Buffy the Transmedia Hero

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The following paper aims to advance a theory of trans-semiotic flow based on an analysis of Joss Whedon’s Buffy The Vampire Slayer (1992–present). Buffy is an example of what Henry Jenkins refers to as transmedia storytelling, which entails “stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world.”¹ Critically, the literature on transmedia storytelling suggests that its methods rely on exploiting different media to perform storytelling roles based on strengths associated with form. Such a view champions creative multiplicity over mere reproduction. Whilst this model is theoretically sound, the present research suggests that such an approach weakens stories based on a continuity structure (a unified experience systematically developed across platforms).² Discrete media invariably convey story elements differently, which means that the aesthetic quality established in one form cannot be reproduced with complete accuracy in another, thus compromising the continuity structure underpinning the narrative and distorting experience of the text.

The aim of this paper is to explore how extant media in Buffy are consumed, and to explore the nature of the relationship between platforms as they relate to story aesthetics. Critically, this paper discusses how Buffy fans conceive of trans-semiotic flow and how discrete semiotic contexts are reconciled in a transmedia structure.
Transmedia Storytelling

Transmedia storytelling is described by Jenkins as the “flow of content across multiple media channels.” He explains that, ideally, transmedia storytelling should facilitate creative expansion by exploiting the creative capacity of each media platform. Furthermore, transmedia stories can be expanded by a number of transmedia players (an adaptation of Dinehart’s concept of the transmedial consumer as VUP [viewer/user/player]), including both producers and consumers. Unlike stories confined to a single platform, transmedia texts should offer audiences an extended story experience. As Jenkins explains,

> each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play.

Transmedia storytelling is different to creative adaptation in the sense that multiple texts are used to create “a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium.” Traditional theories of adaptation propose that ideally, “the spirit of the text” is transferred from one platform to another. Transmedia storytelling on the other hand involves the sharing of a single narrative across texts. One of the most widely recognised examples of transmedia storytelling is The Matrix. According to Jenkins, The Matrix (1999–2003) was developed with such iconographic consistency that each instalment of the franchise was recognisable as part of the whole. He claims that this model caters best to contemporary media audiences, who are migratory, and “will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”

The term transmedia storytelling first entered the public dialogue following the success of The Blair Witch Project (1999). Today, transmedia storytelling—otherwise known as “cross-media,” “variable media,” or “multimedia storytelling”—is used to tell stories as well as market products and sell branded entertainment. This paper focuses on the conventional perspective of transmedia: the telling of a single narrative, distributed across multiple platforms, contained within a single storyworld.

Known commercial transmedia texts include The Matrix (1999–2003), Harry Potter (2001–11), The View Askew-universe (1994–2006) and, of course, Buffy. This paper is informed by a series of in-depth interviews with fans of Buffy, conducted as part of a larger research project which explores how fans engage with commercial transmedia texts. The methodology for the study was based on the phenomenographical approach, described by Ference Marton as “a method adapted for mapping the qualitatively
different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them,” and uses a “case as instance of state” method to explore the ways in which users engage with transmedia texts, including accounts of how and why. Sampling for the study was based on the key principles of qualitative research: the extraction of rich, qualitative data; the examination of an instance using a small sample set; and generalisability to similar contexts but not to a broader population. A total of ten participants were interviewed as a part of the study. The identity of each has been protected via the use of a pseudonym. Whilst opinions in the broader community insist that small sample cannot ensure validity, “interview-based studies involving a small number of respondents are becoming more common in social science.” In fact, according to Mira Crouch and Heather McKenzie, a small number of cases (less than 20) will enhance the validity of in-depth inquiry using the interview method in qualitative research.

