eyebrow: a human woman that can start fires with her mind, a plain-vanilla human man, and a heart-of-gold-in-a-demonic-yet-fireproof-exterior monster. Del Toro introduces a degree of tension at the character level to serve as a B story accompanying the "save the world from Nazi-Cthulu monsters" A story, and capitalizes on a "he's fireproof, she's a pyrokinetic, so even though she's human and he's a monster these two are clearly made for each other" dynamic that Mignola admittedly never capitalizes on in the comics. Neither this relationship nor, for that matter, Agent Myers, appear anywhere in the parent comic franchise. If anything, in the comics Hellboy appears to have a mildly flirtatious relationship with a different BPRD agent, Kate Corrigan (who doesn't appear in the film). Splash audiences of the film may explore the graphic novels and be bewildered by Hellboy's romantic indifference to Liz, and wonder at the absence of Myers. To make matters even *more* complicated, in the animated series Liz is depicted as being about fourteen, which means that the idea of any kind of romance between her and *anybody* is kind of disturbing.

I certainly respect Mignola's decision to grant additional storytellers the freedom to play with his toys as a completely valid creative and aesthetic one (not to mention one that has served to extend the lifetime of characters like Superman and Batman by generations). That said, this entire arrangement is likely to twist newcomers' heads in knots. If an audience member is sufficiently intrigued by the story in the film to seek out additional Hellboy stories in the local comic shop, what are they to make of the abruptly casual relationship between Hellboy and Liz Sherman – not to mention the complete and utter absence of Agent Myers?

Mignola's universe is further complicated by the fact that while many of these cross-media adaptations retell little bits and pieces of the primary mythos from the comics, none of them are what could be called a straight adaptation. Each version varies from the original source material in ways that make each of them serve, again, as their own independent interpretations of Hellboy's life story. Even if we compare just the comic, film, and animated versions of *Hellboy,* a number of key discrepancies rear their ugly heads. All three versions employ an almost identical narrative of Hellboy's origin, right down to the group photo taken with the American military squad that finds him, complete with almost identical poses and with Hellboy's father figure, Professor Bruttenholm, standing behind the young Hellboy's left shoulder. From there, though, the stories rapidly diverge. In the comic, Professor Bruttenholm doesn't last much longer than ten pages into the first volume before he is killed by a monster. In the film, Bruttenholm lasts for most of the movie, but is eventually killed by the film's villain. In the animation, however, the good professor is still around and kicking. The obvious counter-argument says that the animation simply takes place before Bruttenholm dies, but this cannot be the case due to some simple evidence of architecture. In the comics, the BPRD is housed in an office complex in Connecticut until the first book of the *BPRD* spinoff series, wherein they're relocated to Colorado. This happens long after Bruttenholm's death. The animated movies begin with the BPRD in their Colorado headquarters, but Professor Broom is alive and kicking around the mountains with them. In the film, the BPRD is mysteriously relocated to Newark, New Jersey, where it is hidden away deep underground beneath an odd building claming to be the world headquarters of 'Squeaky Cleanup Waste Management Services', which means that if

they *do* move, it's after Bruttenholm's death. And, finally, there's one last sticky wicket

– in the comics, Hellboy quits the BPRD, and, like Professor Bruttenholm, he's long gone

before the BPRD sets foot in their new digs. It's becoming easy to see that when one

attempts to plot the different media components of the *Hellboy* media franchise onto a

timeline, things rapidly fall apart.

Perhaps, then, a better model is needed. If each of these universes do, in fact, all

share some similar qualities, then what if we treated each interpretation not as a parallel

