



Transmedia story as an example of creative possibilities of fandom

ABSTRACT: Jakub Czopek, *Transmedia story as an example of creative possibilities of fandom*, Interdisciplinary Contexts of Special Pedagogy, No. 23, Poznań 2018. Pp. 183–193. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 2300-391X. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14746/ikps.2018.23.11>

The subject of the article is the creative activity of fan communities (fandom), with particular emphasis on the transmedia storytelling – stories presented simultaneously by means of various media. The development of the Internet in the Web 2.0 formula opened up a number of possibilities for the creation of fandoms focused on specific TV series, films, books or video games. The main manifestations of the activity of these groups can be boiled down, on the one hand, to analysing and commenting on a given cultural text, and on the other hand, to developing it by adding new stories, often using a different medium than the one originally used.

KEY WORDS: fandom, transmedia storytelling, remix culture, creativity

The emergence of the Internet and providing access to a growing number of users for commercial purposes with each passing year represents an unquestionable milestone in the development of culture in recent decades. The interactivity of Web 2.0 opened up new possibilities for media consumers. They no longer had to passively consume the content provided by institutionalised broadcasters. The foundation and *raison d'être* of social media platforms

such as Youtube and Facebook is primarily the content created by ordinary users, presented on these websites as videos, photographs, comments or personal reflections. The possibility of contacting others, building relationships revolving around a specific topic (books, films, music genres, etc.) enabled enthusiasts of each manifestation of culture to find each other (at least in theory) among millions of Internet users and to share their passions. Web 2.0 offers much more possibilities than Web 1.0. The idea of prosumption, which was described by A. Toffler decades ago,¹ became possible. The consumer-customer of the new type – prosumer – combines the characteristics of the consumer and the producer. On the one hand, they are recipients of media content that they consume thanks to the constantly evolving means of mass communication. On the other hand, they have the ability to produce, and thus create their own content. Of course, this creative activity of prosumers requires more competence than passive consumption – primarily technical and IT skills related to the operation of electronic devices, as well as an appropriate level of knowledge about the Internet and the places where their products and creations can be made public.

Therefore, the culture of participation, which H. Jenkins described as contrasting with the older convictions regarding the passive attitude of the media audience, gains relevance and shape.² In the culture of participation, consumers (and their particular type – fans) are invited to actively participate in the creation and redistribution of new content.³ The borders between traditional roles are thus

¹ A. Toffler, *Trzecia fala*, translated by: E. Woydyłło, M. Kłobukowski, Wydawnictwo Kurpisz S.A., Poznań 2006, pp. 305-329. Cf. Szymusiak T., *Prosument – Prosumpcja – Prosumeryzm: Ekonomiczne oraz społeczne korzyści prosumpcji na przykładzie Polski oraz Niemiec (podejście naukowe)*, Wydawnictwo Bezkręsy Wiedzy, Saarbrücken, 2015.

² H. Jenkins, *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów*, translated by: M. Bernatowicz, M. Filiciak, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw, 2007, p. 9.

³ H. Jenkins, *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów*, translated by: M. Bernatowicz, M. Filiciak, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw, 2007, p. 257.

blurred. The Internet user becomes not only the recipient, but also the sender. A professional creator can fulfil themselves from the position of a cultural text admirer, while their place will be taken over by an amateur. This approach to the nature of culture at the beginning of the 21st century has found its critics. A. Keen was frank in his descriptions of the cult of an amateur,⁴ who, by putting the average viewer in the role of an expert, leads to degradation and then to the destruction of the value of culture. While one can agree with the thesis that fetishisation of grass-roots creativity and putting it on the pedestal may lead to relatively negative effects in the long run, demonising all such cultural products seems to be unfounded. Expanding the media and communication competences of their users, as well as the related potential for building relations and the society involved in the creation and use of culture, are values that should be nurtured and developed.

