15 Transmedial storyworlds

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When the writers of the television series *Game of Thrones* asked George R.R. Martin (b. 1948), the author of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series of novels, about some of the changes he made, Martin shot back with a question of his own: 'How many children did Scarlett have?' This retort is meant to remind audiences that there is a discrepancy between the book and film version of the American classic *Gone With the Wind*. Famously, Scarlett O'Hara has three children in Margaret Mitchell's novel, but only one in its film adaptation.

Martin's remark brings us into the territory of *transmedial storyworlds* and *transfictions*. Throughout history, many influential cultural texts gave rise to series of adaptations, appropriations and references across a range of different media. Popular stories get endlessly adapted, appropriated and reinterpreted across a range of media, from literary works to paintings, sculpture, music, film and television, thus creating vast, interconnected universes of stories. We could also call such texts *palimpsests*. The Greek term *palimpsestos* originally referred to a piece of parchment from which the old text has been scraped off and the parchment reused for a new text. Since parchment was made from treated animal skin, the old text could not be erased perfectly, so traces of the old letters were still visible under the new layer of text.

In the 1980s, the influential French literary critic Gérard Genette gave new meaning to this term in literary criticism. In his book *Palimpsests: Literature of the Second Degree* (Genette 1997), he used it to describe a process wherein writers refer back to earlier texts and 'overwrite' or 'rewrite' them. Genette coined the term 'hypotext' to refer to the source text and 'hypertext' to refer to the later text that is inspired by the original (1997, p. 5). For example, Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) would be a hypotext, and Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which is a prequel to/retelling of *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Mr Rochester's estranged wife Bertha, would be a hypertext. More loosely, *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and other ancillary texts inspired by Brontë's novel as well as its many stage and screen adaptations could also be analysed as an example of a transmedial storyworld.

The terms transmedia (or transmedial) storyworld and transfiction are sometimes used interchangeably, even though their focus is slightly different. A transmedia storyworld emphasizes the shared elements of a universe that exists across a range of different media (for example, the *Star Wars* franchise includes feature films, live-

action and animated television series, comic books, novels, video games and theme park attractions). The term *transmedia*, made famous by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2006), literally means ‘across media’, and thus – as specified by Jan-Noël Thon’s overview of the relevant literature (Thon 2015) – it describes phenomena that are not media-specific, but which exist across a range of different media types.

In contrast, *transfiction* is narrower in scope: it is a term used to describe a situation in which ‘two (or more) texts share elements such as [...] characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds’ (Saint-Gelais quoted in Ryan 2012, p. 612). The term emphasizes the fictional nature of the migrating entities, whereas *transmedial storyworld* can also apply to non-fictional phenomena. Thus, we can talk about the huge *Star Wars* transmedial storyworld in general or the Han Solo transfiction specifically; the latter is a part of the whole universe and encompasses the nine feature films and the character’s origin story (the film *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018), as well as novels, graphic novels and video games featuring the character.

Transmedia storytelling is another related term that has been pioneered by the influential cultural studies scholar Henry Jenkins. It is strongly connected to the term transmedial storyworld, but, unlike the latter, it emphasizes the process of storyworld creation rather than the product. Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as ‘a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience’ (Jenkins 2006, p. 17). While Jenkins researches contemporary popular culture and uses *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* or *The Matrix* as his case studies, the narrative model he describes can also be used to describe transmedial storyworlds throughout history.