line, but as a spoke in a wheel?
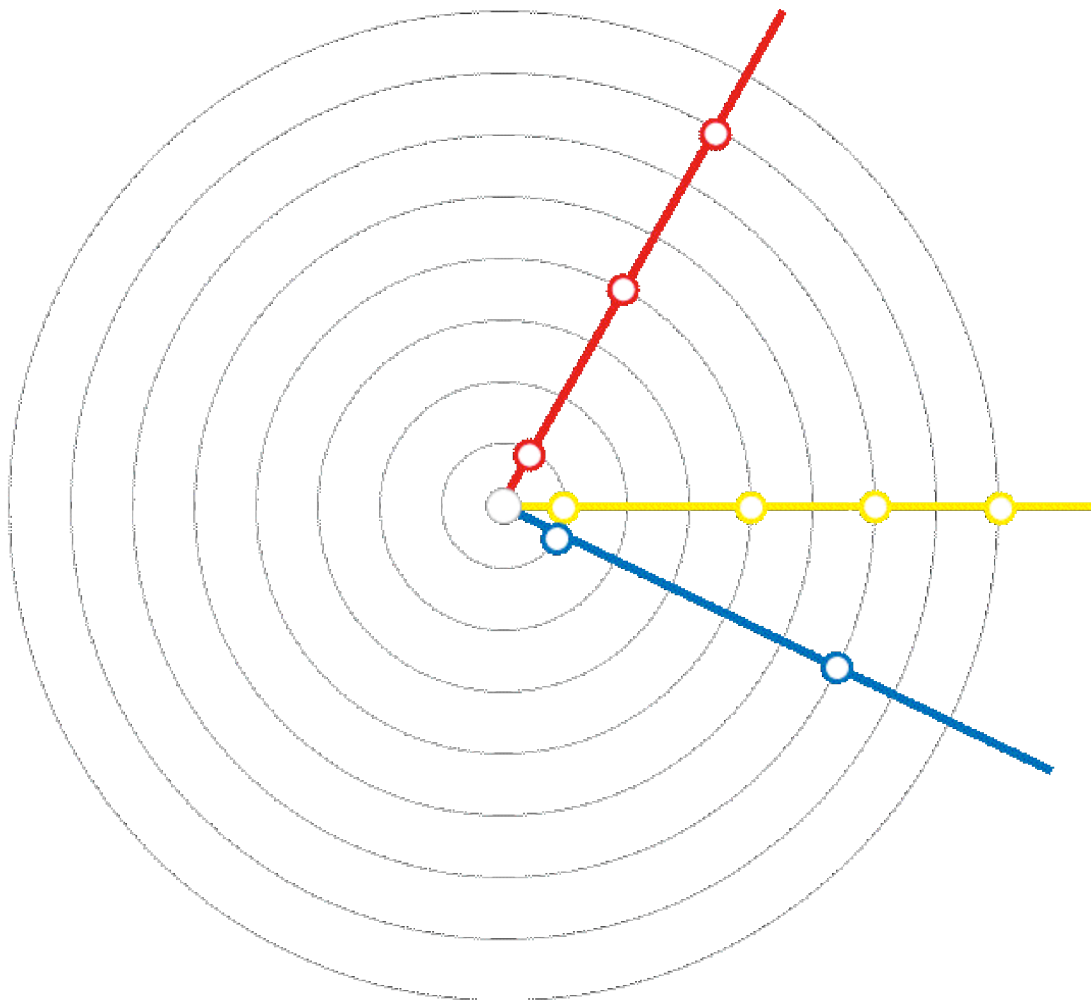
In this image, we see three timelines – a red one, a yellow one, and a blue one, each with subsequent events plotted out as dots along the timeline (the center of the graph being the starting point for all three). This model enables us to wrap our minds around a divergent narrative universe. Note how some of these events are placed on the same concentric circles. Most *Hellboy* timelines share some key events, such as the discovery of the young Hellboy by