

Tales of Our Tomorrows: Transmedia Storytelling and Communicating About the Future

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Abstract

Foresight professionals and the futures field as a whole faces a series of challenges in communicating about the future. Simply presenting data and having a “rational” discussion is not enough to shape perceptions about the future and move people to action. The rapid evolution of digital media technology and the emergence of transmedia storytelling present foresight professionals with a powerful new approach for communicating about the future. Transmedia storytelling is the use of multiple media – graphic novels, video clips on YouTube, blogs, Twitter, and enhanced e-books, for example – to tell one or more related stories set within a common storyworld. This article outlines some of the key principles of transmedia storytelling in order to provide a basic framework that foresight professionals can use when designing transmedia projects.

Keywords: Scenario, visioning, foresight, futures studies, storytelling, transmedia, narrative, user interaction, audience engagement

Introduction

Shaping the future means shaping popular perceptions of the future. Unfortunately, foresight professionals wield less influence than science fiction writers when it comes to shaping those perceptions. The works of H.G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and other science fiction writers created not just their own visions of the future but inspired several generations of readers to create a world based at least in part on these visions. Science fiction books, graphic novels, films, and television continue to shape popular views of the future. The disproportionate influence of science fiction is a testament to the power of storytelling.

While foresight professionals may have a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of how to vision, forecast, assess, and shape the future, it is the science fiction storytellers who have the most effective approach for communicating their visions of the future. Foresight professionals need to be better storytellers if they want to help shape the crucial conversations about issues facing 21st century society. The emergence over the past decade of transmedia storytelling gives the futures field an opportunity to address some of the communications challenges it faces.

Today's complex media environment is changing audience expectations of how, when, and where information is consumed. Media convergence is driving the development of new forms of storytelling in which integrated narratives are presented across multiple media. Participatory engagement of audiences through games, remixing content, and original user-created content is increasingly common.

In telling its stories the futures field faces challenges on two levels. At the broader level is the field's relationship with popular culture, which is characterized by "a deep uneasiness", anxieties about the "legitimacy and utility of amateur, popular culture-steeped futures content", and the threat that the credibility and authority of futures professionals will be disrupted and usurped (Li, 2013). At the level of the individual foresight practitioner, a complex and turbulent world makes it challenging to help individuals and organizations comprehend the uncertainties they face, facilitate critical reflection, and support strategic decision-making. The development of useful scenarios, accurate forecasts, and compelling visions of the future is challenging in itself. Having them applied in a meaningful way can be even more difficult. It is not uncommon for excellent foresights and insights to be discounted or completely ignored while "business-as-usual" continues even in the face of threats that should be obvious. The challenge of filling the gap between foresight and action is a critical challenge for futures professionals.

After working for more than three decades with scenarios in public administration, at the grassroots level and with students, there remains a pestering voice in my mind: what next? Most scenarios are buried in the archives of history and forgotten. They never incarnated in real world action. (Jarva, 2014)

In recent years storytelling has become an increasingly important tool in facilitating changes in people and organizational cultures (Maas, 2012; Anonymous, 2012; Kaye, 1995). The role of media in shaping public opinion and societal values has been widely studied (McCombs, 2002; Semetko, 2004).

Transmedia storytelling can be an effective approach for sense-making within

the futures field. Transmedia storytelling has also been identified as a potential vehicle with which the futures field can engage with popular culture (Li, 2013). A vital, perhaps existential question has been raised about the future of futures thinking.

...how can we support and sustain a resurgence of futures thinking in mainstream conversation but also how can this be most effectively done in the same complex, turbulent media environment that transmedia storytellers face. (Li, 2013, pp. 137-138)

A “rational” discussion focused on data is not enough. The complexity of today’s societal issues makes it imperative that holistic solutions are developed.

How do we do this? One essential way is through story: The only way to truly comprehend the human costs of policy and cultural constructs is to listen to and exchange stories. The humanitarian and emotional perspectives are often more persuasive than only the rational ones when we are creating livable societies. To build a culture of possibility, we have to build both a movement and an ethical framework grounded in multiple narrative from multiple voices, and fostered by co-creation networks that act for the good of the collective and the protection of the individual. (Srivastava, 2012)

The rapid evolution of digital media technology makes transmedia storytelling a viable option in foresight projects. Professional and prosumer hardware and software provides sophisticated, low-cost tools for the production of transmedia stories. Consumer level cameras can shoot high definition video and still images. Software like Adobe’s Creative Suite provides a series of applications for creating illustrations, editing photographs, recording and editing audio and video, developing websites, and creating e-books for a monthly subscription of around \$50. Other applications, some free, can be used to create three-dimensional images of people, objects, and settings that can show what exists only in the imagination. Using these tools will give futures practitioners an opportunity to develop transmedia stories that engage individuals, organizations, and popular culture in a way that was not possible in the past.