Another pioneer of transmedial narratology, Marie-Laure Ryan, develops Jenkins’ theory and suggests that in fact transmedia storytelling constitutes a special case of transfictionality, one where the migration of fictional entities operates across many different media. According to Ryan, *transmedial storytelling* can encompass three possible relationships between the text and the storyworld: (1) one text/one storyworld; (2) one text/many storyworlds; (3) many texts/one storyworld (Ryan 2012, p. 365). Ryan also distinguishes between ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ transmedial storytelling (Ryan 2015, p. 5). In the former case, the transmedial universe and the ways in which it is going to be revealed across different media are planned in advance, and in the latter, it starts in an unpremeditated way, motivated by the creators’ desire to exploit the success of a narrative originally conceived as autonomous (Ryan 2015, p. 6). The *Matrix* franchise, which was envisaged as a transmedia universe from the start, would be an example of the top-down approach, and the *Star Wars* franchise, which followed organically from the success of the first three films, would be an example of the bottom-up approach. Following Ryan’s analysis of transmedia, Jan-Noël Thon also notes that transmedial storyworlds can be varying mixtures of canonical media products (that have either a single author, or many authors) and fan-produced material (Thon 2015, p. 45).

The transmedial universes that rule today’s popular culture, such as the Wizarding World (the Harry Potter Universe) or the Marvel Cinematic

Universe, all belong to the many texts/one storyworld type. They are commercial media franchises, constructed by the producers to whom the intellectual property belongs, in order to maximize audience engagement. Its main strategy is to split an overarching grand narrative into smaller storylines, each of which contributes a piece of the larger puzzle. They coordinate the evolution of the storyworld across media to reach audiences with different demographic characteristics and also to expand the range of associated material products (toys, collectibles, clothing, etc.) that are available for purchase.

Although transmediality, understood as migration of information across different media, has been an important feature of cultural production in many eras and societies, it is worth noting that in the last few decades much of contemporary entertainment media almost exclusively relies on adaptations or transmedial storyworlds. Virtually all the franchises that dominate the global box office, like the *Wizards of the Coast* World, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the DC Comics universe, the *Game of Thrones* or *The Lord of the Rings* franchises, exist across a range of media.

These cultural giants can be studied from a range of critical perspectives that focuses on the question of authorship and authorial control and considers the relationship between the official canon and the fan communities, fan fiction and fan art, emphasizes media affordances (which stories work best in which medium and why) and studies the industry-relations (focusing on production aspects, financial aspects and creating brand loyalty by adding new media to a transmedial franchise).

In the rest of the chapter, we will use intermedial theory to elucidate the creation of the following transmedial storyworlds that were made from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first century:

- *Sherlock Holmes* – a transfiction that started in the late nineteenth century with Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories. It features new additions, including multiple reinventions, reimaginings and the reappropriations of the main character (e.g. in the TV series *Sherlock* (2010–17) and *Elementary* (2012–19), or the movie franchise starring Robert Downey Jr. as Holmes). Our case study discusses how Sherlock Holmes becomes transmedially recognizable as a character through the standardization of his attributes and his attitudes towards sleuthing and technology across the centuries (for transmedia characters and Holmes, see Thon 2019).
- *Penny Dreadful* (2014–16) – a transmedial franchise (incorporating a television series and several graphic novels) that also has its roots in the nineteenth century. However, in contrast to the *Sherlock Holmes* transfiction, *Penny Dreadful* is a mash-up that draws its inspiration from a range of nineteenth-century 'monster narratives'. In our case study, we analyse how sources in the public domain were used by the showrunners to create a coherent storyworld through the palimpsestic reappropriation and re-righting of the originals.
- *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–) – an intellectual property that began its life as a series of podcasts about the fictional American town of Night Vale, where

every conspiracy theory is true; Night Vale was later portrayed in several novels and staged as a live tour. Our case study investigates how the sensory unimodality of the audio drama format left much open to the audiences' imagination, which the producers capitalized on when they added to the Night Vale storyworld in subsequent live performances and novels.

All three cases discussed in this chapter include fairly recent additions to their transmedial worlds. While the *Sherlock Holmes* transfiction is over 100 years old, it is still very vibrant and has recently been rejuvenated with new media products which attained international popularity (this is especially true of the BBC television series *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch, which became a global cultural phenomenon). The three cases were chosen to shed light on a variety of strategies used in a transmedial expansion of their storyworlds.