Professor Trevor Bruttenholm in World War II. If each story shares that event, a new circle can be drawn that connects those events in each universe.
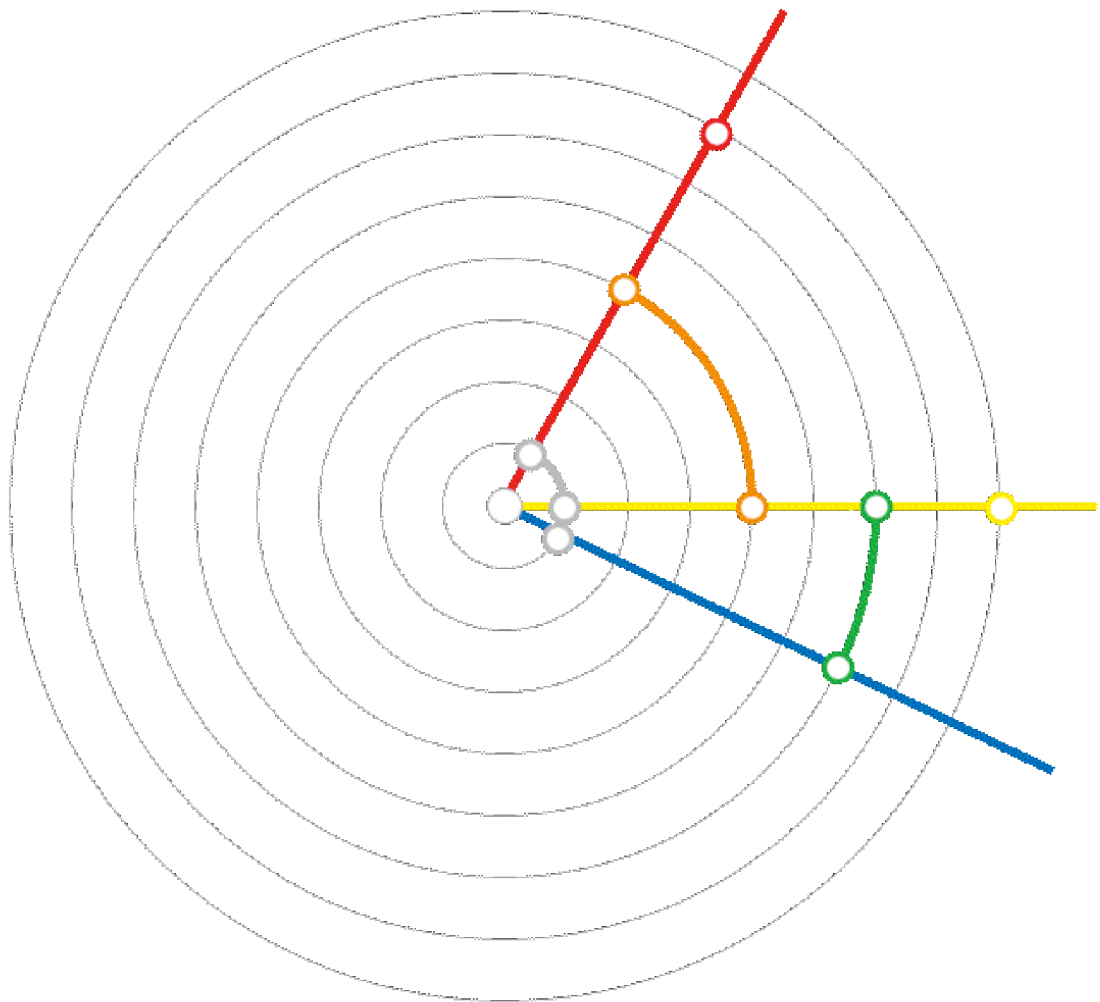
Now, imagine if the Liz Sherman-Hellboy romantic connection existed in two-thirds of the divergent timelines. If that node doesn't exist on a third of the spokes, then we get a broken concentric circle. While less than aesthetically perfect, this is useful insofar as it enables us to see clearly where the various narrative spokes differ.