Another important consequence of the development of Web 2.0, indirectly related to the culture of participation, is the so-called collective intelligence, which can be defined as a kind of added value to the joint actions of all Internet users. Describing this phenomenon, P. Lévy suggests that this cooperation of peers will lead to the emergence of a new form of culture – a circulation of expression, in which all participating users will be simultaneously responsible for creating new content and supporting the activity of other users, and “the distinction between authors and readers, producers and viewers, creators and interpreters will be blurred.”⁵

Web 2.0 enabled the dynamic development of fan communities – fandoms. It needs to be stated that they existed earlier, but it was the Internet – the main medium of McLuhan’s ‘global village’ – which let them ‘find themselves’ in space. What is important in this context is the identification of distinctive features that allow distin-

⁴ A. Keen, *Kult amatora: jak internet niszczy kulturę*, translated by: M. Bernatowicz, K. Topolska-Ghariani, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw, 2007.

⁵ P. Lévy, *Collective intelligence: Mankind’s Emerging World in Cyberspace*, Perseus Books, Cambridge 1997, p. 20.

guishing an ordinary viewer from a fan. After all, not everyone who likes a given cultural text becomes a fan. According to M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, "a fan is someone who actively expresses their liking, appreciation, admiration for a selected book, comic book, film, television show, video game or another work or product of culture."⁶ The fans (as well as the entire fandom) are characterised by the deeper connection with the text, affecting both the psychological attitude towards the text, as well as the attitude and perception preferences. According to Pearson, "fans adopt cultural texts as parts of their identities, often going so far as to build social networks based on common tastes."⁷ The importance attached to this part of identity and the social networks built on it clearly separates a fan from an ordinary enthusiast, and these social networks gathering the fans of specific cultural products are called fandoms. These products thus become 'cultural attractors,' which attract various communities and serve the role of a focal point for them. This is connected with the function of a 'cultural activator' – a stimulant, which entices fans to make repeated attempts at decoding the meaning of a given product and developing one's own references and contexts of its reading.⁸ This leads to taking on a real shape by the remix culture, the emergence of which was ushered by L. Lessig.⁹ According to the author, quoting, sampling or remixing fragments of existing cultural texts by ordinary users and producing something new on their basis is supposed to contribute to a more democratic development of culture. The role of the technical means of combining (mainly in digital

⁶ M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Fandom dla początkujących. Część I. Społeczność i wiedza*, Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej UJ, Krakow 2017, p. 15.

⁷ R. Pearson, "Bachies, Bardies, Trekkies, and Sherlockians", [in:] Gray J., Sandvoss C., Lee Harrington C. (eds.), *Fandom. Identities and Communities in A Mediated World*, New York University Press, New York 2007, pp. 98-109.

⁸ P. Lévy, *Collective intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, Perseus Books, Cambridge 1997, p. 23-24.

⁹ L. Lessig, *Remiks. Aby sztuka i biznes rozkwitły w hybrydowej gospodarce*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw. 2009, pp. 60-89.

formats) these fragments and the ability of users to use them is important in this respect.

The activity of the fandom boils down to two types of activity.¹⁰ The first one may be referred to as analytical or affirmative, boiling down to the description and analysis of a given text of culture (another episode of a TV series, a new volume of a book saga, etc.). Fans tend to analyse individual scenes, new characters, their behaviour, as well as coherence and consistency with the previous parts of the series. In other words, they delve into the text, try to understand it better, comment on it, review it and talk about it, in order to eventually become experts in this (relatively narrow) field. The second type of activity can be referred to as creative. Of course, it does not stand in opposition to the former type, instead it serves as its practical use. It mainly encompasses developing themes from a favourite series or book in original stories, alternative endings or stories taking place on the sidelines of the original work. In other words, the creative type can be called another level of initiation, as it is impossible to use the themes and characters characteristic of a given cultural text creatively without a thorough knowledge of it. M. Lisowska-Magdziarz provides a slightly broader description of the activity of contemporary fans, distinguishing seven potential areas – multiple reception of a selected text of culture (both collective and individual); interpretation and analysis of the text; supplementing, organising and exchanging knowledge related to the text; artistic creativity inspired by the text; building and maintaining a community around the text of culture, made up of people with identical tastes and the same reception method, organisational activities and building infrastructure for the community (such as setting up blogs and Facebook fanpages, organising fan meet-ups); as well as self-observation and self-analysis of the text.¹¹

¹⁰ Cf. K. Hellekson, K. Buse, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 2014, pp 3-5.