The transmedial Sherlock Holmes

Since Sherlock Holmes first appeared in Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), the world-famous detective has been omnipresent in culture and public discourse all around the globe. Although there are several key attributes that make Holmes immediately recognizable to modern audiences, such as the meerschaum pipe, the deerstalker hat and the phrase 'Elementary, my dear Watson!', they do not appear in the original stories of Conan Doyle, but were later additions to the character. To understand Holmes, you have to consider the original stories as part of a much larger web of cultural texts. Just a few years after Doyle's first Holmes story, the detective had already moved on from the page to the stage, to the radio play, to the cinema screen, to the TV series, and later on to the gaming industry (see Boström 2017). An interesting example of his presence in the gaming industry is found in *Sherlocked* (2015–), an escape room in the city of Malmö, Sweden. You can visit this room with your friends or colleagues and form a group that will be locked in the room for an hour. You will be dressed up in period clothing to properly fit into Sherlock Holmes' era, and during that hour, you will be asked to find clues, solve a riddle, etc. to escape from the room.

Through the decades, Sherlock Holmes appeared in many different forms of storytelling and media constellations, so we can analyse the character in terms of transmediality. He is a predecessor to transmedial franchise models of the twentieth and twenty-first century such as Disney, Star Wars and the Wizarding World. In the 2010s, this becomes obvious through a variety of productions that were more or less obvious rewritings of Doyle's canonical Sherlock Holmes universe. Many of them seem to strive to both connect to the 'real' Sherlock Holmes and develop new angles on the beloved character. In the TV series *Elementary* (2012–), Holmes and Watson solve crimes in New York, and the Watson character is not a John but a female doctor named Joan. A less obvious example is *House M.D.* (2004–12), a TV series in which the names of the protagonists are changed to House and Wilson. They do not fight crime

but diagnose medical conditions and work in a hospital, facing mysterious illnesses to be identified and understood. The hospital context is fitting: Doyle himself was a doctor, and in his creation of Sherlock Holmes, he is said to have been inspired by one of his teachers.

Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss's TV series *Sherlock* (BBC 2010–17) is another success story: it has run for four seasons since it started in 2010. Here, Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) and his sidekick Dr John Watson (Martin Freeman) are placed in contemporary London to solve crimes. Much of the plot is based on Doyle's stories, but parts of the story have been rearranged and modernized. An example of this is the first episode, 'A Study in Pink'. The title has been changed from Doyle's 'scarlet' to 'pink' (which is the favourite colour of the murdered woman in the story). In Gatiss's vision, the detective is also a genius when it comes to the use of different digital devices, such as mobile phones, computers and satellite navigation systems.

Holmes' intermedialities

Plenty of intermedial dimensions can be identified within the storyworld of Sherlock Holmes: in the written and published books we find combinations of words and images (illustrations), and we also find references within the stories themselves to other art forms and media, such as music, for example when Holmes and Watson go to a concert or when Holmes plays the violin, etc. Doyle's original stories are therefore already intermedial because they are combinations of words and images. Sidney Paget's illustrations influenced which actors were chosen to play Holmes in film and TV versions. Of course, *Sherlock Holmes* is also intermedial in the sense that it has generated many adaptations, rewritings and transmedial processes.

So let's focus on the BBC's *Sherlock* for a while. In this series, the viewers meet Holmes and Watson as they are living in the digital mediascape of the twenty-first century. In Doyle's stories, Watson is the narrator. He writes up his experiences of solving cases with Holmes with a pen and paper in books and a traditional diary. In *Sherlock*, Watson writes a blog. Holmes publishes his reflections on different scientific discoveries on his homepage, 'The Art of Deduction', while in Doyle's stories he submits scientific articles to different journals. The blog and the homepage are part of *Sherlock*, the diegetic world of Holmes and Watson. When the series aired, however, these sites went up on the internet. On these pages, Watson and Holmes communicated with their followers as if they were living in our world. This was not a unique occasion; the same kind of transmedia storytelling was put to great use in the Lionsgate Television series *Mad Men* (2007–15), when characters from the story tweeted on Twitter about their fictional lives.