A more challenging question, albeit a much simpler one, is "What's at the center of the wheel?" From a narrative standpoint, if all of the stories' Hellboy characters share the same origin story, then the central dot on the wheel could be that shared point of origin. From a more metaphysical standpoint, perhaps we should consider the central point to be the moment when Mignola first conceived of the character. Both of these are valid options – however, if the graph is indeed meant to represent a progression of time as the stories continue outward on each spoke, then it may be more useful to imagine the central point as the first recorded chronological instance across the multitude of narratives.

To be honest, each of these options is valid, and can be equally useful depending on the desired function of the particular graph. Up to this point, each of these incarnations of Hellboy has shared approximately the same window of time in the world, between sometime in World War II and the present. Yet what if, in the future, someone were to do a spectacularly divergent take on the Hellboy mythos, something similar to a DC Elseworlds story or a Marvel *What If?* tale? Or if someone wanted to construct a version of this graph for use in the Batman universe, including some of those Elseworlds stories?[38]

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[38] For more on Elseworlds comics, see section 1.3.

This brings us to another point – aside from pure eye candy, what function does a radial narrative graph like this serve?   Theoretically, graphs like these could be extremely useful tools for storytellers to determine what empty areas of a mythology are ripe for exploration, and what clustered common elements define a character. True, not every Batman tale will originate with Bruce Wayne's parents being gunned down outside a theater by the cheap thug Joe Chill. In some versions they are killed by the proto-form of Batman's eventual arch-nemesis, the Joker; in an Elseworlds story set in caveman times, they could be trampled by a mammoth; or, in a particularly divergent take, Batman's parents could not even be the Waynes at all, but instead Ma and Pa Kent in Smallville, Kansas, as was posited by J.M. DeMatteis' *Superman: Speeding Bullets*. By plotting these points on a radial map, we could see through the broken circle approach that the loss of Batman's parents appears on the vast majority of the narrativespokes – and although it's not present on some spokes, or it appears much earlier or later in time on others, the presence of the event on the majority of the spokes demonstrates this event as a seminal one for the Batman character. This means that a storyteller looking to extend an existing spoke can see how it was done on that spoke, or if the storyteller is looking to craft a new one altogether, they can see how it's been done on other spokes and, having done so, can draft either a new riff on an existing model or tinker with removing that event altogether. In short, for a positive spin, radial narrative maps serve as idea igniters, by mapping out what already exists and showing the empty undiscovered countries that have yet to be explored.

However, radial maps also serve a negative purpose: demonstrating exactly how convoluted a franchise can be when it is extended across multiple media forms without

some degree of transmediation in mind. Imagine turning each of these concentric circles

like the dials in a circular puzzle – only each one slots perfectly together into one unified

timeline. It's almost possible to hear them falling into place like tumblers in a lock –

boom, boom, boom.
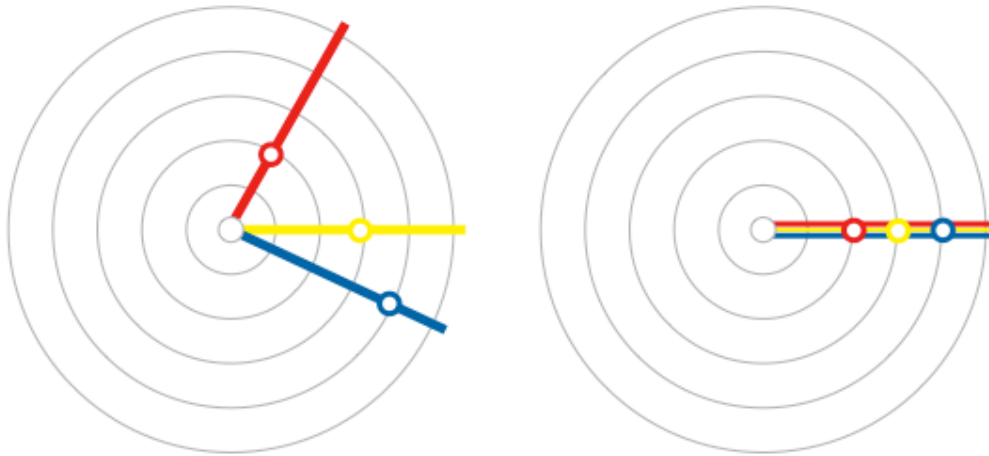
○ **ANIMATION:** *Final Flight of the Osiris (episode of The Animatrix)* shows the letter being sent
○ **ANIMATION:** *Enter the Matrix* has players picking up and carrying the letter
○ **FILM:** *The Matrix: Reloaded* shows the letter being received

A well-plotted transmedia narrative spun across multiple forms would cohere

into one great, crystal-clear, easy-to-comprehend mental model. This is the kind of

model that results from strong transmedial planning at the outset of a project; similar to

the juggernaut that the Wachowski brothers produced when they were planning their

Matrix franchise. A narrative like *Hellboy,* however, would quickly begin to creak,

shudder and collapse as the multiple timelines conflict, contradict and otherwise collide

with each other. In this fashion a radial narrative map can be a visual representation of

the confusion felt by a new fan while first experiencing a non-transmedial franchise.