Storytelling and Strategic Foresight

Storytelling as a guide to the future can be traced back to the very beginnings of civilization (Molitor, 2009). Storytelling has been used to foster the development of new values by linking the present and future (Nováky, 2001). The ability of stories to trigger or block change has focused attention on their use in change management efforts (Brown, Gabriel, & Gherardi, 2009).

Some elements of storytelling have been a small part of the foresight professional’s repertoire for the past few decades. In the early 1990s while in the graduate program in futures studies at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, one of us (von Stackelberg) used storytelling techniques along with role-playing during workshops in which participants took on the personas of citizens of 2030. Another technique used at the time was the creation of mockups of newspapers or magazines to highlight key issues through stories set at a particular time in the future. At about

the same time, the futures consulting firm GBN used live stage performances to act out scenarios developed during multi-day scenario workshops.

More recently, narrative and storytelling have become a common topic of discussion among futures practitioners (Schultz, Crews, & Lum, 2012). The terms “storytelling” and “narrative” have been used to describe elements in a crowd-sourced scenario and foresight system (Raford, 2012). Stories have been proposed as a way to move away from the “flatland” scenarios developed using the “axes of uncertainty” approach and create a richer, deeper perspective of the future (Schultz, Crews, & Lum, 2012).

Transmedia storytelling techniques have been used in a number of projects designed to change perceptions on key issues or encourage social activism. *Collapsus: The Energy Risk Conspiracy* (www.collapsus.com), a transmedia project released in 2011, integrates fictional newscasts, interactive maps, video blogging, and other forms of media to draw participants into a world in which they need to access and analyze information about the future of global energy. The narrative provides a human touch by showing the audience individual characters as they are caught up in the turbulent events portrayed in the story.

Digital storytelling has been identified as a way for young people to construct their identities and re-imagine their futures (Murakami, 2008). *Future States* (www.futurestates.tv) is a series of short films set in the future that deal with immigration, human relationships, economic segregation, and other complex social issues. Transmedia narrative techniques are also used in *Animism: The Gods' Lake* (www.animism.com). The project, developed by Canada's Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, looks at environmentalism, capitalism, and spirituality through the eyes of characters drawn from Canada's aboriginal peoples. The project uses animation, a fictional blog and companion websites. *Conspiracy for Good* (www.conspiracyforgood.com) integrated a philanthropic mission into the narrative itself by using an interactive story that empowered its audience to take real-life action and create positive change in the world. It was accessible through online, mobile phone and flyers on sidewalks, live theater and a new level of audience participation. *The Harry Potter Alliance* (www.thehpalliance.org), built on the storyworld created in J.K. Rowling's bestselling Harry Potter novels, used live streaming to play a new genre of music called “Wizard Rock”, posted action alerts on MySpace, and developed fan sites and other media to create and move a community to action. Through partnership with non-governmental organizations, the Alliance prompts social action on issues like global climate change, poverty, genocide, and human rights.

Defining Transmedia Storytelling

The definition of transmedia storytelling has been the subject of considerable debate over the past several years. The term “transmedia” was first used by cultural theorist Marsha Kinder in 1991 to describe works where characters appeared across multiple media (Phillips, 2012). In 2006, media theorist Henry Jenkins' book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* reframed the term to describe tightly integrated narratives like *The Matrix*, in which films, graphic novels, video games, and other forms of media were used in a way that allowed the story to flow seamlessly from one medium to another (Jenkins, 2006).

The Producers Guild of America defines a transmedia narrative project as

consisting of three or more narrative storylines existing within the same fictional universe and presented using film, television, short film, broadband, book or magazine publishing, comics, animation, mobile applications, special venues, DVD/Blu-ray/CD-ROM, narrative commercials and marketing rollouts, and other technologies that may or may not currently exist. These narrative extensions are NOT the same as repurposing material from one platform to be cut or repurposed to different platforms. (Kinke, 2011)

This article uses a broad definition in which transmedia storytelling includes any works with one or more stories set in a single “storyworld” and told using at least two different forms of media, with the story elements in each form of media making their own distinctive contributions to the audience’s understanding of the storyworld (von Stackelberg, 2011).

In less than a decade transmedia storytelling has moved from the fringes of the entertainment, publishing, and advertising industries to become one of the hottest new ways of reaching audiences. It is a new form of storytelling that spreads the elements of a story across multiple media. Early examples of transmedia projects, for example, would present a character’s story as a series of tweets, a number of still images posted to Flickr, written “diary” entries on a blog, video clips posted to YouTube, and texts sent via mobile phone. This approach, however, is already becoming dated and new combinations of media are emerging.