¹¹ M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Fandom dla początkujących. Część I. Społeczność i wiedza*, Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej UJ, Krakow, 2017, p. 16.

The main manifestation of fans' activity, which I would like to focus on in this text, is a transmedia story, also referred to as transmedia storytelling, a creation quite firmly rooted in fan culture, but largely unknown outside it. In subject literature, this term appeared for the first time in H. Jenkins' *Convergence Culture*, published in 2006 (Polish edition was published in 2007.)¹² It is important to distinguish between storytelling as an activity and story as a finished product resulting from this activity. Hence the presence of the term *transmedia storytelling* in English subject literature, describing this phenomenon in a way that emphasises the very act of creation. One of the fuller definitions on the Polish ground was proposed by K. Kopecka-Piech in *Leksykon konwergencji mediów*, claiming that "a transmedia story is a story 'across many media platforms, based on numerous components, which bring about narrative progress. [...]" Unlike multi-platform nature, transmedia nature is based not only on the use of diverse media, but also on the creation of relationships between them, which result in a new, often non-linear storytelling structure. Transmedia does not mean telling the same story on different platforms, but conveying different information about the same world presented. Transmedia storytelling ultimately involves the viewer in a variety of activities, thanks to which they collect individual components in order to discover the entire story. In such a case, the media palette may consist, for example, of a TV series as the main component and the accompanying website, book, video game and a feature film.¹³ One of the first examples of stories of this kind in the mainstream media was the story of Laura Palmer and the town of Twin Peaks. Shortly after the première of the series directed by David Lynch (the first episode was broadcast in April 1990) the book *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* appeared on the market (ultimately released in Poland in 2017).

¹² H. Jenkins, *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów*, translated by: M. Bernatowicz, M. Filiciak, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw, 2007, pp. 95–96, 260.

¹³ K. Kopecka-Piech, *Leksykon konwergencji mediów*, Wydawnictwo Universitas, Krakow, 2015, pp. 40–41.

It was written by the girl, whose murder is the starting point of the plot of the TV series, and the first-person narration was supposed to shed a new light on the life of the protagonist. In fact, the book was written by Jennifer Lynch, daughter of the director of the series. The story, made famous by the TV, has thus moved to the printed medium, not in the form of a classic book adaptation, but rather as a way to develop and conclude some of the plot points. The same role was played by *The Animatrix* animated series, which complemented the *Matrix* trilogy.

The main medium used by fans are *fan fiction* stories, often referred to as fanfics. The prosaic form is the easiest to use, as it does not require the authors and creators to use complex technical means, such as a film camera or computer graphic software. One of the largest websites presenting fan works of this kind is Archive of Our Own.¹⁴ The largest Polish website of this kind is FanFiction.pl.¹⁵ Fans also fulfil themselves by creating other forms. Deviantart¹⁶ features artistic work – illustrations, collages, comics, as well as video clips, which are collages of scenes from films or TV series.

The best conditions for the development of a transmedia story appear in the context of expansive universes. The more heroes, including secondary and tertiary characters, the more opportunities for the development of fan-made creations. What is more, the characters are no longer confined to the framework of the world presented in one medium. They can freely move between these worlds and it is all up to the author's own imagination. When fans take the reins of the story over from institutional media creators, the characters story turns from a closed one (in a film or a book) into almost an endless one. When the universe of a given hero is no longer viable for some reason, nothing stands in the way of crossing the fate of said character with completely different characters, from completely different worlds, by means of a so-called *crossover*. One of the most

¹⁴ <https://archiveofourown.org/> [retrieved on: 27.07.2018].

¹⁵ <http://www.fanfiction.pl/> [retrieved on: 27.07.2018].