Keep in mind that these graphs so far are each representative only of the larger components and events as a whole. What are some alternate models that could even better serve our purposes? Let's blow our minds a little and suddenly imagine this not as a simple line, but as multiple lines in a latticework, each of which represents a different character in a transmedia campaign. This gets ugly for a moment, but bear with me. It is possible to create graphs that represent not just where each piece of media fits into a larger timeline, but also where each character in that world appears at what point – in effect tracing a timeline not for the media components, but for the characters themselves. If your intention were to follow a particular character across multiple media forms in a transmedia franchise, such a map would make it easier to do so. Imagine an enormous graph that represents the course of the story over time, with sections marked out for where each character exists and in what media form. Imagine being able to change the graph, virtually tilting it this way or that to view it along the different axes, so as to follow different characters. Is this not, again, an evolution of digital storytelling – storytelling with the aid of digital devices and tools?

Further, it doesn't take that large a leap to change this model from a graph into a game. The major comic publishers, DC and Marvel, are both infamous for huge crossover stories that unfold across dozens of connected comics. In the summer of 2006, for instance, Marvel Comics launched a giant crossover event called *Civil War*, which could be followed (mostly) by only reading the dedicated *Civil War* miniseries – but the reader's experience with the story would be greatly enriched by picking up all the issues of Marvel's other books that tied into that main narrative. The genius of this from Marvel's standpoint, and the fiscal challenge from a casual reader's standpoint, was that

the number of tie-in books extended into dozens of additional existing series, and to read the entire franchise would involve picking up over 135 individual comic books. At a price tag of approximately three dollars a book (and that's often being conservative), comics fans would be looking at paying over $400 for the entire experience.

But let's look at this from a narrative standpoint – as I started to describe in section 3.3, imagine an online version of this graph, a digital 3-D representation of all of this paratextual data such that users could poke it, prod it, zoom into it and out again, turn it and twist it, collapse parts and expand others – a map of the events and characters at play in a narrative of this degree of scale. Now, imagine that this entire thing were wholly interactive, so that when a fan bought a comic and entered a code from that issue into his online account at Marvel.com, it lit up an entire chunk of the timeline. Instantly the fan would be presented with a visual representation of what he'd collected – and, more importantly, what all he had left to collect. Now imagine if there were stories that were unlockable through using this system – buy five of this month's issues and a sixth automatically unlocks as a free webcomic for you. Or, more diabolically, what if certain issues and stories were exclusive to this type of system?

This model isn't entirely different from a skill tree in a role-playing game like *World of Warcraft*. These devices exist to give players options on how to develop their avatars in the world – beating a certain number of monsters increases the avatar's level, which then translates into additional skill points for the player to 'spend' on the tree. It's called a tree because it has branches – a player can opt to spend their points evenly on all the branches, creating a well-rounded avatar, but doing so prevents them from enjoying the advanced skills only located at the end of each branch. What this often triggers is a

"collect 'em all!" mentality, driving the player to spend more and more time in the world, amassing levels and points until they've managed to acquire all of the skills on the tree, or creating a second character in the game world that pursues a different branch of skills than the first.

Thinking about transmediation in this way reveals two things: one, that if done properly the perception of a transmedia property can be shifted from "oh, that's way too much work and way too complicated to try and follow" to an "I have to collect them all" type of mentality. And two, the creation of online tools to help both creators and consumers map their progress through an ever-widening transmedia franchise might be a rewarding and lucrative experiment. Just as forums and weblogs and social networks have arisen to enable people to connect and further engage with their franchises of choice, I wouldn't be in the least surprised to see more of these models appear and evolve – especially as the narratives themselves continue to evolve into new forms like transmedia franchises and alternate reality games.

By deliberately making each extension in canon, by creating and maintaining a consistent narrative world, by embedding hermeneutic codes to serve as potential migratory cues from one extension to another, and by stitching it all together using new commercial and artistic technology, there is plenty of reason for a would-be transmedia storyteller to be optimistic. The future of transmedia entertainment is both extremely complicated and incredibly rich – the creative and commercial opportunities are huge. In short, it's a great time to be a storyteller.