Through rich, detailed, and multifaceted media, transmedia storytelling can simulate a real-life experience that rises above the “digital noise” of everyday life and strengthen the connection between creator and audience (Miller, 2008). The result is the communication of an experience, not just a message. The power of transmedia storytelling comes from its use of the storyteller’s traditional tools – emotion, user engagement, universal themes, and relevance (Rutledge, 2011) – and the addition of new capabilities like personal connection and user-generated content. Transmedia storytelling creates experiences that are more than entertainment; it is now possible that personal education and societal transformation can be as entertaining as commercial entertainment properties. Because the story is at the heart of effective transmedia narratives, understanding how and why stories transmit meaning and foster understanding can provide foresight professionals with a framework for effectively integrating narratives into many different types of projects.

Intellect, Emotion, and Decision-making

Understanding the role of intellect and emotion in decision-making processes is important when determining how to present information in a scenario, forecasting, or other futures-oriented projects. These types of projects by their very nature are intended to challenge existing perceptions, mental models, and organizational structures. As a result they often provoke a range of emotional responses – uncertainty, confusion, insecurity, fear, and others – that lead to resistance to change. One of the most significant applications of storytelling from the perspective of foresight professionals is their use helping manage these emotions.

Affective (emotional) and cognitive (intellectual) processes are crucial to survival. Emotional responses provide important information about what is beneficial and what is harmful (Fenske & Raymond, 2006). Processes involving emotion and selective attention work together to prioritize thoughts and actions

(Fenske & Raymond, 2006). Highly emotional stimuli, provided they are relevant to the viewer, are processed faster and hold attention longer than less emotional stimuli (Eastwood, Smilek, & Merikle, 2001). Keeping stimuli simple and focused is important. Affective responses are lower and reaction times longer when distractions are present (Fenske & Raymond, 2006; Dickert & Slovic, 2009). If the objective of the stimuli is to provoke an empathic response towards others, the focus should be on an individual rather than a group of people, as presenting a group in need of help reduces the level of sympathy and willingness to help (Dickert & Slovic, 2009).

Cognitive and affective systems influence four other systems in humans (Potter, 2012):

- Physiology – the automatic bodily responses to stimuli
- Belief – faith in the truth or reality of something the individual has not directly experienced
- Attitude – an individual’s judgment about a person, place, thing, event, or issue
- Behavior – overt action taken by an individual

Cognitive, affective, belief, attitudinal, and behavioral structures also typically exist at the institutional and societal levels (Potter, 2012).

All media, including transmedia stories, can exert an influence on these systems in one of four ways (Potter, 2012):

- Acquiring: influences a person to obtain something that is not present prior to exposure to the message
- Triggering: influences a person by activating something that already exists within that individual
- Altering: influences a person to change something that already exists with them
- Reinforcing: influences a person to make it more difficult to change something that already exists within them

These four media influences are applicable to the cognitive, affective, physiological, belief, attitudinal, and behavioral systems. For example, information in a forecast might be presented so readers are given new knowledge (acquiring), to prompt their memory of previous actions (triggering), have them change their opinion about the organization’s strategy (altering), or confirm that the current strategy is working (reinforcing). These influences are similar at the personal, institutional and societal level.

The “Understanding Spectrum”

Knowing the purpose of a foresight project is important in determining what should be presented to stakeholders and how it should be presented. Data, information, knowledge, and wisdom form a continuum – an “understanding spectrum” (See Figure 1) (Shedroff, 2000, p. 271). The decision to present raw data may be appropriate for one project but completely wrong for another. Data alone is often not enough to create an understanding of an issue being addressed in a foresight project. To make data useful – to turn it into information – requires the addition of context for using that data and packaging that makes it usable. Transforming information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom requires the integration of both context and experience.