As a matter of thematic designation emerging from the data, this paper focuses predominantly on the relationship between the Buffy television series and the subsequent comic book series. In other words, participants from the study commented mostly on the television series and its relationship to the seasonal expansion in comic book form; however, the Buffyverse is not limited to these sources. The Buffy text includes a number of extant media including the television series Angel (1999–2004) and a series of comic books of the same title (2000–02), the Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1992) feature film and the recently released comic book series, Angel and Faith (2011–present), as well as a variety of other titles. Nonetheless, this paper reveals significant insights into the relationships between discrete semiotic contexts and the impact of discrete semiotic contexts on transmedia traversals.

Traversals and Tone

One of the key themes emerging from the research on fans of Buffy is conditions of consumption—many of which are contingent upon narrative design. Critically, within this theme denotations of experience related to the transference of tone are significant. Whilst tone is a somewhat nebulous concept, its use is reflected in the interview data. Given the trans-semiotic context of transmedia formats, the aesthetic condition of the narrative changes markedly throughout the course of the story; indeed, the very nature of transmedia storytelling relies on the uniqueness of each platform to offer a distinct variety of storytelling. Christy Dena describes the instrumentality of transmediation as polymorphic, claiming,
a polymorphic approach to the production and experience of a work is informed by a schema where all media are created equal. … Polymorphism privileges the complexity of many forms above reproduction.  

She claims polymorphic creations can be differentiated from hybrid media and transgressive art by the fact that each platform retains its integrity; however, this does not account for the relationship between platforms.

In a paper on cultural preservation, Eileen Maitland and Cordelia Hall argue that instillation art and variable media pose problems concerning viability for future incarnations because preservation of these forms is difficult. They claim that “where works of drama are concerned, ‘The play’s the thing’. But what is the thing for multimedia installations? Digital art? Performance art?” Indeed, what is the “thing” in transmedia? According to Jill Walker, it is difficult to think about narrative this way because our languages are designed to identify discrete objects. She claims that conceptualising transmedia storytelling forces us to think about “things that aren’t things.” When different media function as discrete elements of a larger structure, it can be difficult to locate a structure. In some cases, multiple media create a variety of expression successfully in ways which emphasise replication. In other words, multiple media can replicate recognisable story elements, such as character, across different semiotic contexts. For example, traditional franchising models allow audiences to engage with their favourite characters across multiple platforms via a function described by Janet Wasko as recycled culture. Media production training today privileges textual products that travel across technologies. According to Wasko, mega corporations which produce and distribute cultural products benefit from moving commodities (such as characters) between different formats; however, she claims that divergence of content across multiple formats results in a multiplicity of content. This is comparable to the principle of multiplicity used in transmedia storytelling. According to Jenkins, transmedia narratives operate according to different spreadable functionalities. He claims one of the core dualities according to which transmedia narratives operate is continuity versus multiplicity. He explains that some transmedia franchises routinely use “alternative versions of characters or a parallel universe version of their story.” This is known as multiplicity. Continuity, on the other hand, allows fans to follow or reassemble narrative components in ways which are meaningful and cohesive. Jenkins cites the rich continuity structures of comics as an example of this. While multiplicity replicates recognisable characters and motifs across multiple platforms, continuity structures rely on coherent and meaningful transitions between platforms in order to fulfil narrative design.
When traversals are user-driven—that is, when media users traverse platforms based on connections made as they consume—the relationship between media is personally meaningful. For example, we may think of a group of friends who watch a movie together and then borrow a reference book from their local university to learn more about the era in which the film was set. When traversals are structured by commercial design as transmedia storytelling—that is, imposed upon the user—the relationship between platforms is artificial. This means that bridging mechanisms in transmedia design need to work harder in order to ferry users from one platform to another.

