“Transmedia Storytelling in Which Music is the Biggest Component”

Great research! The link between transmedia and music seems invisible... this research evidence the connection! (Scolari, 2014)

By: Dries Heerkens
Student number: 093542
Master Media Innovation
Module 2: Media theory
1. Introduction

Transmedia Storytelling can be described as “telling a story across multiple media. Each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa” (Jenkins, 2003).

At the most basic level, transmedia stories “are stories told across multiple media. At the present time, the most significant stories tend to flow across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel & Robison, 2006, p. 46).

Transmedia storytelling is not the same as cross-media story. Cross-media storytelling focusses on telling the same story but with different media (e.g. Lord of the Rings – in which the film and the book are telling the same story) and transmedia storytelling uses different media, but each medium has its own contribution to the story and tells its unique part of the story.

History has shown some successful examples of transmedia storytelling. A famous example is The Matrix – which started as a film. After the film, The Matrix has expanded the story with two more films, series of animated shorts, two collections of comic books and several video games. Each media tells the a different story in the same story world.

A second example of transmedia story telling is Tomb Raider, which tells the story of Lara Croft – a female archeologist who is looking for hidden treasures. This story started with a video game, for PC and multiple consoles. After the success of the videogames the story expanded with two film and different series of comics.

The last example to be stressed out is Lost. Originally started with a television series, but expanded the story to webisodes and comics which both gave out clues and extra information about the story and the characters of the series. Watchers of the series could choose to only follow the story as presented on television, or to gain extra knowledge about the story by using the other media as well.

It can be recognized that the examples which are used on the internet and in the theory of Jenkins focusses mainly on television series, films, comics, novels and video-games as a starting point. This Is raising the following questions: Is transmedia storytelling also done in which music was the starting point and how will this develop in the future?
An interesting statement of Ewing is that “Many of today’s top pop stars are transmedia operators to some degree, selling their music as part of their story, not as discrete art works” (Ewing, 2011)

In this essay will be focused on the options in Transmedia Storytelling in which music is the biggest component. The animated band ‘The Gorillaz’ is seen as the pioneers in transmedia storytelling in music (Vasile & Godest, 2011). Therefor a case study is done on this band, supported by the theories presented by Scolari in his paper ‘Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative Worlds, and Branding in Contemporary Media Productions’ from 2009.

2. Transmedia storytelling in music

The big advantages of transmedia storytelling in which music is the biggest component are that it has unique kind of options, which are only available for music. A band or artist can release games around a band, they can organize an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) to promote a new album and make story around their lives – these are options which could be done in any kind of transmedia storytelling. But, music has extra options, it provides options which are unique for the music industry. Think about a live appearances which can be visited by fans or dance moves linked to a song. These options contribute to the story of a band or artist and connects fans. See below a list of options for transmedia storytelling in music:

1. A band application – with live updates of the band or artist, in which music and photos are shared and where information about the individuals of the band are given.

2. A music video – Which can be used to give visual elements to a song. Music videos could also be used to tell a story. A well-known example is ‘Interstalla 555 – The 5tory of a 5ecret 5tar 5ystem’ – this is project by the electronic band ‘Daft Punk’ which shows a visual realization of the star system. Each track of the album ‘Discovery’ has a video clip which displays as an episode of the story.

3. Dance moves – Adding a particular dance move to a song has a positive effect on the interactivity between the song and the audience. An example of this is the dance belonging to the song ‘Gangnam Style’ by ‘Psy’. After the song became a hit – people became interested in the dance of the song, which led to a viral effect, resulting in that the video clip of the song became the most viewed video on YouTube ever.

4. Live appearance – in some cases a live appearance of the band or artist is more than just performing the most popular band songs, thanking the audience and leaving for the next live appearance. For example, Rammstein – a German rock band, has a very high live reputation because they provide highly spectacular shows. It gives a unique experience to the audience and the live appearances adds value to the band’s story.
5. ARG (Alternate Reality Game) – for a promotion of a new album, bands and artists use ARGs to create a buzz around an album. Arcade Fire created an ARG as a promotion for their album ‘Reflektor’ by using a guerilla marketing campaign in which they let street artist make mysterious codes in several big cities in the world.

6. Documentary – A documentary is used by bands and artists to show their fans how they work, what they think about music, how the relationships are within the band and various other insides. By means of a documentary fans get the opportunity to gain extra knowledge about their favorite artist.

7. Websites – Websites are used to share updates about the band or artist, informing when and where shows will take place and share information about the band or artist. In addition, social media made it also possible to create an online community around a band or artist.

8. Videogames – Several band and artist have made a pc or console game in which the band characters are the main players of the game. An example is the game ‘The Beatles: Rockband’.

In conclusion, there are several options for bands and artists to create a transmedia story, maybe even more than in any other type of story, see figure 1. However, only a few succeeded in creating a story world and using a successful combination of above mentioned options, leading to a big success.

