

Immersion, social media and transmedia storytelling: the "inclusive" mode of reception*

Inmersión, redes sociales y narrativa transmedia: la modalidad de recepción inclusiva

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Abstract

In the present article, I argue that social media become the main site of a new set of relations between fiction and reality in transmedia storytelling by enabling interaction between characters (in the fictional world) and interactors (in the real world). These relations underlie a new mode of reception, which I propose to call the inclusive mode of reception. Unlike the "immersive" mode of reception, whose ultimate goal is to substitute one reality for another by altering the interactor's reality and plunging them into an entirely different fictional world, the main objective of the "inclusive" mode of reception is to make possible the simultaneous co-existence of two worlds (those of the interactor's everyday reality and of the fictional world they consume) and to connect them using social media as an interface.

Keywords

Social media, transmedia storytelling, interface, immersion, mode of reception.

Resumen

En el presente artículo, sostengo que las redes sociales se convierten en el sitio principal de un nuevo conjunto de relaciones entre la ficción y la realidad en la narración transmedia al permitir la interacción entre los personajes (en el mundo ficticio) y los interactores (en el mundo real). Estas relaciones subyacen a un nuevo modo de recepción, que propongo llamar el modo de recepción inclusivo. A diferencia del modo de recepción "inmersivo", cuyo objetivo final es sustituir una realidad por otra alterando la realidad del interactor y sumergiéndolos en un mundo ficticio completamente diferente, el objetivo principal del modo de recepción "inclusivo" es posibilitar el coexistencia simultánea de dos mundos (los de la realidad cotidiana del interactor y del mundo ficticio que consumen) y conectarlos utilizando las redes sociales como interfaz.

Palabras clave

Redes sociales, narración transmedia, interfaz, inmersión, modo de recepción.

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1. Introduction

The relations between social media and fictional characters have, until now, been analyzed almost exclusively through the lens of fandom¹. These studies highlight in particular the important role played by fans in the creation of social media accounts devoted to their favorite characters. Such “unofficial” accounts enable these fans to become a part of both the fictional world of their favorite figure and a community of fans around that fictional world. Rarely, however, do scholars examine the relatively recent phenomenon of incorporating social media into transmedia narratives through the creation of “official” accounts for fictitious characters. This use of social media in transmedia narratives is no longer limited to independent productions such as *Hello Geekette* (2008-2011), *Noob* (2008-2017), *Marble Hornets* (2009-2014) and *Carmilla* (2014-2016). It is now also found in productions by major Hollywood studios, including the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2008-present)².

Angela Ndalians touches on the topic in her work on viral advertising campaigns, which she sees as an extended form of narrative (Ndalians, 2012:163-193). For Ndalians, these advertising campaigns heighten the audience’s immersion in a fictional universe by adapting interactive strategies derived from alternate reality games, such as navigating an urban environment using social media with the goal of solving a mystery³. In the case of this particular example, participants must gather information that is dispersed both across various platforms (websites, Facebook and Twitter accounts, films, television series, etc.) and in various places around town.

2. Theoretical framework

In the present text, I propose to initiate a discussion which will more directly interrogate the incorporation of social media into transmedia narratives through the creation of “official” accounts for fictional characters. It is im-

portant to clarify what is meant by transmedia in this article, and how others have employed it, since the term transmedia encompasses a variety of practices. My approach borrows from the media studies theory of transmedia storytelling, leaving aside the interrogations brought to light by the narrative studies theory of transmedial narrative. More precisely, the latter area – variously described as transmedial narratology, transmedial narrative and narrative media studies – interrogates the nature of narrative in light of the relationship between narrative and media, asking questions such as how the intrinsic properties of the medium shape the form of narrative and affect the narrative experience, what properties of a given medium are favorable or detrimental to narrativity, what can medium x do that y cannot, what are the narrative genres, devices, or problems that are unique to a medium, or under which conditions nonverbal media can tell stories (Ryan, 2004: 35). As narrative theorist David Herman pointed out, transmedial narratology is “the study of narratives of all sorts, irrespective of origin, medium, theme, reputation, or genre” (Herman, 2002: 47).