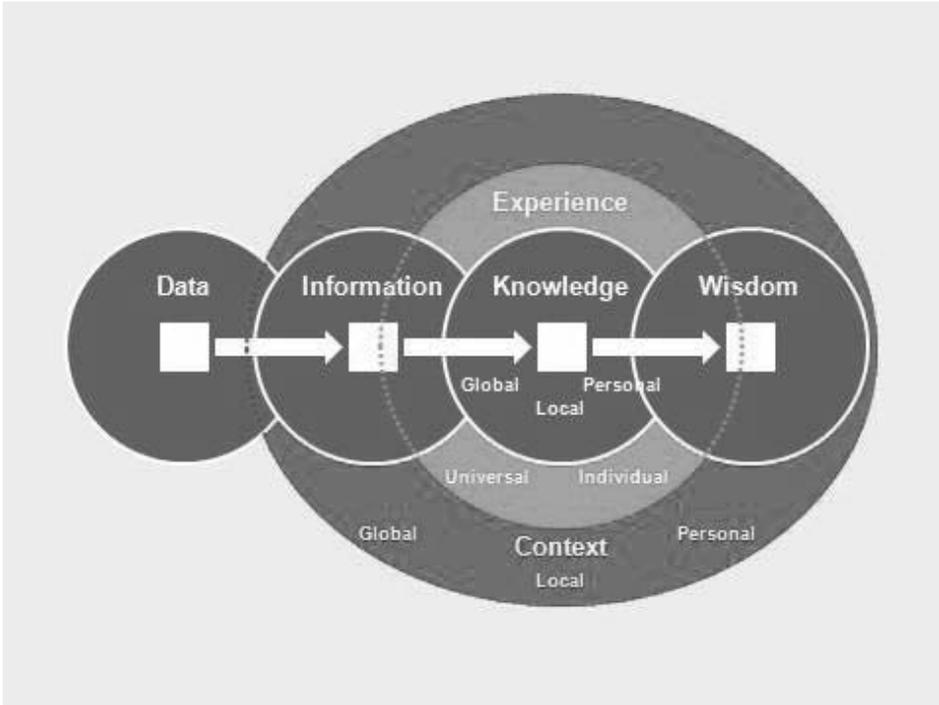


Figure 1. The Understanding Spectrum is a continuum from data to information to knowledge to wisdom
 Source: Peter von Stackelberg, adapted from Shedroff (Shedroff, 2000)

For example, a piece of data that states climate change will cause more severe weather events is important but essentially meaningless for the vast majority of people. There is nothing in that piece of data that gives a recipient of the data the context or experience that helps them apply it in a meaningful way. Adding more data points is not likely to improve their understanding if context and experience aren't part of the package of information.

Rising sea levels, more severe hurricanes, species extinction, global water shortages, the impacts of technological change – these and many other important issues that need to be addressed are well documented by foresight professionals but are not being addressed in any substantive way by most individuals, institutions, and societies. Foresight professionals need to move up the understanding spectrum, beyond presenting data and information to facilitating the development of knowledge and wisdom. Stories, by embedding context and experience, are a powerful tool for developing knowledge and wisdom.

Why Stories?

Stories appear to be an innate part of human beings. Provided they are engaging and follow a simple dramatic arc, even the simplest narratives can produce the release of neurochemicals like cortisol, which focuses attention, and oxytocin, which affects empathy (Popova, 2012). Humans respond to narratives from very early in life (Nelson, 1989). Narratives are a form of “mental imprint” that can mold perceptions and touch the unconscious mind (Simmons, 2006, p. 29); create patterns

and structures of life events, provide insights into life and human nature, and reflect the unconscious needs of human beings (McClean, 2007, pp. 18-21); and are central to the way humans perceive everything in our world (Szulborski, 2005, p. 42).

Stories bridge the gap between the intellect and the emotions, providing a much quicker transfer of meaning than the intellect alone.

In life idea and emotion come separately. Mind and passions resolve in different spheres of humanity, rarely coordinated, usually at odds...But whereas life separates meaning from emotion, art unites them. Story is an instrument by which you create such epiphanies at will...In life, experiences become meaningful with reflection in time. In art, they are meaningful now, at the instant they happen. (McKee, 1997, pp. 110-111)

Narratives can bring order to the chaotic flow of events in the world around us, enabling us to comprehend what is happening.

Personal Narratives

As we integrate data and information with context and experience the knowledge and wisdom that we develop becomes more internalized and integrated into us as a “personal narrative”. Narratives can prompt changes in the brain’s synaptic connections (Lakoff, 2009), essentially creating who we are (Gazzaniga, 1987). We comprehend life as an ongoing series of internal narratives (Fisher, 1985), which are our primary way of modeling our perspectives of ourselves and the world around us – our “worldview” (Schlitz, Vieten, & Miller, 2010). Our personal narrative is partially constructed by an “unreliable narrator” (ourselves) to add meaning to the facts presented to us (Shelley, 2012).

Narratives are stories that weave together a series of facts (or assertions) so they make sense. Narratives create what is true for the believer, which is more germane to the believer’s life than facts. Facts are like dots on a graph. The narrative is the curve that connects them, that gives isolated data points meaning, and gives meaning shape. (Shelley, 2012)

There is an interplay between popular culture’s narratives and the personal narratives of the individual. The movie *The Day After*, broadcast in 1983, is an example of how storytelling played a role in reshaping a global issue by impacting a personal narrative – in this case that of Ronald Reagan, the president of the United States. In his diary, Reagan noted:

Monday, October 10, (1983) Columbus Day. In the morning at Camp D. I ran the tape of the movie ABC is running on the air Nov. 20. It’s called “The Day After.” It has Lawrence, Kansas wiped out in a nuclear war with Russia. It is powerfully done—all \$7mil.worth. It’s very effective & left me greatly depressed. So far they haven’t sold any of the 25 spot ads scheduled & I can see why. Whether it will be of help to the “anti nukes” or not, I can’t say. My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war. Back to W.H. (Reagan, 2007, p. 43)

Reagan's position gave him a level of power most individuals do not have. However, that doesn't mean the average person is powerless. While today's public narratives can shape the personal narrative, digital media tools and networks make it easier for individuals to interact with each other to create new collective narratives that contain the building blocks of new futures, informed but not constrained by the past.