Sherlock Holmes has travelled across media borders extensively: from technical to technical medium, from basic to basic medium, and from qualified to qualified medium. Some examples could be identified like this:

- from technical to technical medium: from paper and ink (book) to screens;

- from basic to basic medium: from the printed words of the novels to the orally performed words on film and TV;
- from qualified to qualified medium: from crime fiction novel to theatre play and to film.

So, we have this detective, Sherlock Holmes, who is depicted in different media types, and consequently the modalities of the media in question also differ.

A good way of discussing the transmedial Sherlock Holmes is by way of the concept of cultural icons (see Lund (2012) and Brooker (2001)). A cultural icon may appear in several media. It does not have to be a single story, character or real person, but can also come in the shape of a poetic expression, a piece of music, a building (like the Eiffel Tower) or something else (e.g. images of the double helix). Famous cultural icons are found in every qualified media type, from Frankenstein's monster to Marilyn Monroe, Hamlet with Yorick's skull, or the intro to a very famous rock song such as Deep Purple's 'Smoke on the Water'.

In *Sherlock*, there are plenty of references to the fan cultures of Sherlock Holmes as they have appeared throughout the decades. Lyndsay Faye explains this phenomenon by pointing at the 'opacity' of Sherlock Holmes: he becomes a riddle, a gap for everyone to fill in, reflect upon and dream about. That, according to Faye, is part of the mystery of the transmedial power of Sherlock Holmes:

Sherlock Holmes as a popular heroic figure displays a remarkable level of tantalizing opacity [...] Therein lies the magic, I would posit, both for fans and for Sherlockians, at least for those inclined to create their own transformative works.

(Faye 2012, s. 5–6)

If this is true, this opacity will probably continue to be at work for a long time to come and Sherlock Holmes will continue to be a cultural icon and an intermedial and transmedial construction in many different media.

Appropriating the nineteenth-century icons: The storyworld of *Penny Dreadful*

In our discussion of the Sherlock Holmes transfiction we touched on the notion of character recognizability. How many features (and which features?) of Conan Doyle's character do we need to decide that a given fictional character is recognizable as a version of Sherlock Holmes? Is Doctor Gregory House, the protagonist of *House, M.D.*, recognizable as a reinvention of the iconic character, even though he is a medical doctor and not a detective? And is *Elementary*'s Joan Watson, an American Chinese woman living in modern-day New York, still a version of Dr John Watson?

The question of character recognizability becomes even more interesting in the case of mash-ups, which are storyworlds that take their inspiration from various earlier texts and thus simultaneously contribute to multiple transfixions. In this section we discuss one such example: *Penny Dreadful*, which originated in 2014 as a television series created by the acclaimed Hollywood screenwriter John Logan. The series ran on Showtime for three seasons (2014–16), garnering a string of accolades, including BAFTA awards and Emmy nominations. When it was cancelled, the creators decided to continue expanding the storyworld with graphic novels, and they have also produced a spin-off television series called *Penny Dreadful: City of Angels* (2020), which is thematically connected to the original series but set in a completely new setting with a new cast of characters.

The creation of the spin-off means that technically *Penny Dreadful* should be considered an ‘anthology series’, meaning a type of television, film or radio series which presents a new set of characters and a new story in every episode or season that are unrelated to the previous ones. It should be noted that *Penny Dreadful* is not a typical anthology series, because its first three seasons constituted one coherent story, but the existence of the spin-off seems to move the series in that direction. However, in this section we are only going to discuss the original television series (seasons 1–3, released between 2014 and 2016).

What is interesting about *Penny Dreadful* from an intermedial and transmedial perspective is that the series is not a straightforward case of the adaptation of one nineteenth-century text, and it does not add to just one existing transfixion (as is the case with *Sherlock*). *Penny Dreadful* is a *mash-up* in which characters from various out-of-copyright novels coexist in a shared storyworld. These characters are the protagonists and villains of iconic nineteenth-century ‘monster narratives’: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (1818), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by R.L. Stevenson (1886), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (1890) and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker (1897).