If the narrative studies theory of transmedial narrative is concerned with the study of medium-specific and non-medium-specific nature of narrative, the media studies theory of transmedia storytelling, on the other hand, seeks to understand how a storyworld unfolding across media platforms. Media studies theorists have developed, as a result, several concepts (often similar) to fully grasp the subtleties of transmedia storytelling. Just to name a few examples, let’s mention that Marc Ruppel describes as “cross-sites narratives” structures that “shatter the fixity of narrative as a single-medium endeavor and establish instead a multiply-mediated storyworld” (Ruppel 2006). For Jill Walker, “distributed narratives [are stories that] can’t be experienced in a single session or in a single space” (Walker 2004: 91). Glorianna Davenport identifies “very distributed stories” as narratives “capable of expanding the social engagement of audiences while offering intensive narrative immersion in a story experience that plays out in multiple

public and private venues” (Davenport, Agamanolis, Barry, Bradley & Brooks, 2000: 456-469).

Finally, last example, media theorist Henry Jenkins has popularised what he calls “transmedia storytelling.” As Jenkins explains:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction (Jenkins, 2006: 95-96).

We can add to this definition the user-generated content as one of the strategies for expanding fictional worlds (Scolari, 2009: 585-606). I agree with Carlos Alberto Scolari that most of these concepts “try to define roughly the same experience: a sense production and interpretation practice based on narratives expressed through a coordinated combination of languages and media or platforms” (Scolari, 2009: 588). It is this kind of experience that is at the center of this article.

My goal is to demonstrate through a case study of the transmedia story *Marble Hornets* (2009-2014) how the presence of fictional characters on social media creates new relations between their fictional world and the reality of the *interactor* – relations, moreover, which are accentuated by the use of mobile technologies⁴. The term “interactor” – a portmanteau word formed out of “interaction” and “actor” – is employed throughout this chapter rather than the usual terms “spectator” or “viewer.” Even when the term “spectator” does not refer to a more or less passive “receiver,” and we grant them the full agency at the basis of all aesthetic experience, one of the advantages of the term “interactor” is that it makes it possible to contextualise, in its very formulation, the phenomenon I seek to observe. Indeed, as Catherine Guéneau rightly points out, “on the web, are we not (simultaneously

or separately) reader, spectator, player, listener, scriptwriter, and even sometimes filmer (with a webcam)?” (Guéneau, 2006: 70). The term “interactor” thus highlights the active/creative nature of aesthetic experience produced by some transmedia narratives. In addition, then, I will also discuss how these new relations between interactor and fictional world force a reassessment of the concept of “immersion” – concept that was developed to better grasp the relations between fiction and reality created by more traditional media such as the novel, the graphic novel, television, cinema and video games.

In order to overcome the heuristic sterility of these two concepts, I propose to view social media as an “interface” between the interactor’s reality and the fictional world they consume. The principle underlying my approach is quite simple: by enabling interaction between a character (in the fictional world) and an interactor (in the real world), social media has become the main site of a new set of relations between fiction and reality. I must say from the outset that interactors do not believe they are actually interacting with a fictional character. They know they are interacting with an actor/writer “in character” on social media. In other words, interactors understand that these characters are fictional, but pretend to engage with them as if they are not fictional, as if they were real. This is very similar to interacting with fan-made fictional character profiles. Nevertheless, it is sometimes more difficult to delineate the boundaries between fiction and reality⁵. More precisely, then, I wish to advance the hypothesis that social media acts as an interface which enables fictional elements to be present in the interactor’s everyday reality, thereby creating new ways in which the interactor enters into contact with the characters of fictional worlds. As an analytical concept, this interface enables me to ask questions about the limits of and boundaries between representation and reality, and the way in which fictional information materializes in our everyday lives. Over the past few years such interfaces have become important conceptual frameworks which enable us to think through and beyond dua-

lisms – such as the virtual and the physical or fiction and reality – by focusing on the boundaries separating various systems, frameworks or kinds of software, and on the forms of contact and communication which might be possible if these boundaries were to be crossed or transgressed⁶. The concept of interface also makes it possible to formulate questions around the way in which connections among the various systems are possible. In the end, the interface is a space of contact and negotiation among the various systems, one which must constantly be explored.