Designing Transmedia Narratives

Designing effective transmedia stories is a complex task that goes well beyond simply mastering the mechanics of producing content in several different media. Creating transmedia stories involves three distinct but interrelated sets of design tasks (von Stackelberg, 2011):

- Narrative design, which focuses on the design of the story elements of the transmedia narrative.
- Engagement design, which focuses on designing aspects of the transmedia narrative that primarily involve the audience's mental and emotional engagement with and participation in the narrative.
- Interaction design, which focuses on how users physically interact with the interface and navigate through the transmedia narrative's content.

In this article we will address only the narrative design aspects of transmedia storytelling and its application in foresight projects.

Narrative design

While the "transmedia" aspect of transmedia storytelling often garners the most attention, it is the "storytelling" that is the more critical element. Without an effective story, a transmedia experience will usually be ineffective or counterproductive and too dispersed, creating confusion in the user and causing them to disengage. One challenge for foresight professionals wanting to use storytelling techniques in their projects is that traditional approaches don't precisely fit the needs of the futures field and may in fact directly contradict the primary concept of narrating the future.

Narratives are traditionally concerned with past events or with events that are happening right now, and narratives process them into a meaningful sequence. Even if they claim to be about the future, as, for example, utopian tales, narratives process these events as if they had already happened. They are mock future narratives, so to speak. In contrast, future narratives in the sense of this project are narratives that preserve the characteristic feature of future time, namely that it is yet undecided, open, and multiple, and that it has not yet crystallized into actuality. We do not yet have a grammar, a logic, or a poetics of future narratives in this sense. (Bode, 2013)

Another challenge is adapting science fiction storytelling techniques for use in the futures field. Many writers think that science fiction is about describing what the world will be like at some point in the future. This would be a mistake; science fiction should not be used as a vehicle for predicting the future.

The fallacy is that stories set in the future are about the future.

They are not. You set a story in the future to give the audience another pair of glasses, to abstract the present in order to understand it better. One key difference between science fiction and historical fiction is that stories set in the future highlight not so much values as the forces and choices that face us today and the consequences if we fail to choose wisely. (Truby, 2011, p. 183)

All great science fiction is about the writer's view of universal evolution, with the relationship between humans and technology always being central to the story (Truby, 2011).

Transmedia Storyworlds

At the core of any transmedia narrative is the “storyworld”. A storyworld is a structure within which all characters, objects, settings, and events exist (von Stackelberg, 2011). The development of the storyworld involves identifying and describing each of these:

- Characters: Details of their physical, psychological, behavioral, and social characteristics as well as their motivations, values, needs, desires, and fears.
- Significant Objects: Details of their physical characteristics and intrinsic and/or symbolic value.
- Settings: Details of the *topos* (physical characteristics, physical laws that govern the world, technologies that are used, etc.), *mythos* (the established conflicts and battles, stories and rumors, and “official history” of happenings within the storyworld), and *ethos* (the laws and social values, implicit and explicit ethics, codes and norms of behavior, etc.)
- Events: Details of specific changes in the state of the overall storyworld or individual characters, objects, and settings.

The temporal attributes of the storyworld are also important. *Storyworld time* is the span of time within which all settings, characters, significant objects, and events occur within the storyworld. *Story time* is the sequencing of fragments of storyworld time as seen from the perspective of characters used within individual stories set within the storyworld. This temporal framework is flexible enough that it allows for approaches like flashbacks, flashforwards, and non-linear sequencing of story fragments to simulate dreams, visions, psychological phenomena, and other situations.

Using the concept of the storyworld as outlined here provides a solid, consistent framework within which a transmedia narrative can be easily used in foresight projects and presents opportunities for project participants to delve deeply into the content being developed. Predetermined elements and critical uncertainties (Schwartz, 1991) related to each of these can be incorporated into the storyworld, perhaps with the participants being challenged to examine the assumptions associated with them as decisions are made about which to include. While the term “storyworld” is not used, the application of various foresight tools and techniques – timeline mapping, futures wheels, systems maps, and others – to create a “contextual ‘backdrop’ or scenery” has been described for a foresight oriented project (Schultz, Crews, & Lum, 2012). This “scenery” against which a number of scenarios are set could be considered a storyworld and the process of creating it “world building”.

Dreamrunners, a transmedia storyworld developed by Eira Jones and von

Stackelberg, was created in part using a comprehensive timeline of technological, economic, social, and political change and a series of detailed technology forecasts. The result was a comprehensive “storyworld bible” of a complex society set in the 2030s and struggling to deal with a variety of issues related to technological change, social conflicts, economic uncertainty, and political paralysis. While *Dreamrunners* is not intended to be a forecasting or scenario project, the storyworld created is flexible enough that it can be used for those purposes with only minor modifications.