According to James Reynolds, media coded for different purposes are rarely compatible. In a study exploring the filmic adaptation of *V For Vendetta* (2006), Reynolds claims the film medium is not well suited to convey the ideological foundation underpinning the story in its originating form: the graphic novel medium. Whilst this study explores adaptation, the author identifies a number of creative barriers associated with using different media to convey story, many of which are applicable here. Comparably, a study by Elizabeth Evans found that fans of the BBC series *Spooks* (2002-present), which offers content through both television and games, transfer values *between* media, therefore expecting the same experience from gaming as they get from the television series. What emerged from her research was that fans who played the game enjoyed engaging with the series’ characters, but they did not themselves want to become a part of the series’ diegesis. As Evans explains,

> *these participants do not want to step inside the fictional world of Spooks. … They want the fictional characters from the series to remain and therefore they reject the kind of viewing position offered by the games. … [T]hey want to experience [the series] through the actions of a third party.*

What this reveals is that consumers may not be as comfortable about shifting their consumption patterns across media as traditional theories of transmedia storytelling would suggest. According to respondents from the study, this invariably becomes an issue of tone, and inconsistencies between platforms can negate narrative integrity. For instance, when asked if he consumes material related to *Buffy* across multiple platforms, Jeremy 10 replies,

> Yes. I like seeing how the story can be told in different media. But the books are invariably a disappointment. Perhaps a story that started off as a partly visual narrative loses something when you turn the pictures of faces into descriptions of expressions that give you
more access to the characters’ consciousnesses than you’d get in the original version?

For this respondent, different media are necessarily incompatible due to the different representational techniques employed in each. Critically, this suggests that transmedia formats contradict the cognitive work performed by the audience, thus underestimating the role of the viewer/reader as content co-creator.

Recently, the principle of co-creation was used to market *Pottermore*: an online reading experience offering fans of *Harry Potter* an expanded view of the universe which allows them to participate in the creation of new content. In an introductory video on the site, author, J K. Rowling explains,

just as the experience of reading requires that the imaginations of the author and reader work together to create the story, so Pottermore will be built, in part, by you the reader.32

Whilst it is still unclear how audiences will contribute to the expansion of the series online (at the time of writing the site is only available to a select group of users), the concept is built on a collaborative approach to storytelling which purports that the story emerges via the relationship between co-creators: authors and readers. Whilst the concept of participatory consumption has been written on extensively in post-structuralist critiques of literature and consumer culture,33 nowhere else is this concept more clearly evidenced than in the consumption of transmedia texts due to the variable nature of the story components. This is because transmedia formats frequently contradict the aesthetic motifs imagined by the reader associated with a particular form.

Despite claims that the strengths of transmedia storytelling lie in its ability to exploit each medium to do what it does best, there can be challenges associated with this approach relating to the transference of tone. Whilst the economic logic of securing audiences in a netted franchise/storyworld is compelling, inconsistencies in tone can negate these potentials. Literary critic Lev Grossman had this to say about *Pottermore*:

[W]hen publishers mix reading with other media, the way Pottermore does, I find it confusing. Every time I see more of the Potterverse realized in other media, as video or audio or even still images, it undoes the work I did by reading about it.34

This comment demonstrates issues voiced by fans from the study: as the story moves from one platform to another, changes in tone impact narrative consistency. Some see this as innovative whilst others describe it as
Buffy the Transmedia Hero

problematic due to creative differences at the platform level. This suggests that transmedia formats should be based not only on the storytelling capabilities of different media, but creative synergies which exist between forms. Only then can the creative industries offer audiences truly cohesive entertainment experiences. Relationships forged between creatively incompatible media isolate audiences and neglect their role as storyreaders in the active construction of the text. As one respondent lamented,

I’m gonna have to leave Buffy at the end of season seven and not [go] into the work that [it] takes in comics. It doesn’t quite seem to be how I depict Buffy (Henry8).

This statement reflects the views expressed by Grossman. For this fan, the material manifestation of Buffy in the season eight comics contradicts how he understood the world in the television series. For creators of transmedia works whose fiction is built on a continuity structure (such as Buffy), this suggests that each unit in the structure should closely mimic the previous. Tonally, the fiction should be similarly conveyed across all platforms, and aesthetic motifs which frame the narrative should supplant or advance stylistic techniques associated with form. This suggests that transmedia aesthetics, like the storyworld, should structure or intervene upon story components. In other words, there needs to be an aesthetic motif capable of traversing multiple semiotic contexts without risk of changing dramatically; it should be recognisable in all forms.