Viewing social media as an “interface” between the interactor’s reality and the fictional world they consume thus highlights the new relations between fiction and reality. These new relations underlie a new mode of reception which I propose to call the “inclusive” mode of reception, which I contrast with the “immersive” mode of reception connected with the concept of immersion. Unlike the “immersive” mode of reception, whose ultimate goal is – without ever really reaching it – *to substitute one reality for another* – by altering the interactor’s reality and plunging them into an entirely different fictional world – the main objective of the “inclusive” mode of reception is to make possible the simultaneous *co-existence of two worlds* (those of the interactor’s everyday reality and of the fictional world they consume) and to connect them using social media as an interface. Put differently, it is as if the fictional worlds become part of our everyday reality through social media.

3. Fictional Characters on Social Media

The presence of fictional characters on social media is not a recent phenomenon. Fans have been creating pages devoted to their favorite characters since the emergence of social media on sites such as MySpace. Today, fans continue to manage such pages on Facebook, LiveJournal, Tumblr and Twitter as a way of living out their favorite fictional world and continuing

the narrative. This role play is a way of entering both this world and a community of fans connected with it⁷. The people behind these unofficial pages (or profiles) interact amongst themselves or with other fans from the same world in a manner consistent with the psychology of the character whose presence they wish to simulate on the Internet. Others appropriate a fictional character’s identity in order to generate humorous or satirical posts on social media⁸.

There also exists on social media profiles of fictional characters which could be described as “official,” in the sense that these profiles are managed by the creators of the characters in question or at least the rights holders. On some social media sites, it is possible to verify the authenticity of these profiles in order to let other users know their status. The blue check mark on Facebook and blue badge on Twitter, for example, confirm this authenticity. These profiles are mostly used to promote new products, whether a new film, comic book, or spin-off products. To be convinced of this, one need only browse the official profiles of two of the most popular comic characters today: Superman and Iron Man⁹. Given that these two characters now operate in a transmedia fictional world in which video games, comic books, television series, and films cross over and add to the same narrative, it is not surprising to find on Superman’s Facebook profile, for example, an advertisement about the addition of the Supergirl character to the *LEGO Dimensions* video game, or a link to pre-order online the latest *Superman* comic book.

For the past few years, creators of characters have not been content to use the character’s profile just to introduce them to the public and promote cultural products related to them. Instead, some creators use these profiles to develop the narrative of the fictional world in which their characters live. With these social media, creators make interactors interact with their fictional world in an entirely different manner. This kind of interaction is harder to obtain when these interactors are readers (of novels or comic books), spectators (of films or televi-

sion series) or players (of video games)¹⁰. The characters' use of social media makes it possible, first of all, to greater involve consumers of the cultural products of a fictional world by filling certain narrative gaps between the different segments of a storyline, whether these are dispersed across several instalments of a specific medium (a series of films, novels or comic books) or across a variety of platforms, as is the case with a transmedia narrative¹¹. The presence of characters on social media also provides interactors with an opportunity to enter into new kinds of relations with them. It is not only that the characters talk about elements of their personal lives, as do millions of real users, thereby giving interactors privileged access to their most inner thoughts; these characters also comment on current affairs and contemporary cultural phenomena, sharing their favorite quotes from recent films, or asking for suggestions for hip restaurants. The way fictional characters use certain social media, such as the microblogging tool Twitter, gives them an air of authenticity, in that this use reproduces the social interactions found on social media on a regular basis¹². It thereby situates the lives of these characters in interactors' everyday reality. It also gives the latter the possibility of interacting with these characters in real time (and perhaps also to influence their storylines) insofar as the characters are able to respond to comments by interactors on social media. In short, interactors can learn more about the lives of these characters by following their profile while they follow the narrative of the fictional world in which they live.