Stories Within a Storyworld

Multiple stories can emerge from the interaction of characters, objects, settings, and events in a rich storyworld. This provides the opportunity to use a variety of approaches in communicating about key issues. For example, different characters can be used to show a range of perspectives of a single issue; different characters can be used to show the same perspective to different demographics and psychographics within the target audience; or different media can be used for stories targeting different groups within a diverse audience. This ability to create different stories with different characters across different media platforms makes a unified message essential. Confusing, contradictory, and disconnected messages can make the overall narrative ineffective or counterproductive.

Foresight practitioners who plan to use transmedia storytelling in a project must explicitly identify the message that they are want to present to the audience. Professional storytellers – screen writers, novelists, non-fiction feature writers, and others – work to find the *theme* or *controlling idea* that expresses the meaning of the story they want to tell. The theme/controlling idea identifies how and why something changes from the beginning of the story to the end (McKee, 1997). The development of a *designing principle*, the idea around which the story is synthesized, provides its internal logic and the overall strategy for how the story will be told (Truby, 2011). The third element in planning the story is the *central conflict*, which focuses on the question of “Who fights whom over what?” (Truby, 2011, p. 28). The theme/controlling idea, designing principle, and central conflict should all be written as single sentences, forcing the storyteller to focus in on what is at the core of the story’s meaning. For example, assume a company has become involved in a foresight project designed to develop new strategies in the face of rapid technological changes that affect its core products. These three elements might look like this for a story used in that project:

- Theme/Controlling Idea: “The organization triumphed because it was more agile than its competitors.”
- Designing Principle: “Force the organization to make a difficult transition from its current position as a market leader.”
- Central Conflict: “The organization is in a fierce competitive struggle with a nimble new competitor that has just entered the industry.”

These three elements are not separate pieces, but rather slightly different perspectives on what should be a consistent and unified framework that forms a *storyworld arc* that moves us from the beginning to the end of the “grand story” of this world. The foundational storyworld arc is the source from which all of the emergent stories in this storyworld arise.

If multiple stories are planned, the theme/controlling idea, designing principle, and central conflict can be applied to an overarching story that has a number of

related sub-stories. With this approach, each sub-story would have its own theme/controlling idea, designing principle, and central conflict, all of which should be different than but related in some way to the corresponding higher elements. The overarching theme/controlling idea is the glue that keeps the storyworld together and makes individual stories recognizable as being from the same storyworld.

This approach to transmedia narrative design has been heavily influenced by concepts drawn from systems thinking and complexity theory, in particular the concept of emergent structures, properties and behaviors (emergence) in which complex systems and their patterns of behavior arise from a multiplicity of relatively simple elements and their interactions. With a rather simple framework of characters, significant objects, settings, and events there are ample opportunities to explore the relationships and interactions between these elements and by playing with the temporal attributes of storyworld time and story time, the author can add additional complexity to stories. This approach also draws from another concept from systems thinking and complexity theory – the concept of fractals and similar (but not identical) patterns when looking at systems across multiple levels of “magnification”. If you look at a tree at different levels of detail you will see the tree as a whole, its various branches from the largest limbs to the smallest twigs, the branching patterns of the veins in the leaves, and so on. With storyworlds and the stories within them, we should see similar but not identical patterns of values, of conflicts, of needs and desires, of behaviors, at all levels of detail from the storyworld to the individual stories and sub-stories to the acts or chapters to the sequences, scenes, and beats.

By playing with the interrelationships of just four elements – settings, characters, significant objects, and events – and the temporal aspects of the storyworld and stories we can create incredibly rich narratives. When framed using the lens of theme/controlling idea, designing principle, and central conflict, we can provide rich insights into the issues our audience needs to address. And by playing with the patterns of behavior at different levels of “magnification” within the storyworld and individual stories we can provide rich experiences that keep our audience engaged.

Narratives, Games, and User Control

Transmedia projects can span a spectrum (Figure 2) that ranges from games and simulations to stories. At the game end of the spectrum, users have a high degree of control over the final outcome. At the story end of that spectrum, users have little or no control over the final outcome (von Stackelberg, 2011). Spread across the spectrum between the two ends are interactive narratives, augmented reality games (ARG), and narrated games. All use some level of participant interaction integrated with narrative. The interactions in an ARG can take many forms and are generally designed to imitate the kinds of interactions a player might have in everyday life. This could include texts, e-mails, chat messages, voice messages, and other forms of communication to guide players through the game.

Foresight professionals wanting to use a transmedia approach should look at the full spectrum, from stories to ARGs to games and simulations to determine which will work best for a particular project. The ability to create multiple stories in a transmedia storyworld allows the author to have control of some stories while allowing users control in others. A foresight project might include one or more stories presented, for example, via video or graphic novel over which the author has narrative control and a game in which the user creates the narrative based on the

characters, objects, settings, and events present in the storyworld. User control of the narrative in games and simulations, however, means the project designer needs to ensure a framework is in place that helps users create a narrative that is consistent with the message the project intends. It would be counterproductive, for example, for a foresight project that intends its message to be the need for better collective management of common resources to use a game that ends up rewarding the ruthless exploitation of those resources.

