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Holarchic Media: When transmedia just isn't Transmedia enough

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Transmedia is a term which has been with us now for almost twenty years, gaining currency in the early 'noughties', although of course we may look to Jenkins' 'transmedia storytelling' (2006) as a point from which we might agree it began to percolate more readily within the broader media consciousness. However while the term is tried and tested, the concept(s) it pertains to are – arguably - less well-defined and agreed-upon, and furthermore may perhaps be continually evolving. Indeed, at the marvellous Transmedia Earth Conference in Medellin, Colombia in 2017 – eleven years after the publication of *Convergence Culture* - a common refrain heard during informal conversations among many of us interested in the subject was '*What the &%&# is transmedia?!*' (transmedia theorists, it seems, are fond of a colourful adjective; Jenkins' own blog, of course, contains the subtly-titled bio 'Who the &%&# is Henry Jenkins?'). We had travelled from across the globe to attend the conference, the first of its kind, and discovered that many of us had somewhat disparate ideas about what transmedia might actually be, and that individually we subsequently understood the term rather less fully than we perhaps believed we did beforehand (which is, of course, probably quite indicative of an excellent and successful conference!). Given a variety of overlapping uses, interpretations and definitions of the term, as well as its potential for continual evolution as technology and content-use progresses, the purpose of this short paper is to present a round-up definition of transmedia as-at 2021, and also to propose a new term – *Holarchic Media* - which I suggest may provide a defining counterpoint to the original concept.

Let's continue with Jenkins, who opens his 2017 paper 'Transmedia Logics and Locations' by reminding us that transmedia is an adjective, and not a noun. "Transmedia needs to modify something" he writes (2017, p. 220); in principle the term refers to a method of describing a relationship between media touchpoints, linked either by design or an organic

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connection, ideally producing an experience greater than the sum of its parts. This definition can, and does, encompass 'traditional' broadcast-era media, ludic and immersive media, social media and user-generated content (UGC), and emergent platforms, linked – as Carlos Scolari notably suggested in Medellin – like music; 'music is not the notes that are played, but the space between them, and transmedia is the same'. Consequently, while some contemporary definitions of the term still continue to refer to transmedia as a form of marketing and promotional tool, in general we can see that the term has matured far beyond this, to cover a breadth of experiences including narrative, documentary, journalism, physical experience, under-the-radar, and user-generated content.

As media platforms and touchpoints become ever-more connected, and users increasingly expect media texts to be positioned as nodes in a network - particularly if we include user-generated content within the totality of the definition, as Stein (2017) persuasively suggests that we should - a potentially logical next step from *adjective* transmedia as a connective process is the oft-advanced suggestion that perhaps 'all media is now Transmedia' (Dowd et al, 2013), at least in some way. This view is persuasive, after all Jenkins was writing at what we might think of as the beginning of a transmedia age, heralded by the global uptake in key social platforms around 2006 (Facebook, Twitter etc.) and the release of the iPhone in 2007, which have progressively allowed media content to become increasingly 'transmediated' to an extraordinary degree. Given the fundamental changes in media use and conception that have occurred since Jenkins' 2006 publication, it's not surprising that the original term has evolved, developed, and expanded to encompass ongoing developments and changes. After all, the sheer ubiquity of social platforms and connected technologies which have become standardised 'cornerstones of everyday life' (Selwyn & Stirling, 2018) has normalised the principle of transmediation – transmedia the adjective – from being one of noteworthy, and more crucially notable process (we could look at a transmedia experience and see where its 'edges' were) to exceptionally complex and increasingly opaque systems of interdependencies.

At the same time, as I suggested when this was discussed in Medellin; while 'all media may indeed be transmedia' in one reading, given that there are now a wealth of specifically 'transmediated' experiences, systems and content available - existing outside of perhaps more conventional media norms, and for which no other term is sufficiently relevant - if we do accept that 'all media is transmedia' then it will be necessary to propose a new term to describe these experiences. In this context, given that an adjective suggests a sliding-scale ('*x* being *more transmedia* than *y*' for example), perhaps it is time to also think of Transmedia the noun; as a thing in-and-of itself. As I have argued elsewhere (2016, 2017), Transmedia (the noun) is fundamentally dissimilar to 'traditional' and established media forms, the process of 'transmediation' working outside Norman Holland's established definition of suspension-of-

disbelief, and altering the relationship of text and audience to one of experience and participant.