4. *Marble Hornets* (2009-2014)

Marble Hornets is a good illustration of the way narrative form has changed in the wake of the presence of fictional characters on social media. *Marble Hornets* is a transmedia story that developed between 2009 and 2014 on three media: 1) the forum of the site *Something Awful* (somethingawful.com), 2) a Twitter account, and 3) a web series broadcast on two YouTube accounts. *Marble Hornets* tells

the story of a young man named Jay who tries to find out why his friend, Alex, is in hiding. Alex was shooting a student film called "*Marble Hornets*" but abandoned the project two months after production began. Before disappearing, Alex gave his footage to Jay, asking him never to speak to him about it. Despite all this, Jay decides to post a few clips to YouTube. By sharing Alex's story in this way Jay cherishes the hope that a web surfer can help him to solve the mystery and ultimately to find his friend. As he explores the content of the archives, Jay discovers that Alex had been intimidated by the appearance of a mysterious figure during the shooting of his film. The characters in *Marble Hornets* refer to this figure in a black suit – who appears to be inspired by the supernatural fictional character Slenderman – as "the Operator"¹³. As his encounters with the Operator begin to expand beyond the locations of his film shoot, Alex gradually descends into a state of paranoia. We thus see Alex's work and personal life quietly crumble as the posting of short clips on YouTube advances. As Jay examines the video footage left behind by Alex, events involving the Operator begin to influence his life as well. This mysterious figure then begins to take over Jay's personal life too, forcing him, like his friend Alex, to film himself. The YouTube videos alternate between those showing Jay's life and those showing Alex's, underscoring the similarities and connections between them since the appearance of the Operator in their lives.

Marble Hornets was presented to the interactor as a transmedia experience from the outset. The story began to develop in 2009 on the site *Something Awful* (on June 18), on YouTube (on June 19), and on Twitter (on June 20). *Marble Hornets* thus officially began on June 18, 2009, when Jay posted an entry on the *Something Awful* site's forum under the nickname "cegars"¹⁴. In a 750-word post, Jay set out Alex's story and explained why he had felt the need to view the footage left behind by his friend. The character Jay first appeared in a discussion thread in which participants create urban legends and scary stories, backing up their claims with convincing and supposedly docu-

mentary evidence. A YouTube account called *Marble Hornets* was set up the day after the publication of the text on the *Something Awful* site, on June 19, 2009. An initial video, called "Introduction," was uploaded on June 20. In this video, Jay explains briefly his reasons for sharing on YouTube the content of Alex's archive. The creators of *Marble Hornets* then set up a Twitter account for Jay the day after posting the first video, on June 21. An initial tweet was set out that same day at 11:48 p.m., linking the Twitter account to the YouTube site: "Due to interest in the youtube [sic] channel, set up a twitter account. Updates posted here"¹⁵. A second YouTube channel, called "totheark," was set up on July 22. The videos shown on this channel were, for the most part, cryptic and threatening responses to the videos on the *Marble Hornets* YouTube channel. Although no information about the identity of the character behind the setting up of this channel was revealed throughout the *Marble Hornets* story, the consensus among fans was that it was someone who had been involved in the shooting of Alex's student film¹⁶.

All told, Jay published nineteen comments on the *Something Awful* forum and uploaded ninety-two videos on the *Marble Hornets* YouTube channel, with a total of more than eighty-eight million viewings¹⁷. The "totheark" channel, which showed thirty-nine videos, had slightly fewer than ten million viewings. In the end, Jay sent 555 tweets from his Twitter account @marblehornets, which had 58,000 followers. Jay's tweets, making direct reference to the *Marble Hornets* YouTube channel, notified people of video updates and sometimes of technical problems. Some tweets described the process behind assembling various video segments that were then shown on the YouTube channel. For example, between the posting of the video *Entry #2* on June 21, 2009, and that of the video *Entry #3* on June 23, 2009, Jay sent the following four tweets:

June 21, 2009 at 10:50 p.m.: "Been looking at tapes all day. Nothing interesting so I'm calling it a night."¹⁸