Speaking of the season eight comics, Joss Whedon, creator of Buffy, recently confessed that fans aren’t interested in reading “bigger things.” He submits that, “having discovered that we can do more than the television show, I’ve discovered that I don’t really want to.” According to Henry8, having Whedon involved in the production of the comics is important because he can “guide certain authors” to create the comic “in the style of the TV series.” This lends credence to Whedon’s admission: for this fan, the comic books should reflect the style and tone set in the television series. This sentiment is echoed by Edward5, who claims that when reading fan fiction he is looking for something that is “much like the TV show.” Critically, this contradicts the central tenet of transmedia storytelling: to exploit each medium to do “what it does best.” Respondents from the study suggest that rather than enhance the engagement experience, the use of different media can disrupt cognitive manifestations of the text. For these fans, works expanding the narrative established in the television series are necessarily derivative and should thus emulate the same style and tone used in that platform. Whilst it is practically impossible for different media to emulate the same style (indeed, each is coded with unique
aesthetic functionalities), this paper argues that characters from the story embody functional motifs which traverse multiple platforms, needed to reconcile tonal and aesthetic differences between them.

**Character**

Whilst tenets from the field champion transmedia design for its ability to offer a variety of expression, respondents from the study suggest that the use of multiple platforms can negate narrative integrity due to the difference between semiotic codes. One of the key themes emerging from the study is the consideration of character in transmedia design as a condition of consumption. In order to advance a theory of trans-semiotic flow which positions character as an embodied functional motif, this paper will draw on ideas and terminology from genre theory in order to frame its approach.

According to Daniel Chandler, “[c]onventional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style).” Typically, this approach identifies conditions and/or motifs which occur across multiple contexts and can be associated with a particular genre or form. Contemporary theories of genre use a similar approach, but incorporate a rhetorical dimension which takes into account the relationship between the author and the reader of the text. Andrew Tolson refers to genre in this respect as a category which mediates industry and audience. These perspectives share in common an approach to genre based on the identification of motifs which can be replicated across texts and forms; however, they do not account for multi-model texts and transmedia traversals. Genre is necessarily archival; it operates across a class of media, finding form through repetition. Transmedia works are also archival; however, works based on a continuity structure demand meaningful transitions between forms, so the necessary motif needs to be adaptable rather than replicable. A recent study of *Logicomix*, an adaptation of foundation mathematics into the graphic novel medium, suggests that essential elements from the original text are transferable to a complex network of frames; however, this text is not based on the same continuity structure as *Buffy*. Whilst this study contributes significantly to the discourse on adaptation, it does not lend itself to an analysis of transmedia design.

According to Jay Lemke, transmedia storytelling uses media and genre to create coordinated meanings. He claims each text is an “intertext” for another, which makes meaning entirely dependent; however, transmedia storytelling is better understood according to the principles of
archontic literature: literature which is open to expansion and enlargement across multiple platforms by multiple people.\textsuperscript{44} According to Abigail Derecho, archontic texts can be dissociated from the principle of intertextuality in the following way:

it is the specific relation between new versions and the originary versions of the texts, the fact that works enter the archive of other works by quoting them consciously, by pointedly locating themselves within the world of the archontic text, that makes the concept of archontic literature different from the concept of intertextuality.\textsuperscript{45}

Furthermore, Lemke fails to elaborate on how coordinated meanings are managed within transitional spaces. Respondents from the study suggest that the most important coordinated meaning in transmedia storytelling is character tone. For most respondents this stems from a love of the characters in the original forms through which they accessed the narrative. For example, David\textsuperscript{4}, a fan of Buffy claims,

I’m fairly certain that what got me to watch the show was re-watching the movie for the first time in several years, and remembering how much I loved the character of Buffy. When I found out that Joss was going to continue Buffy in comic book form, I was ecstatic.