![Figure 1: Options in transmedia storytelling in the music industry](image)

Recently Scolari (2014) questions in the article ‘Transmedia y musica’ if transmedia has the possibility to save the dropping music industry “According to some professionals like Robert Pratten transmedia
narratives can bring added value to music and drive sales. Pratten compares the music market with perfumes "We do not sell perfumed water, but dreams." Transmedia could add to this dream-narrative musical product dimension. The construction of narrative-centered music worlds would place the artist in a position of social catalyst in direct Connection with the communities, to give them a reason to spend Their money.” (Pratten, 2010)

3. **Case study: 'The Gorillaz' - pioneers of Transmedia Storytelling in music**

‘The Gorillaz’ is an animated band from England started in 1998. The band was started by Damon Albarn - front man of the British Britpop band ‘Blur’ and Jamie Hewlett - comic book artist and designer of ‘Tank Girl’. The two met each other – when Hewlett interviewed Albarn - and shared the thought of starting a new project, inspired by their idea that “there is nothing substance on MTV”. They agreed on starting a new cartoon band, named “The Gorillaz”.

Their first EP ‘Tomorrow comes today” was released in 2000. One year later their first album “Gorillaz” was released. This album had high attention in the media and was nominated for “Best British Album” in the BRIT awards, besides the band was also nominated as “Best British Newcomer” and “Best British Group”. At this stage could be concluded that the group had positioned themselves as high quality musicians, besides the band created a fan-base. However, only being a good musical act was not enough for the duo. They wanted to create a new dimension on music – making a transmedia story world around the band.

3.1 **The overarching structure of the Narratology**

The music videos released by the band, showed a story around the characters of the band, which are easily identifiable by the audience; 2D is the lead vocalist, Murdoch the bass guitarist, Russel the drummer and Noodle the guitarist and only female band member. – These character have been central in the band from its beginning.

In 2002 they released their first DVD ‘Phase one: celebrity take down’. The DVD came with a CD-ROM containing wallpapers, screensavers and music. It also contained a game, in which the player have to complete mission, in which the player is a policeman who has to defend ‘Kong studios” – the virtual studio from the band. In 2006 ‘Phase two: slowboat of hades’ was released. This DVD contained new material of the band including an appearance in ‘MTV Cribs’ – in which the virtual band showed how their house and shared their lifestyle, besides the DVD included live appearances, video games, speeches by the band-members and - of course - music. In the meantime ‘The Gorillaz’ had released a second album, played various live appearances and also contributed in different console games , such as RockBand, Singstar and Guitar Hero.
By this time, ‘The Gorillaz’ had invented their story world – in which different media contributed to the information about the band, every in its unique way – every component gave the consumers the opportunity to get more information about the characters and the diegesis.

In 2009 the band released a documentary called ‘Bananaz’. In this documentary everything behind the scene is shown to the audience – how the story world was build, who are behind the voices and how the drawing processes are done. This gave the consumers more answers about the story world – mysterious elements of the story world were revealed in ‘Bananaz’.

That the duo also follows the latest trends and developments on the media market can be concluded when looking to the promotion campaign along with the third album ‘Plastic Beach’ in 2010. The album was promoted with a 3D video called ‘Journey to Plastic Beach’ in which Murdoch is in search for the lost spirits of the band (Vasile & Godest, 2011). Next to this an online treasure hunt was organized in which the players needed to find 12 characters of the Gorilla universe and on top of that an interactive game was launched on the site in which players could explore ‘the Gorilla universe’.

These actions lead to an incredible number of followers on social media. Today the Gorillaz have 8.5 million likes on Facebook, 250.000 followers on Twitter and 770.000 people connected via MySpace. This fan base is obviously very useful to communicate message and promote new actions.

‘The Gorillaz’ have shown that it is perfectly possible to create a story world around a band and used multiple options in Transmedia Storytelling. The results are clearly seen – looking at the social engagement of the audience – but also looking at the prices won by the album: 5 MTV awards, 1 Grammy and 1 NME award; which was ‘The innovation award’. The success is also reflected in the album sales: in total 15 million albums sold world-wide (Marchetto, 2007).

In most cases – the music of a band or artist is the only component of their narratology – while in the case of The Gorillaz the narrative structure is built with a lot more components, see table 1. This is useful for the band to create different entry points for the audience to get introduced to the band. Any of these textual units can be considered as an entry point to ‘The Gorillaz Universe’ and all messages and components are part of a larger whole.
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**Table 1: The Gorillaz Transmedia Narrative world**
3.2 Semiotic Framework

In order to make Transmedia Storytelling successful, strategies are set. Looking at ‘The Gorillaz’. The strategies The creation of microsites and the creation of user-generated content can be identified.

Firstly, the creation of microsites. Assuming that the music (CD’s and EP’s) is the biggest component in the narrative world of the band – the other components are to enrich the diegetic world by expanding the period between the music releases. The video clips, DVDs and videogames are used by The Gorillaz “to bridge” the period between the music releases.