June 22, 2009 at 1:40 p.m.: "More tapes, more of the same."¹⁹

The same day, at 9:14 p.m.: "Just realized I haven't eaten all day. Taking a much-needed break."²⁰

June 23, 2009 at 1:37 a.m.: "Exhausted from compiling entry #3. Posting it tomorrow."²¹

The Twitter account also enabled the creators of *Marble Hornets* to develop the storyline by adding new content, like these three examples of tweets sent by Jay in which he describes his fears and his future plans:

February 10, 2010 at 4:12 p.m.: "Considering boarding up my windows. Still feeling incredibly unsafe here."²²

Three days later, on February 13, 2010 at 10:51 a.m.: "Looking through some surveillance footage. Not sure what I'll find. I feel like I just have know [sic] one more time what's been going on."²³

And finally, the last example, from February 25, 2010 at 4:12 p.m.: "Feeling like I'm being watched constantly."²⁴

Marble Hornets generated a significant response from fans on social media. Interactors produced several videos with their interpretation of the story, or simply to show their reaction to certain videos²⁵. They also interacted with the principal character, Jay, on his Twitter account, asking him for example how he felt after posting a particularly emotional video or what his future plans were. In the course of his search for Tim, one of the actors in Alex's student film, Jay announced in a tweet on January 10, 2012 at 5:49 p.m. that he was thinking about expanding his search: "Going to look outside of the downtown area soon. There is still Rosswood park, but I'm not going there alone."²⁶ After an interactor asked him: "Who would you go with?", Jay replied, "That's the problem. I don't trust anyone."²⁷

5. Relations between Fiction and Reality: Immersion vs. Inclusion

Under the concept of immersion, the relation between our reality and the fictional world is one of exclusion. In its absolute conception, which, in reality, is never achieved, immersion can be described as the experience of feeling transported into an environment different from our own and invented from scratch (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2001; Grau, 2003; and Therrien, 2013). More precisely, works of fiction whose objective is to immerse the interactor into a fictional world try to give the interactor the illusion of being surrounded by a reality completely different from his or her own – a reality that tries to monopolize all his or her entire attention. One example of such absorptive experience is perceptual immersion which seeks to submerge the senses (Ditton & Lombard 1997). Or, we might refer to the kind of psychological engagement that we see in certain activities such as video games, which involve a period of mental concentration during a precise activity (Therrien, 2013: 452-453). Another type might also include imaginative/narrative immersion, which involves directing our awareness of the real world toward imaginary narratives (Ryan, 2001: 98). Regardless of the type of immersion in question, its ultimate goal is to give the interactor the impression that he or she leaves his or her everyday reality in order to *plunge* into another reality – while always aware, to some degree, of his or her own involvement within it and the external conditions under which s/he is participating in a mediated fiction. This new reality is designed as to be different from our own as air is from water, hence the use of the metaphorical term immersion, derived from the physical experience of being completely submerged in water. In sum, immersion relies on a feeling of "presence," an impression suggestive of being in a living environment in real time (Grau, 2003: 7).

By enabling interaction with characters on social media, some creators, like those behind *Marble Hornets*, interrogate the traditional relation of exclusion between fictional worlds and our everyday reality. As I already mentio-

ned, the goal behind the various immersive strategies (in particular, perceptual immersion, immersion as psychological engagement and imaginative/narrative immersion) can be quickly summarized as that of transporting the interactor from his or her everyday reality to a fictional world. This relation involves a temporary and voluntary cutting off from one's reality in favor of another mediated reality, even if the interactor is, to a certain extent, always aware of his or her own reality. The interactor's attention thus alternates between the two worlds throughout his or her immersion. Marie-Laure Ryan elegantly expresses this when she describes the metaphor of immersion as the physical experience of being completely submerged in water: "The ocean is an environment in which we cannot breathe; to survive immersion, we must take oxygen from the surface, stay in touch with reality" (Ryan, 2001: 97). Despite this constant back-and-forth between these two worlds, the interactor's reality and the fictional world are mutually exclusive, insofar as the two realities cannot exist simultaneously.