Critically, the respondent confirms that his willingness to pursue the series is influenced by his interest in the story’s characters. The fact that he is willing to do this even if the writing has decayed or the text has switched media (which is negatively associated with the former) suggests that characters are the most important enduring elements in transmedia design. Furthermore, this suggests that characters play an integral role not only in the success of the story on one platform, but in its ability to transfer across multiple platforms with a dedicated audience. From a genre theory perspective, characters embody functional motifs able to traverse multiple platforms. This allows them to reconcile contradictions in the text. Furthermore, this suggests that character consistency is instrumental in the continuation of the narrative across platforms. When asked to reflect on the importance of narrative consistency, David\textsuperscript{4} says,

So long as the characters are mostly consistent, I can get past pretty big changes in logistics and continuity. The change in continuity between the movie and the show were sizeable (Buffy became two or three years younger, Joyce became completely different, etc), and the logistics completely changed between the show and the comic … but I manage to enjoy all three of them because the
important characters retained what I always enjoyed about them.

From this perspective and for fans from the study, character consistency is instrumental to transmedia design. Despite changes otherwise, fans are willing to forgive contradictions in the text if the integrity of character profiles is upheld. Characters transcend aesthetic motifs coded to form and become a structure for the text to carry story across platforms. Like genre, the transmedia text finds structure through recognisable and repeating motifs; however, in a continuity structure the motif is functionally adaptive. In other words, the embodied character evolves rather than repeats across platforms.

The importance of character to storytelling has been widely discussed elsewhere in film and literature studies as well as in reference books, most notably as discussions of archetypes.\(^46\) According to Mike Alsford, Buffy represents the archetypical heroic outsider. For Alsford, part of what makes Buffy such a popular heroic character is the fact that she embodies moral and ethical conditions which are familiar to all of us.\(^47\) Her sense of ethical duty in the face of extraordinary circumstances make Buffy a champion of morality; however, this paper does not approach character from a conventional analytical perspective. Rather, this paper focuses on the functional properties of character in the context of transmediated storytelling. Character is instrumental, according to respondents from the study, in motivating consumption across multiple platforms. The significance of this insight extends beyond mere archetypal analysis because it situates character as a functional motif. Central to this theory is the adaptability of characters. In other words, as the story evolves, so too should they. When this function is neglected, inconsistencies can threaten the integrity of the narrative and, in some cases, lead fans to discredit the work’s author. This is a concern for Fred6, who claims,

> I do … sometimes stop and wonder why the author chose to do something … if it seems odd; particularly … if a character has been developed over a particular period of time to be one way and that character starts to act out of character. … Sometimes you occasionally get like a change in behaviour which doesn’t seem like it’s been well explained. … Usually a lot of times the explanation will come later so you keep watching, but it is something where you still stop and wonder to yourself, why … that did that [sic].

Inconsistencies in character development risk the integrity of the narrative as it evolves across platforms. For Fred6, this provides impetus to question the authoring process. Furthermore, Isabelle9 claims the series would lose credibility if Buffy changed significantly. As she succinctly puts
The basic personalities of all of the main characters must still be present in other forms (like comics) for the series to be taken seriously by the fans. If Buffy suddenly turned into the happiest person in the world, we’d wonder what new “monster of the week” we were watching (or reading about). … If she stayed the happiest person in the world, she wouldn’t be Buffy anymore, and the show (or the comics related to the show) would lose their credibility, which in turn would turn off “viewers” in their droves, meaning less audience to purchase the new material, which would mean another cancellation of the series. And that would be bad.

Character consistency is a concern for these fans, particularly as the story continues across multiple platforms. As Isabelle9 demonstrates, Buffy is recognisable for reoccurring character traits. When these traits are contradicted or abandoned in a new form, the structure loses credibility, as was pointed to in an earlier-quoted lament from Henry8. It is imperative that characters develop consistently in order to reconcile the different semiotic contexts and, ultimately, substantiate the story-world. According to Jenkins, transmedia storytelling has increasingly become about the art of world building. As one screenwriter explains:

Once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could tell multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media.