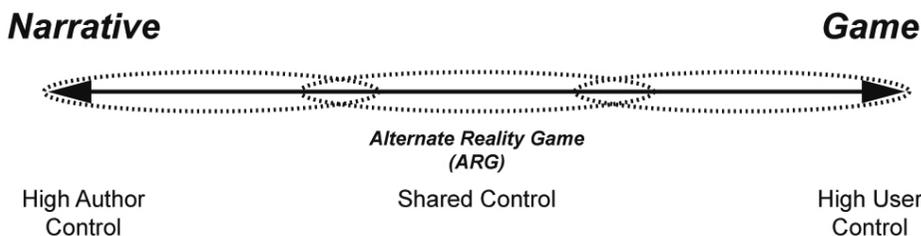


Figure 2. The story-game spectrum of control
Source: Peter von Stackelberg

The degree of user control over the narrative is known as *user agency*. The greater the ability of users to set goals, plan their attainment, and be rewarded with changes in the narrative environment, the greater the degree of user agency. When considering the use of transmedia narratives as part of a foresight project, futures practitioners need to carefully consider how user agency will be handled. Key questions to consider are (von Stackelberg, 2011):

- *User Story Role*: Is the user projected into the story either through an avatar or in a first person perspective or kept in an external role as an observer outside the narrative?
- *Agency Relationship*: Are the user and narrative tightly linked so a user action causes an appropriate and proportional response within the narrative or loosely linked so user actions cause limited or no response in the narrative?
- *Agency Scope*: Is the impact of a user action on the narrative world local (i.e. navigating an avatar) or global (i.e. taking an action that determines the direction the narrative takes)?
- *Agency Immediacy*: Does the user’s action cause an immediate response or a response that occurs after a considerable delay?
- *Agency Duration*: Is the impact of the user’s action short-term (e.g. killing a character that is regenerated a few seconds later) or permanent (e.g. permanently eliminating a key character) within the narrative or storyworld?

Using Characters in Transmedia Stories

Characters play a number of important roles from a storytelling perspective. Foresight practitioners who use stories should consider each of these roles when designing the narrative.

The character arc – the change in a character from the beginning to the end of the story – is often the primary framework for the entire story. The “hero’s journey” is a popular framework used to describe a series of steps the protagonist in a story goes through. While these steps may be portrayed as a physical journey, they are in fact the stages of internal change that occur in the character. Audiences expect some

sort of character arc, so foresight practitioners who include characters in a project need to ensure that at least one character arc is present. It is important that character arcs be connected to the central message the story is trying to communicate. Character arcs should be closely linked to the story's theme/controlling idea, designing principle, and central conflict. If the character arc is not aligned with these, the risk of losing or confusing the audience is substantial.

Character development plays an important role in increasing empathy (Chiaet, 2013) and should be a key objective for foresight practitioners using storytelling techniques.

Popular fiction tends to portray situations that are otherworldly and follow a formula to take readers on a roller-coaster ride of emotions and exciting experiences. Although the settings and situations are grand, the characters are internally consistent and predictable, which tends to affirm the reader's expectations of others. It stands to reason that popular fiction does not expand the capacity to empathize.

Literary fiction, by contrast, focuses more on the psychology of characters and their relationships. "Often those characters' minds are depicted vaguely, without many details, and we're forced to fill in the gaps to understand their intentions and motivations," Kidd says. This genre prompts the reader to imagine the characters' introspective dialogues. This psychological awareness carries over into the real world, which is full of complicated individuals whose inner lives are usually difficult to fathom. Although literary fiction tends to be more realistic than popular fiction, the characters disrupt reader expectations, undermining prejudices and stereotypes. They support and teach us values about social behavior, such as the importance of understanding those who are different from ourselves. (Chiaet, 2013)

As noted earlier, empathy is greater for individuals than groups. The use of individual characters to represent groups or communities can sidestep this problem. Using a character to mirror the beliefs, values, thoughts, emotions, and actions of a group makes it easier for the audience to understand that group. The use of personas in marketing, some types of foresight projects, and other business activities is an example of how an individual character can be used to represent a group. With stories, these personas are elaborated on in much more detail, but the principle of mirroring the group with an individual is the same. This is a powerful approach that must be used carefully to avoid misrepresenting, stereotyping, or trivializing an entire group. The use of character to represent specific demographics and psychographics can also help connect individual audience members with the narrative by giving them someone they can identify with and who can serve as a guide for the user to interact with and make choices impacting the future outcomes in the story. Those choices would draw from behavioral change models and programs deeply embedded in the narrative. Using "mentor" archetypes for this sort of interaction could be the bridge and trigger for more empathy first for the individual self and then toward the group, community, country and world (Eira Jones, 2013).

The use of archetypal characters can help an audience quickly move into a

story. If the protagonist and antagonist in a story are broad archetypes they are immediately recognizable (Jenkins, 2006).