In the case of a transmedia story using social media, the interactor is not only immersed in a fictional world, but fictional elements also enter his or her everyday reality through social media. This interaction on social media between the interactor and fictional characters breaks the autonomy of the fictional world by presenting it not as a separate world but rather as forming part of the "real" world of the interactor. In this way, the heuristic sterility of the concept of immersion is revealed, hindering us from distinguishing between the interactor's immersion in another world (i.e., replacing his or her everyday reality with a completely different world) and the introduction of elements of a fictional world into their everyday reality.

Transmedia narratives such as *Marble Hornets* are a good illustration of how some creators today develop other modes of reception which diverge from that of the interactor's immersion in a fictional world. The presence on social media of such characters as Jay from *Marble Hornets* encourages a mode of reception which I describe as "inclusive," in contrast

with the “immersive” mode of reception. Whereas the immersive mode of reception gives the interactor the feeling of being transported into another reality (while still being aware of his or her own reality) by plunging them into a fictional world, the “inclusive” mode of reception makes possible the co-existence of a fictional world with the interactor’s everyday reality. Here social media plays the role of an interface between the fictional world and the interactor’s reality. In other words, interaction between a character (the fictional world) and the interactor (the real world) takes place on social media (the interface)²⁸. Social media must thus be seen in this case as an interface which reconfigures not only the relations between fiction and reality, but also the space in which these relations unfold. Unlike the “immersive” mode of reception, the “inclusive” mode of reception does not replace the space of the interactor with that of the fictional world. The two spaces co-exist simultaneously and are partially superimposed through the intermediary of social media. Rather than limiting the fiction to the periphery, on the margins of the interactor’s reality, inclusion thus projects the fiction beyond the traditional surroundings of fictional worlds.

The exchanges between reality and fictional worlds become even more fluid when mobile technologies (cell phones, tablets, etc.) come into play, enabling fictional characters to enter the real world of interactors at any time and in any place. In the words of author Goran Racic, who created a Twitter profile for Thomas Loud, the main character in one of his novels, *Loud Evolution* (2013), “the overall idea is to have a story that’s unfolding in real life.”²⁹ The same idea is true of Steve Lowtwait, co-creator with Michael Smith of a transmedia story whose use of “websites and other social accounts that support the story [blend] fiction and reality to create a whole world” (Ramachandran 2013). Lowtwait and Smith created Facebook profiles for the main characters of their story. Some creators, to heighten the impression of realism, post images of fake text messages on the profile of their character. These fake conversations on smart phones (created with

such software as ifaketext.com) supposedly took place between their character and other fictional characters in the same fictional world.

Generally speaking, then, it is now acknowledged that mobile technology reinforces personal autonomy with respect to space and time by enabling us to detach ourselves completely from the place in which we find ourselves and to communicate at any hour of the day without remaining in a single spot (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu & Sey, 2007: 247). Similarly, the use of social media by fictional characters, in tandem with the use of mobile technologies, frees the fictional universe from a particular space and precise time. The “inclusive” mode of reception thus does not limit the interactor to a fixed place for a given period of time, whether this place is a movie theatre, a television or computer screen, or even what Michael Bull calls a “privatized auditory bubble” created by using a tablet or reading a novel or graphic novel (Bull, 2005: 344). Conversely, the use of social media by fictional characters, in tandem with mobile technologies, thus liberates the fictional world not only from a particular space, but also from a precise time. The boundaries between the space-time of the interactor and that of the fictional world become blurred and even almost impossible to distinguish, such that merely walking down the street on the way to work can be combined with interaction with a fictional character. “Inclusion” must thus be understood as an experiential activity which intermingles with experiences from our everyday lives. The elements of a fictional world such as those of *Marble Hornets* become a part of the daily routine of interactors by means of tweets. For example, an interactor can be in the midst of writing a personal tweet to a friend and at the same time receive a message from a fictional character, becoming a part of the person’s Twitter feed and perhaps inciting them to interact with the character once their personal message has been sent. We are now in “perpetual contact” no longer just with our personal network, but also potentially with some fictional worlds (Aakhus & Katz, 2002).