¹⁶ <https://www.deviantart.com/> [retrieved on: 27.07.2018].

acclaimed stories in this category published at archiveofourown.org is a fan fiction story, which features *Star Wars* characters of go to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, made famous by the Harry Potter series.¹⁷ The website has more than 1.5 million users, who published more than 4 million texts on it, belonging to nearly 30,000 different fandoms. The most popular are connected with *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Sherlock Holmes* and the world of Marvel's superheroes. The fans of Henryk Sienkiewicz's trilogy can also find something for themselves, including for example stories exploring the theme of forbidden love between Jan Skrzetuski and.... Bohun.¹⁸

This denotes an important feature of fan-made works - crossing borders, including those related to eroticism and violence. Things that may not¹⁹ appear in the *mainstream* media and in the official creations associated with a given character or universe can be easily presented and manifested in the world of fandom. Hence the presence of various relationships between the characters, often with erotic themes highlighted in the stories, as well as a stronger emphasis on violence, which is toned down in generally available products of culture.

In *Television Culture*, J. Fiske introduced the division of texts of culture into three levels. The first level is the main text, the message, which can be referred to by the audience (such as film or TV series). The second level texts are all the texts that refer to the first level text (professional film reviews and viewer discussions on the Internet).²⁰ The third level is created by the audience by combining the texts

¹⁷ *Nocturnal Studies and other Peculiar Magic*, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/8694634/chapters/19935013> [retrieved on: 27.07.2018].

¹⁸ *Ogniem i Sercem*, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/13219485/chapters/30238233> [retrieved on: 27.07.2018].

¹⁹ Both through its immoral character, as well as due to the fact of addressing the adventures of a given protagonist to young audiences.

²⁰ Fiske published his book in 1987, at a time when nobody had heard of the widely available Internet, social media and online discussions. Undoubtedly, however, the theses presented there can also be successfully applied to certain aspects of the functioning of the Internet.

from the other two levels. This is where all kinds of *fan fiction* can be found, as the broadest form of processing and reinterpretation of the source text.²¹ This reinterpretation serves a kind of feedback, which goes to the creators of the original work, giving them information about the way it is read by fans and their expectations.

The transmedia narratives are also used by media companies. Global brands, such as comic book superheroes are gradually 'colonising' an increasing number of kinds of media. The stories that once filled the pages of comic books are now being developed in films (both animated and feature films), TV series and video games. The *Star Wars* universe is now available in all media forms. The *Witcher Saga*, which was created by A. Sapkowski, who wrote his series of books, was developed in the form of computer games published by CD Projekt Red, a 13-episode TV series and a feature film directed by Marek Brodzki and produced by Heritage Films (2001), and in 2020 it is to be complemented by another TV series, this time produced by Netflix, an American platform.²² This results in an oversupply of content, since in order to discover the story presented in each of the media, the recipient needs to devote time and get access to the content (also understood as an economic constraint). Self-sufficiency thus becomes an important aspect of transmedia character. Each element of the presented story should form a coherent whole – it should not be necessary to know the film in order to enjoy a video game and vice versa. Of course, knowledge of the whole story makes the experience richer and in a sense fuller, but it should not be a prerequisite for experiencing the stories told in different media.

At this point a sceptical reader might ask whether the works of people unknown to the wider public deserve any interest whatsoever? Does exploiting well-known heroes and placing them in

²¹ Fiske J., *Television culture*, Routledge, New York 2011, pp. 123-125.

²² T. Gardziński, Twórcy Wiedźmina od Netfliksa zaczynają szukać aktorów. Kto zagra Geralta? <https://www.spidersweb.pl/rozrywka/2018/05/23/wiedzmin-netflix-geralt-aktor/> [retrieved on: 26.07.2018].

new situations and contexts make sense? Certainly, these millions of products of fan culture will include works with poor language use and their authors will be far from ever receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature for their works. On the other hand, all creative activities deserve attention, especially in the case of young people. Encouraging interest in literature, developing imagination, honing their writing (or graphic, in the case of illustration or comics) skills, as well as their involvement in the circulation of culture – these are just some of the benefits of perusing this type of cultural texts.