The scope of *Penny Dreadful*’s world-building ambition is perhaps not on the same scale as that of the creators of *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*’s fictional universes, but what is notable about this television series is how it uses the different ‘building blocks’ from iconic nineteenth-century novels. As a consequence, the series can be said to add new material simultaneously to as many as four separate transfixions related to the four novels that it appropriates.

Penny Dreadful’s production history is a little bit unusual in contemporary television practice, in that it just had one writer, who was also one of the producers and thus had an unusual amount of creative control. For a high-end television series, typically there is a lead writer or a showrunner working with a team of other writers. But in the case of *Penny Dreadful*, John Logan wrote all 27 episodes. He already had a distinguished career as a screenwriter, having written scripts for a number of Hollywood blockbusters and two James Bond films.

When Logan talks about the genesis of *Penny Dreadful*, he often repeats that what started him off was a very simple realization – that three of the most iconic nineteenth-century novels ‘about monsters’ – *Dracula*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *Dorian Gray* – were published within a few years of each other. To

this list he adds another, much earlier but probably still more influential nineteenth-century 'monster narrative': *Frankenstein* (1818). Once he decided on the material to be appropriated, he started to envisage a universe where the characters from all these novels could coexist and interact. He pitched the idea to Sam Mendes, with whom he had collaborated on the James Bond film *Skyfall*, and they managed to find a television studio interested in the project. A decisive factor was the phenomenal success of the first seasons of *Game of Thrones* (2011–18), which opened the door for other expensive fantasy projects because they had demonstrated that there could be a global mainstream audience for such projects.

But what is fascinating about *Penny Dreadful* from a transmedial perspective is not only that it appropriates characters and storylines from multiple novels but also that it includes references to their culturally significant adaptations. It can thus be said to appropriate the source texts as well as their subsequent adaptations. In fact, analysing the inspirations for *Penny Dreadful* can be compared to an archaeological excavation: it is all about unearthing subsequent layers of appropriation. The very bottom layer is constituted by the out-of-copyright nineteenth-century novels. The expiration of copyright often means that there is an opportunity to greatly expand a now cheaply accessible storyworld, as we have also seen with H.P. Lovecraft's (1890–1937) universe of weird stories recently.

As we said before, Dracula, Dr Frankenstein and his creature, Dr Jekyll and Dorian Gray coexist in *Penny Dreadful*'s storyworld. They are accompanied by a range of lesser-known characters from the original novels, especially from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*: Dr Seward (here turned into a female 'alienist'), Renfield (Dracula's hapless first victim in Stoker's novel), Mina Murray and Dr Van Helsing all appear in *Penny Dreadful* in minor, though crucial, roles.

The next layer of the palimpsest that is *Penny Dreadful* are the canonical Hollywood adaptations of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*: the Universal Monsters franchise (1920s–40s). A clear proof that Logan wanted to reference the Universal movies as inspiration is the character of Ethan Chandler, played by Josh Hartnett. In a plot twist towards the end of season one, the character is revealed to be a werewolf, and his real name turns out to be Ethan Talbot – 'Talbot' being the real name of The Wolfman in the Universal Monsters universe.

The third layer of inspiration is Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation of *Dracula* (1992), visible in the TV series' portrayal of Dracula in season three and in some more subtle references in costume and stage design.

The fourth major layer of inspiration is steampunk, notably *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* comic book series created by Alan Moore (1999). The similarities between *Penny Dreadful* and this graphic novel and its rather disappointing screen adaptation are so pronounced that *Penny Dreadful* was actually accused of plagiarism by some reviewers. And given the fact that *The League* itself is also an appropriation of late-Victorian material (the inspirations for its characters include Dracula, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Jules Verne's Captain Nemo and Henry Rider Haggard's Allan Quatermain), we are dealing with an interesting question: if an appropriation appropriates an earlier appropriation of a source text which is now out of copyright, can we still talk about plagiarism?