IV. Conclusion: Ten Key Takeaway Concepts

"Well," he said, "we've gone far. We could have gone further still, but we have gone far. It's only the beginning of what it could be. But that's something, anyway."

– James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait*

As transmedia storytelling comes into its own, what are the key ideas that storytellers, academics and producers alike should keep in mind? We've covered a lot of ground in this document, but hopefully this thesis has provided ten key takeaway concepts to assist in future explorations of transmedia storytelling.

1. A good transmedia extension should make a distinct and valuable contribution to the franchise as a whole. In its purest form, a transmedia franchise engages in *transfiction*, wherein the first chapter is told in one media type, then leads straight into a second chapter in a second media type, which then cliffhangers straight into a third chapter in a third media type. More common is a 'looser', often more practical notion of transmedia, where each extension can stand on its own as an individual narrative. While the bonds between these extensions may not be as immediate as in transfiction, each one nevertheless enriches the audience's experience with the rest of the franchise. For example, *The World of the Dark Crystal* fleshes out the back-story behind *The Dark Crystal,* and *Enter the Matrix* fills in some of the narrative gaps left open by *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*.

2. Extensions of a transmedia story should stay in canon. Being optional is bad. If we consider the *story* of a transmedia narrative to be the sum total of all the components in the franchise, then an extension's value is often directly proportionate to how well it adds to the story – the encyclopedia of the world – that audiences are building in their heads. Stories told outside of canon can be highly entertaining (as in the DC Elseworlds comics or fan fiction), but since they're not a part of the same narrative universe, their content is apocryphal at best and confusing at worst.

3. A transmedia story is often the story of a world. A truly successful transmedia narrative often spans multiple casts of characters, as evidenced by *Star Wars, Star Trek* and even *The Matrix*. The primary characters of *Enter the Matrix* are secondary characters from the trilogy of films; nevertheless, the story told in the game has a significant and lasting impact upon the development of their world. Similarly, the majority of the animated *Star Wars: Clone Wars* series takes place before Luke Skywalker is ever born, but it still enriches our experience of the original trilogy by telling us more about the history of that world. The story of the original *Star Wars* trilogy may be Luke's, but the story of the *Star Wars* franchise as a whole is the epic history of the Jedi, the Old Republic, the Empire, the Alliance… n other words, the story of their world. A good transmedia author will make his world a primary character in his story.

4. Extensions of a transmedia story should maintain the tone of the world. Just as the world is the real primary character of a large transmedia franchise, a break in the tone

of the world from one extension to the other is just as disruptive as a break in the tone of a character. An audience's suspension of disbelief is strained if a hero is portrayed as cheerful and giddy in chapter one but sullen and moody in chapter two with no explanation for the change. Inexplicably changing the tone of the world from optimistic to pessimistic or from horrific to slapstick from one extension to another will be just as problematic, if not more so.

5. It is important to consider when the decision was made to transmediate a story.

When evaluating a transmedia franchise, it's important to consider when the transmediation began. If a story wasn't intended to spawn other stories, then it might have been written as a 'closed' world and later extensions may feel artificial. Academics may want to differentiate between hard, soft and chewy transmedia franchises in order to more accurately evaluate their implementation. Storytellers and producers working on transmedia franchises may want to keep this distinction in mind when either beginning a new project or joining an existing one to determine the difficulty of adding further extensions.

6. Determine whether the story's world is open or closed; if it's closed, crack it open.

Similar to the hard/soft/chewy classification schema, evaluating a world for its degree of openness to expansion can help to determine the best way to develop new extensions. A more 'open' world is easier to extend, but a closed world often requires one of at least four techniques proposed in section 2.9: ignore the closure, stylistically ignore the closure, change the rules of the closure, *or* celebrate the closure.