The second strategy used is the creation of user-generated content. This happens on multiple ways, people make their own fan fiction of the band in form of drawings – based on the fictional characters. Besides people use social media to communicate with the band and show their creations (Scolari, 2009). Also fan-websites have been launched on the internet, in which fans post every information of the band (see: http://fans.gorillaz.com/ and http://www.gorillaz-unofficial.com/)

3.3 Specification on the message

From a semiotic perspective, Transmedia Storytelling is a narrative that includes a series of stories expressed through different media (Jenkins, 2013). This narrative articulates an expression with a hierarchy of values that act as the content of the fictional world. These values are expressed in all the different texts that integrate the space of ‘The Gorillaz Universe’ (Scolari, 2009).

Looking at ‘The Gorillaz Universe’ a combination of elements can always be noticed in all transmedia products, which are unique for ‘The Gorillaz’ and identifies them. This is part of the encoding process of the virtual band – also called “The message”.

- The characters: The characters are seen back in every transmedia product and are the most important signifiers. Sometimes only one character is used and in some cases a combination of multiple characters. Most of the time all four virtual band members are shown.; Each band member is easily identifiable, see figure 2 (From left to right: Russel, Murdoch, Noodle, 2D). The drawing style of Jamie Hewlett is also easy to identify. Therefore the visualization of the characters directly make the link the ‘The Gorillaz’. At the moment there are complete character descriptions known of the band members, which are gathered by multiple media.

  Figure 2: band members
The logo and band name: The logo of the band always have been the same. The logo shows the band name written as street art. Most of the time this signifier is in red, but also a black version of the logo has been published. The visualization of the logo also makes easily the link to the virtual band. Obviously the word “Gorillas” could have given different interpretations - some will directly think of a type of monkey. Therefor it is smart that the band has chosen to write the name with a ‘z’ on the end – to make the name unique for the band.

The lyrics: the meaning of the lyrics of the band are for many people a point of discussion. ‘The Gorillaz’ like to put different meanings in sentences and give a certain text multiple possibilities to interpret. This can be seen as a value for the band, which also lead to User Generated Content. The Lyrics of the song “Feel Good Inc.” raised a big discussion in which 238 people gave their interpretation of the meaning of the songs (Songmeaning.com, 2013)

The voices: The voices and accents can also be seen as a value for the band. Murdoc is voiced by Phill Cornwell and has a very typical British accent. 2D is the lead singer and voiced by Damon Albarn, who has a very recognizable voice. Russel is voiced by Remi Kabaka Jr. and has a typical Afro American accent. Noodle is done by different Japanese women, most of the time the bassist is done by Haruka Kuroda. This combination makes it easy to recognize the voices to the characters.

These elements are expressed in all different transmedia products. The set of characters, topics, lyrics and voices define the fictional world of the brand.

3.4 Specification on decoding the message

From a semiotic perspective, every text constructs its reader. In the case of ‘The Gorillaz’, the band created multiple customer groups, the cartoons are focusing on comic-readers, the live appearances to festival visitors and the online games to online-gamers, in other words – the story can be decoded on multiple ways – some will see ‘The Gorillaz’ as cartoon figures who make music and are characters in games while others see them as a virtual band who experimented with multiple media. Signiers can be signified in different ways. This leaves the transmedia consumers in a choice to be on a first level, the single text consumers – if the ‘readers’ uses only one element from the transmedia world, e.g. listening to one song of the virtual band. On a second level are the single media consumers – if the reader plays all the games the band has developed but does not pay attention to the other media used. On a third level there are transmedia consumers – if the reader process representations from
different media and languages and reconstruct more extensive areas of ‘The Gorillaz Universe’ – e.g. buying the album, playing the games and watching the documentary.

However, the music of the band creates different implicit consumers. Their style is a composition of multiple musical genres, with a large number of influences including alternative, rock, hip hop, electronica, dub and pop. Therefore it has a very high reach and attracts different types of “music-consumers” (Scolari, 2009).

This explains the big fan base of the band, which also have led to User Generated Content (UGC) on the internet, an example is the many drawings that “readers” made from the band and post it online, see figure 3.

![UGC by fans](image-url)
4. Conclusions

In conclusion, ‘The Gorillaz’ have shown that it is perfectly possible to create a transmedia story world around a music band or artist. The Gorillaz started with creating a fictive world with fictive characters around their music. Besides, they set standard elements in the diegesis and finally they used multiple media to let the transmedia consumers discover the world and attract different consumers by using different media and attract implicit consumers by their music which is based on different styles and influences.

Creating transmedia story worlds around bands and artist is already in a developing stage, based on the following observations. Nine Inch Nails created an ARG for the promotion of the new album, Justin Bieber built a fan-base in which his fans are called ‘Beliebers’ and Deadmau5 gave a concert in Toronto which was broadcasted live on YouTube and leaded to high interaction on social media between attendees and non-attendees of the concert and think about the American rapper Eminem “Eminem has always operated, shifting his audience’s focus between real life, music, video and film – each offering a piece of the experience but none, even the music, complete in itself. Imported from Detroit fits into Eminem’s story, and though its musical impact is mostly only implied” (Ewing, 2011).

All examples of how transmedia is developing and is more integrating in the music industry. Might transmedia by the answer to how to solve the music industry?
References