This paper argues that when a world is built across multiple semiotic contexts there needs to be a linking motif which can bridge these spaces, such as character. Respondents from the study suggest that characters can reconcile contradictions in the text as long as they are consistently developed as the story evolves. For example, Edward5 claims form is used as a vehicle for advancing character arcs, thus enabling him to prolong his engagement with characters from the story. He claims to engage with the text across multiple platforms because

I’m much more a fan of the characters than I am the story so reading the comics allows me to keep track of where the characters are officially. … [I]t holds for Buffy and it holds for the sister series Angel as well, I just like to know where they are just for my own, to have my own knowledge filed away.

Transmedia storytelling provides fans like Edward5 with an opportunity to
prolong their engagement with the characters they know and love. The act of consumption can thus be characterised, in this context, as following rather than exploring: “I just like to know where they are,” as Edward5 puts it. For these fans, characters are the threads which hold the story together. Character inconsistencies threaten to disable this structure, to disassociate story elements and to risk the integrity of the narrative. Respondents from the study are motivated to engage with the text across multiple platforms as long as the characters that inhabit the world are consistent. According to George7 this is important to fans because, he claims,

they take ownership of the characters ... then when ... the story goes in a certain direction it's kind of like they've been cheated because ... the characters have done something that they feel ... shouldn't have happened.

Whilst this is true of most single-platform stories, transmedia formats threaten established character motifs by inserting characters into different semiotic contexts coded for unique forms of storytelling. Thus, for fans, the imperative for consistency is stronger in transmedia storytelling because character profiles are threatened when resituated into formats which employ different storytelling techniques to the originating media.

Conclusion

This paper has advanced a theory of trans-semiotic flow using Joss Whedon's *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* as a case study to argue that characters embody functional motifs which bridge extant media in the storyworld. Despite claims that champion transmedia design for its ability to offer a variety of expression, tonal inconsistencies can negate this potential. Characters are functionally adaptive in this context; as the story evolves across platforms so too do they. In this role, characters are able to reconcile contradictions between semiotic contexts by bridging the spaces between them. This paper has argued that use of the term “motif” in this context is comparable to its application in genre studies. Just as genre finds structure in a class of media linked by reoccurring motifs, so too does transmedia storytelling; however, transmedia stories based on a continuity structure require an adaptive motif, such as character, to bridge extant media. Fans of *Buffy* interviewed as part of a larger study suggest that characters are the most important element of *Buffy* as the series continues into the comic book medium. For these fans, characters are instrumental in the continuation of the story. In fact, they claim that flaws in the text are negligible as long as character tone remains consistent. Not only does this
suggest that characters are instrumental to transmedia design, but it intimates that they embody functional motifs which bridge discrete semiotic contexts and, critically, carry a dedicated audience with them. Suggestions for further research include: comparative analysis between multiple texts; ethnographic research in the fan community; and, extended cultural and economic analysis of commercial transmedia trends.

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**NOTES**


6 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 96.

7 Kamilla Elliot, “Literary Film Adaptation and the Form/Content Dilemma,” in *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Ryan Marie-Laure (Nebraska: Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska, 2004), 222.


9 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 115.

10 Ibid., 2.


Jenkins, “The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn.”

Dena, “How the Internet is Holding the Centre of Conjured Universes,” 2.


Dena, “How the Internet is Holding the Centre of Conjured Universes,” 2.

Christy Dena, “Capturing Polymorphic Creations: Towards Ontological Heterogeneity and Transmodiology” (paper presented at University of Sydney, 2007), 2.


James Reynolds, “Kill Me Sentiment: V For Vendetta and comic-to-film
adaptation,” *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* 2, no. 2 (2009).


30 Ibid., 208.

31 Ibid., 209.


35 It was clear from the context of the interview that when the respondent said “depict” he meant it to mean “imagine/interpret.”


37 Ibid., 3.


42 Lemke, “Multimodal Genres and Transmedia Traversals,” 292.


49 Screenwriter in Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 116.