Archetypes are found in the themes of myths (e.g. death and rebirth), characters in literature (e.g. hero and villain), and imagery in dreams (e.g. eyes and teeth). They are believed to be the product of unconscious biases and dispositions that have been ‘hardwired’ into the brain over the course of human evolution. (Lidwell, Holden, & Butler, 2010, p. 28)

The Matrix used character archetypes from a variety of sources to help the audience quickly understand the story. This use of archetypal characters is particularly important in games where there is little time for exposition before users “grab the controller and try to navigate the world” (Jenkins, 2006). Since archetypes influence perception on an unconscious and primarily affective level, they are especially useful when traditional modes of communication (e.g. language) cannot be used (Lidwell, Holden, & Butler, 2010, p. 28). The list of possible character archetypes is long and varied. For example, the website Listology has 140 archetypes listed (Diaskeaus, 2006); 65 archetypes are listed on the TV Tropes site (TV Tropes, n.d.); and 47 archetypes are identified at the Unofficial White Wolf Wiki (White Wolf, n.d.). In *45 Master Characters: Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters*, Schmidt identifies 45 archetypal characters and provides broad character descriptions for each.

The use of factions, groups, or tribes from the storyworld is a way of establishing user agency without disrupting the original narrative. Joining a faction such as one of the Thirteen Districts in the Hunger Games storyworld, the Hogwarts Houses in the Harry Potter storyworld, or the Animal Factions from the *Dreamrunners* storyworld is a way for the user to identify with characters and other users and become involved in a community based on the storyworld. Tribes are influenced by purpose and common cultural attributes that creates a passion to fulfill a purpose (Deragon, 2012). Corporations have attempted to engage groups and “tribes” to influence individual consumer behavior through marketing campaigns that use fan pages, social media interaction, and increasingly, transmedia marketing that attempts to create a user experience within the context of a group or “tribe”. Enabling and empowering tribes as part of a storyworld with a purpose for social benefit fits more naturally with the tribe mentality.

People are gathering in “cultural tribes” to connect, collaborate, discover and influence change. Social technology enables people to aggregate around anything, everything and anywhere. (Deragon, 2012)

With characters and stories embodying the themes of the storyworld, tribes could be set up not only to appear in the storyworld and have users engage there but also to spill into the real world, using social media platforms combined with the themes that address “on story” issues. Encouraging collaboration around particular subjects, issues and change projects in a more engaging way and potentially gamifying the users participation, they could ‘level up’ as demonstrated by characters in the storyworld and this could be achieved by the user taking actions in the real world.

Story world characters could encourage these actions – each main character representing a tribe or faction and encouraging and motivating the user. We could

even see actions in the real world impact stories in the storyworld. In other words users become part of the tribe and when causing an impact in the real world would be acknowledged in the storyworld.

Conclusion

Using state-of-the-art tools for communicating about the future is essential if foresight practitioners and the futures field as a whole are to stay relevant in the crucial conversations around 21st century social, technological, economic, environmental, and political issues.

Transmedia storytelling experiences using audience engagement, interactivity, collaboration and user generated content give users more than just an entertainment experience.

When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely “suspend” a critical faculty; we also exercise a creative faculty. We do not suspend disbelief so much as we actively create belief. Because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than question the reality of the experience. (Murray, 1997, p. 110)

While Murray refers to fictional storyworlds, entering compelling non-fiction or hybrid fiction/non-fiction storyworlds can have the same effect. Engaging with storyworld characters and learning the same lessons they are learning through the story can be used to share visions of the future and help change personal and collective narratives to shape the future.

The role of the creative media industry is considered crucial for social change because storytelling puts a human face on the societal issues we are trying to solve (Srivastava, 2012).

Creative media and storytelling highlights local voice and local solutions the best, more so than reports, more so than charts that don't have narrative. When I think about transmedia I think about co-creation, participation and whether the story and distribution is going to be relevant to community, engaging local communities, giving them access. Technology is not the driver, it is the enhancer; the driver is the social change goal and then the narrative. What we need are architects that have a bird's eye view and can combine story, social transformation and technology. Not as a manager but as a strategic vision builder for a project. (Srivastava, 2012)

As stated earlier, digital storytelling has been identified as a way for people to construct their identities and re-imagine their futures (Murakami, 2008). With the rapid evolution of digital media technology opening opportunities for foresight practitioners to communicate in new ways, the potential for change is accelerated. The cost and capabilities of today's digital media hardware and software makes it possible to create sophisticated, high-quality video, audio, e-book, web, and other content on the average desktop or laptop computer. Transmedia storytelling, because of its effectiveness in building complex storyworlds, engaging audiences, and developing entertaining content, should be considered as part of any major strategic

foresight or strategic change project. An important new role on these project teams is that of story architect, with the responsibility of designing and developing storyworlds, writing narratives, and creating user experiences while ensuring that the storytelling is aligned with the goals and objectives for the project.

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