This playful interaction with a fictional character on social media, which becomes part of the interactor’s everyday routine, is in stark contrast with the “immersive” mode of reception of most fictional worlds, in which the interactor needs to devote a very precise period of time in order to consume a cultural product, whether it is a novel, comic book, film, episode of a television or web series, or a video game – even if more and more viewers are consuming these various media in a “distracted” manner.³⁰

The use of social media by fictional characters also gives rise to a kind of intimacy and familiarity with these characters, insofar as they imitate ordinary or normal social interactions. The fact that social media are now a part of our daily lives likely encourages interactors, as a way of increasing their enjoyment, to let fictional characters enter their everyday lives – the real world – in the form of online discussions. The impression of distance between the fictional world and the interactor’s everyday reality is thus greatly diminished through the creation and growth of relations between the interactor and fictional characters on social media. It is almost as if the fictional world were a part of the interactor’s “real” world – as if the action of the fictional world were unfolding in a temporal framework that is shared by both the interactor’s reality and the fictional world of the characters.

6. Conclusion

In the end, the relatively recent phenomenon of incorporating social media into transmedia narratives through the creation of “official” accounts for fictional characters is gradually introducing a number of important changes to the ways in which we interact with fictional worlds. This is why it is important to analyze not only the works containing transmedia narratives in isolation. Today we no longer speak just of the *Iron Man* film series (2008-) or the *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* television series (2013-), but also of the Marvel Cinematic Universe – a media franchise whose world spreads at one and the same time across films, television series, graphic no-

vels, web series, and a Twitter account. Similarly, focusing solely on the web series *Marble Hornets* would leave out a part of this world, which was also developed through a Twitter account and in the forum of the site *Something Awful*, which is also the basis of the “inclusive” mode of reception.

The “inclusive” mode of reception makes clear that other avenues, made possible by the emergence of social media, and unlike those of classical narrative immersion, are currently being explored by some creators. These new forms are becoming increasingly popular and are not limited to independent productions alone. They now include work produced by the major studios, signaling the emergence of a new trend. This trend may intensify with the consolidation of what Scott W. Campbell and Yong Jin Park call the “personal communication society” (Campbell & Park, 2008). These authors hypothesize that society is increasingly gravitating towards interpersonal communication. It is thus possible to imagine the popularization of an “inclusive” mode of reception with respect to transmedia narratives in a society in which individuals, placed at the center of mobile communication processes, become true autonomous nodes, freed from the boundaries of specific places and capable of communicating with anyone in their personal networks – including fictional characters.

Notas

1. See for example Coppa 2006; Booth 2008; Wood & Baughman 2012; McClellan 2013; Bore & Hickman 2013; and Lookadoo & Dickinson 2015.

2. To take just two examples (one from an independent production and the other from a Hollywood studio), the main characters in the independent Canadian web series *Carmilla*, Laura Hollis and Carmilla Karnstein, each have Twitter and Tumblr accounts: <https://twitter.com/HeyCarmilla>; <http://heycarmilla.tumblr.com>; <https://twitter.com/Laura2theLetter>; <http://laura2theletter.tumblr.com>. Consulted on 16 August 2016. With respect to Hollywood productions, we could mention the WHIH Newsfront Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/WHIHOfficial> – consulted 16 August 2016), which

is a fictional account officially connected with the Marvel Cinematic Universe. WHIH Newsfront is a platform for online news belonging to the fictional television network WHiH World News, which shows fake news bulletins describing the impact of the MCU heroes' various activities on the general population.

3. For an introduction to the concept alternate reality game (also known as augmented reality game), see Palmer & Petroski 2016.

4. I will henceforth use the term "interactor," a portmanteau word formed out of "interaction" and "actor," rather than the usual terms "spectator" or "viewer," because the latter do not appear suitable for the present discussion. Even when the term "spectator" does not refer to a more or less passive "receiver" and we grant them the full agency at the basis of all aesthetic experience, one of the advantages of the term "interactor" is that it makes it possible to contextualise, in its very formulation, the phenomenon I seek to observe. Indeed, as Catherine Guéneau rightly points out, "on the web, are we not (simultaneously or separately) reader, spectator, player, listener, scriptwriter, and even sometimes filmer (with a webcam)" (Guéneau, 2006: 70). The term "interactor" thus highlights the active/creative nature of aesthetic experience produced by some transmedia narratives.