Such considerations may perhaps have contributed to our collective '*what the &%&#?*' conversations in Medellin, as our definitions seem to fluctuate between adjective and noun depending on context. After all, Dowd et al's suggestion that 'all media is transmedia' is predicated on this duality, and is consequently an unwitting dichotomic statement, suggesting at-once a totality ('*all media*') - which can only imply an adjective, a network of interdependent processes connecting all media touchpoints - and at the same time a noun ('*is transmedia*'), the 'is' implying a thing in-and-of itself (I would suggest that to maintain the sense of transmedia the adjective, the statement should be 'all media is transmediated').

As we can see then, the problem is that this slippage of the term across both adjective and noun may broaden the definition to the point of irrelevance. I therefore suggest that we leave transmedia where it is, as an adjective to describe interdependent relationships between media touchpoints, and discover a new term for uniquely transmediated experiences, which might otherwise constitute Transmedia the noun. My proposed rubric for determining such experiences is related to my previous observations regarding suspension of disbelief in transmedia, VR and other immersive experiences: as Brown (2012) notes, 'games require players' instead of audiences, otherwise they are simply potential games, and where we have transmediated experiences which require participants over audiences (otherwise they are only potential experiences), this would constitute the use of my proposed new term. These experiences have the unusual property of arguably operating as a form of holarchy; from one direction they are parts of a consistent and identifiable whole – a whole that has 'edges' so we can see where the experience begins and ends – and from another direction they operate as separate touchpoints with their own identities, hence the term *Holarchic Media* suggested above. In a holarchy, an individual holon is both a part and a whole; consequently with Holarchic Media experiences, we may see individual touchpoints of the experience as constituting both part of the experience, and also being collectively the totality of the experience. This is the final element of the definition which separates it from transmedia; where transmedia is an adjective describing the connections between media nodes, Holarchic Media as a noun refers to the nodes of a connected experience, rather than the connectivity between them. Thus Holarchic Media experiences are also transmedia experiences, while transmedia experiences are not necessarily holarchic in nature.

The question at this stage then, is where to go with this definition. As I say, my suggestion is that the term applies to connected media which is experiential in nature, however 'experiential' would also include ludic and immersive media (such as XR) for example, so Holarchic Media would likely constitute a subordinate category of an 'Experiential Media' taxonomy,

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while transmedia would constitute the ordinate category. Work such as NFBC's *Highrise* and *Bear 71* might fall into this category, as might Al Jazeera's excellent *Pirate Fishing* and *SyHacked* projects, output from Bloemkamp's Oats Studios, and standalone works such as Kaayk's superb *The Modular Body, Netwars, Paz Vs Stuff,* and Elaine McMillion Sheldon's exquisite *Hollow*, as well as many others. These are experiential, connected media experiences across narrative, documentary, journalism and more; transmedia in nature, with an holarchic identity, and for which no other collective definition is sufficiently relevant.

So far I have focused solely on content to provide examples of Holarchic Media, however to conclude I wish to offer one final consideration, which will warrant further study as a larger paper. This is the idea that a platform or system can also potentially function as part of the definition, and will be predicated on the idea – which I will develop further elsewhere - that layers of influence may constitute an experiential holarchy. If we take a platform such as Instagram for example, at every level it has various modes of penetration and influence, from the influence of the channel itself, the influencers using the channel, and even the channel's dependency on computing structures – what Lanier (2010) refers to as 'Lock-in' - which are themselves inherently influential. At the same time however, in another reading, Instagram constitutes a clearly experiential whole. If we consider the principles of a holarchy – that a holon is simultaneously a part and a whole – we may see that Instagram is both a single-experience totality, and simultaneously an enormous breadth of varied experiences, linked as a complex system of interdependencies. If all media is indeed *transmediated*, then Instagram may warrant the definition of Holarchic Media too.

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