7. Utilize hermeneutic codes, negative capability, and migratory cues to strengthen intertextual bonds between extensions. Transmedia narratives often suffer from an ingrained resistance in audiences to shifting media forms; if someone starts a story in a TV show, they often want to just keep experiencing it as a TV show. To overcome this inertia, transmedia narratives often have to employ Barthesian hermeneutic codes, negative capability, and Ruppelian migratory cues in order to motivate audiences to follow the intertextual links between extensions. Hermeneutic codes are essentially those components of a narrative that drive audiences forward by raising questions; section 1.7 proposed six subclasses of hermeneutic codes that can be used to spark audience imaginations: *cultural, character, event, geographical, environmental,* and *ontological*. The ability for the human imagination to fill in these narrative gaps on their own is what poet John Keats called 'negative capability' in 1817; the ability for these gaps to function as directional pointers for intertextual connections is what Marc Ruppel called 'migratory cues' in 2005.

8. Address outstanding questions from other extensions. Storytellers use hermeneutic codes to raise questions in the minds of the audience; their desire to have these questions answered is what drives them forward through the narrative. Questions that remain unanswered in one component of a franchise are often the best starting place for another extension. Analyzing an existing text (or hypotext) for hermeneutic codes can often turn up a number of opportunities for extensions (or hypertext) to add to the audience's encyclopedia of the world.

9. Raise new questions for further expansion. As any good storyteller will confess, the secret to telling good stories is to wrap every answer with even better questions. A good transmedia extension will not only answer questions raised elsewhere in the franchise, but it will also pose a number of its own for future expansions to use. In this manner a good franchise can be extended for decades, and a world can be developed into a rich, well-rounded narrative universe.

10. Look for ways to graphically and systematically display these relationships. Experiencing a transmedia franchise requires, as Jenkins suggests, a 'hunter-gatherer' mindset. Audiences traverse multiple components across multiple media forms, collecting new knowledge that they add to their mental encyclopedias of these fictional worlds. Storytellers need to use careful notes and charts, especially when operating with multiple teams of storytellers on multiple in-franchise projects, to ensure that both continuity and tone remain consistent. Academics can use a similar analytical model to track the relationships between multiple components and keep a record of how these franchises develop. Producers can commercialize this same model to provide audiences with improved methods for obtaining, collecting and charting components of a franchise, as well as measuring the metrics of how these components are consumed. The development of clear, easy-to-use mapping systems, coupled with clear, easy-to-understand links between extensions, may help transform transmedia entertainment from a geeky pastime into popular mainstream entertainment.

Transmedia storytelling is a rich and exciting new field for all involved –

storytellers, academics, producers, and not least of all, audiences. Whether a franchise is

developed as a multibillion-dollar campaign or as an independent project by a single

auteur, we are presented with an exciting opportunity to utilize literary theory to shape a

new literature for the twenty-first century – or, at the very least, to tell some truly

amazing stories.

Appendix I: Sample Transmedia Franchises

The X-Files (chewy)

>*The X-Files* TV series (1993-2002)

>*The X-Files: Fight the Future* feature film (1998)

Final Fantasy VII (soft)

>*Final Fantasy VII*

>*Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*

>*Final Fantasy VII: Dirge of Cerebus*

>*Final Fantasy VII: Dirge of Cerebus: Lost Episode*

Final Fantasy XIII: Fabulla Nova Crystalis (hard)

>*Final Fantasy XIII*

>*Final Fantasy XIII Agito*

>*Final Fantasy Versus XIII*

The Matrix (chewy)

>*Enter the Matrix* positioned between *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*

>*The Animatrix* fills in many of the gaps (*Second Renaissance 1 & 2, Kid's Story*)

>Online comics provided stories from Paul Chadwick, Neil Gaiman, etc.

X-Men (soft)

    X-Men: The Official Game: bridge between *X2* and *X3: The Last Stand;*

    explains absence of Alan Cumming's Nightcrawler in *X3* (2006)

Lost (soft)

    Bad Twin: novel "written" by one of the characters (2006)

    The Lost Experience: ARG providing clues to the show (2006)

Empire (hard)

    New project by *Ender's Game* author Orson Scott Card and Chair Entertainment

    Story told across games, novels, comics and films

Firefly/Serenity (soft)

    Serenity: Those Left Behind is a comic series bridging *Firefly* and *Serenity*

As The World Turns (soft)

    Oakdale Confidential: tell-all diegetic novel available in real bookstores (2006)

Transformers (chewy-to-hard)

    Prequel novel by Alan Dean Foster (Spring 2007)

    Comics-only prequels (Spring 2007)