It is worth mentioning one more aspect, which somehow serves as the other side of this coin. The production users' own media content and publishing it on the Internet should certainly be regarded as a positive phenomenon. However, according to a study by Jen Schradie,²³ this phenomenon is associated with the so-called 'digital production gap.' The author tried to answer the question "Who is responsible for the content placed on the Internet?" and thus define a profile of a typical content creator. The study resulted in determining the fact that there was a clear divide between creative, active users and passive ones, focusing only on consuming content, which coincided with education levels and level of income in the family. In other words: the better the financial situation and education, the more likely it was that the person participated actively in creating on-line content. This 'digital production gap' is, in a sense, the next level of digital divide.

However, even if only ten or so per cent of all the Internet users are creative, it does not change the fact that we are dealing with a very dynamically developing branch of on-line creativity. The importance of this phenomenon can be proved by the dynamically developing field of *fan studies*, the publications concerning which were also released in Poland.²⁴

²³ J. Schradie, "The digital production gap: The digital divide and Web 2.0 collide", *Poetics* 39 (2011), pp. 145-168.

²⁴ Cf.: Lisowska-Magdziarz M., *Fandom dla początkujących. Część I. Społeczność i wiedza*, Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej UJ, Krakow, 2017; M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Fandom dla początkujących. Część II. Tożsamość i twórczość*, Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej UJ, Krakow, 2018.

Bibliography

- Fiske J., *Television culture*, Routledge, New York, 2011.
- Hellekson K., Buse K., *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa, 2014.
- Jenkins H., *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów*, translated by: M. Bernatowicz, M. Filiciak, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw, 2007.
- Keen, A., *Kult amatora: jak internet niszczy kulturę*, translated by: M. Bernatowicz, K. Topolska-Ghariani, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw, 2007.
- Gardziński T., *Twórcy Wiedźmina od Netfliksa zaczynają szukać aktorów. Kto zagra Geralta?* <https://www.spidersweb.pl/rozrywka/2018/05/23/wiedzmin-netflix-geralt-aktor/> [retrieved on: 26.07.2018].
- Kopecka-Piech K., *Leksykon konwergencji mediów*, Wydawnictwo Universitas, Krakow, 2015.
- Lessig L., *Remiks. Aby sztuka i biznes rozkwitły w hybrydowej gospodarce*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw, 2009.
- Lévy P., *Collective intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, Perseus Books, Cambridge, 1997.
- Lisowska-Magdziarz M., *Fandom dla początkujących. Część I. Społeczność i wiedza*, Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej UJ, Krakow, 2017.
- Lisowska Magdziarz M., *Fandom dla początkujących. Część II. Tożsamość i twórczość*, Instytut Dziennikarstwa, Mediów i Komunikacji Społecznej UJ, Krakow, 2018.
- Pearson R., "Bachies, Bardies, Trekkies, and Sherlockians" [in:] Gray J., Sandvoss C., Lee Harrington C. (eds.), *Fandom. Identities and Communities in A Mediated World*, New York University Press, New York, 2007.
- Schradie J., "The digital production gap: The digital divide and Web 2.0 collide", *Poetics* 39 (2011).
- Szymusiak T., *Prosument – Prosumpcja – Prosumeryzm: Ekonomiczne oraz społeczne korzyści prosumpcji na przykładzie Polski oraz Niemiec (podejście naukowe)*, Wydawnictwo Bezkręsy Wiedzy, Saarbrücken, 2015.
- Toffler A., *Trzecia fala*, translated by: E. Woydyłło, M. Kłobukowski, Wydawnictwo Kurpisz S.A., Poznań, 2006.

Websites

- <https://archiveofourown.org/>
<https://archiveofourown.org/works/8694634/chapters/19935013>
<https://archiveofourown.org/works/13219485/chapters/30238233>
<https://www.deviantart.com/>
<http://www.fanfiction.pl/>