5. To give just one example, the realism of the transmedia material online around the film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) was so convincing that it was difficult for some interactors to determine whether the world described by the story was fictive or real.

6. See Manovich 2001; Drucker 2011; and Jeong 2013.

7. See the following: Coppa 2006; Wood & Baughman 2012; McClellan 2013; Bore & Hickman 2013; and Lookadoo & Dickinson 2015.

8. The fanmade Twitter account @Lord_Voldemort7, based on the fictional character Lord Voldemort from J. K. Rowling's series of Harry Potter novels, is probably one of the most popular examples, with almost two million followers.

9. See <https://www.facebook.com/superman>, and https://twitter.com/Iron_Man. Consulted 16 August 2016.

10. Interaction between spectators/listeners and fictional characters existed before the advent of social media, but to a lesser extent. One can think of letters

sent by fans to fictional characters in soap operas, or, before that, in radio serials, who, in turn, would write back. Other examples include TV shows produced for children and comics fan clubs with a membership certificate signed by a fictional character (such as Clark Kent for the "Supermen of America" fan club).

11. Pre-social media precursors exist: to mention just one example, comic writers/editors are well-known for answering readers' questions about unresolved story events in the comic book's letters column.

12. Twitter may appear to be one of the platforms least susceptible to being used to tell stories. Despite its enormous user base and its diverse content, its reputation as a site for trivial conversation should leave the creators of fictional worlds cold. And yet its simplicity and ease of use have made possible an astonishing creativity.

13. For an exhaustive study of the *Slenderman* character, see Chess & Newsom 2015.

14. ce gars, "Comedy Goldmine: Create Paranormal Images," Online forum comment, *Something Awful*, June 18, 2009, <http://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3150591&userid=129681>.

15. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, June 21, 2009, 9:48 p.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/2274242683>.

16. Various participants, "totheark," Online discussion forum, *Marble Hornets*, <http://marblehornets.wikidot.com/totheark#toc3>, accessed August 16, 2016.

17. This figure and the following figures date from August 2016.

18. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, June 21, 2009, 9:50 p.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/2274272009>.

19. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, June 22, 2009, 12:40 p.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/2282682375>.

20. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, June 22, 2009, 8:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/2288502235>.

21. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, June 23, 2009, 12:37 a.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/2291310286>.

22. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, February 10, 2010,

- 2:12 p.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/8919140839>.
23. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, February 13, 2010, 8:51 a.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/9059882744>.
24. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, February 25, 2010, 2:19 p.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/9643792938>.
25. For examples of interactors' interpretation of the story, see the following videos: KAYALL, "Slender Series Explained.... Sort Of: Marble Hornets," YouTube video, August 16, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EN5VVZCPQPY>; and Night Mind, "Marble Hornets: Explained – Season One," YouTube video, July 20, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_sACgfX50g. For examples of interactors' reaction to certain videos, see the following videos: pie189, "WE WATCH MARBLE HORNETS - CAPS LOCK," YouTube video, January 12, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mm4GHKyc_0; and Aniril1, "Lets React: Marble Hornets! Part 1," YouTube video, July 30, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44p8o5u_QBk.
26. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, January 10, 2012, 3:49 p.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/156870266805420033>
27. Marble Hornets, Twitter post, January 10, 2012, 4:26 p.m., <https://twitter.com/marblehornets/status/156879741029318656>
28. Even though research has demonstrated that a person's real identity and their online identity cannot be exactly the same in terms of their behavior, here I am presupposing that interaction is carried out on the basis of the interactor's real identity and not on the basis of a fictional identity they have created. See Turkle, 1995: 177-209.
29. Quoted in Larson 2013.
30. See Dawson, 2007; Berman & Kesterson-Townes, 2012; and Hassoun, 2014.

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