    Michael Bay blockbuster (Summer 2007)

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (soft)

      Seasons 1-7 on Television (1997-2003)

      Comics-only "8th season" (2007)

Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* (soft)

      Comics-only prequels (2007)

      Novels (1982-2004)

24 (soft)

      24: TV series from 2001-present

      24: The Game set between Season Two and Season Three (2003)

      24: Conspiracy mobisodes run concurrent to Season Four (2005)

Stargate: SG-1

      Stargate: SG-1 feature film (1994)

      Stargate: SG-1 television series (1997-2007)

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Appendix II: Bacon's Summaries of the Henson Films

Readers that haven't seen the Henson fantasy films in a while might appreciate a brief recap of exactly what's happening in each film. To that end, I've included the summaries that Matt Bacon used to introduce each film in his 1997 book *No Strings Attached: The Inside Story of Jim Henson's Creature Shop* below.

The Dark Crystal

In the world of *The Dark Crystal*, trees walk and mountains move. All of nature is intelligent and alive. This strange land is ruled by the decadent Skeksis from their lair in the Castle of the Dark Crystal. At its heart is the glowing stone that gives the Skeksis their power.

The Skeksis fear one thing: an ancient prophecy foretelling the end of their power at the hands of a Gelfling, one of an elf-like race who once shared the lands of the Dark Crystal. The Skeksis and their crab-like footsoldiers, the Garthim, have thus waged unending war on the Gelflings, until none are left – or so they think. One Gelfling, Jen, has been saved by the Mystics, a wise old race of hermits. As Jen's ancient master lies dying, he tells Jen of the Shard, a part of the Dark Crystal broken off a thousand years earlier. Jen must find the Shard, and reunite it with the Dark Crystal before the three suns become one. If he fails, all things whole and good will be destroyed.

Jen quests through his world in search of the Shard, pursued by the Garthim. He discovers the Shard in the observatory of Aughra the astronomer, but the Garthim catch up with him and he flees into the

swamp. There, he meets Kira, another surviving Gelfling. After
confronting a renegade Skeksis in the ruins of the last Gelfling village,
Kira and Jen are carried to the Castle by the giant Landstriders. Entering
the castle through the sewers, the pair are discovered, and Kira captured.
In a last desperate effort, Jen penetrates the Council chamber as the
Skeksis prepare for the Great Conjunction which will regenerate their evil
power. Using the Shard, Jen heals the Dark Crystal at the moment of
Conjunction, releasing the power of good it contains. (20)

Labyrinth

"Be careful what you wish for; it may come true." Babysitter Sarah
carelessly wishes that the Goblins would come and take away her bawling
baby brother... and they do. The goblin king, Jareth, tells her that her
brother will be turned into a Goblin in thirteen hours. Then he vanishes
into his kingdom – the labyrinth.

Sarah follows him into a strange world of mazes and mysteries, in which
little is what it seems. She meets an irritable gnome called Hoggle, who
gives her directions, but Sarah is soon lost. Seeking advice from two
animated playing cards, she opens a door and plunges down a shaft full of
grasping hands. At the bottom she meets Hoggle, who agrees to guide her
in return for her bracelet.

As they thread through the underground maze, Sarah and Hoggle are
menaced by the whirling blades of a mining machine, but they escape to a
topiary maze. Here Sarah discovers a shaggy giant, Ludo, hanging upside
down in a trap. She frees him and he joins the quest.

Misled by a talking doorknocker, Sarah finds herself in a forest, where a group of 'fierys' threaten to singe her before she is rescued by Hoggle. On into the Bog of Eternal Stench, guarded by the diminutive Sir Didymus, a fox. Sarah smooth-talks the fox knight into joining the party and they press on, but Hoggle has a trick up his sleeve – a magic apple given to him by Jareth, which he gives to Sarah. The apple transports her in her imagination to a fairytale ballroom, where she dances precious hours away. Eventually she wakes in a junkyard beneath the walls of the Goblin city. Ludo, Sir Didymus and Hoggle rejoin her, and together they enter the Goblin city. Jareth turns loose the giant knight Humungus, and dispatches the Goblin guards to deal with the intruders. But they win through to the castle, where Sarah rescues Toby.

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