Finally, there is one additional source of inspiration: the literary genre of the penny dreadful itself. In the mid-nineteenth century, the ‘penny dreadful’ was a derogatory term for long-running, serialized novels that often featured supernatural elements. One of the most famous penny dreadfuls, *Varney the Vampire* (1845–7) is explicitly referenced in the series as a part of its storyworld.

The existence of these manifold layers of inspiration also means that *Penny Dreadful* can rightfully be called a palimpsestic appropriation. The term ‘palimpsest’ highlights a text’s references to earlier texts (possibly in an oblique or allusive way), and appropriation is described by Julie Sanders (2006) in her *Adaptation and Appropriation* as a practice requiring ‘a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product of domain’ (p. 26). According to these definitions, then, the difference between adaptation and appropriation is one of degree: bolder and freer adaptations would be called appropriations.

There is also another technical term that describes John Logan’s strategy even more precisely, especially when it comes to his approach to *Frankenstein*. ‘Re-righting’ is a term that was coined by the French adaptation scholar Chantal Zabus (2001) and that denotes a kind of rewriting or adaptation ‘that aims at redressing certain wrongs and restoring an apocryphal script that has been suppressed due to ideological pressures present at the time of writing the original text’ (Zabus 2001, p. 195). Re-righting becomes a political and ideological practice: it sets right the perceived wrongs in the original text and rescues characters and storylines that were treated ‘unfairly’ by the original writers. Zabus’ theory is deeply rooted in postmodern discourse, especially in Gérard Genette’s narratology and his notion of the palimpsest. Zabus’ re-righting seems imminently applicable to many recent adaptations/rewritings that clearly have a political agenda, for example, the ITV television series *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015–) and *The Great* (2020), a quasi-biographical television series about the Russian ruler Catherine the Great, which plays fast and loose with historical facts.

In very general terms, the three seasons of *Penny Dreadful* can be seen as an attempt to re-right the plots of its two main inspirations, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. With regard to *Dracula*, the series achieves this by giving the protagonist Vanessa Ives (who is a stand-in for Bram Stoker’s female protagonist, Mina Murray) more agency, and with regard to *Frankenstein*, by asking the audience to sympathize or even identify with the creature. The series’ sympathetic treatment of Frankenstein’s creature, who here initially uses the name of Caliban and then adopts the name of a historical figure, a minor Romantic poet called John Clare, bears a strong resemblance to many iconic twentieth-century rewritings of canonical texts whose mission is to ‘rescue’ the Other in the story. They include Michel Tournier’s novel *Friday, or, The Other Island* (a 1967 rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of Friday) and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which rewrites *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Rochester’s estranged wife, ‘the madwoman in the attic’ of Brontë’s original novel. A more recent example is *Indigo* by Marina Warner (1992), which rewrites Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* to restore dignity to the play’s purported villains, Caliban and his mother, Sycorax.

Why do creators of modern cultural texts so often resort to palimpsestic appropriation? Why do so many contemporary novels, graphic novels, films and television series adapt and build on earlier works? There are many factors that make such a practice attractive from the creators' point of view. Appropriating a successful and influential cultural text means that there will be at least some 'in-built' audience for the new media product, which will consist of fans of the original, which the new project's marketing campaign can capitalize on. This goes a long way to explaining the proliferation of remakes, sequels, prequels and spin-offs at the box office. A new version of *Dracula*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Pride and Prejudice* or *Robin Hood* will be easier to finance and promote than a completely original idea and will be guaranteed to have a captive audience.

Additionally, in the case of texts that exist in the public domain, using them for inspiration is cost-free, and therefore even more tempting. While the legal situation may vary in different countries, the general rule of thumb is that if more than seventy years have elapsed since the death of the original author, all their works enter the public domain and can thus be freely adapted and appropriated. Naturally, today that 'out-of-copyright' category includes almost all texts written in the nineteenth century and before. All Greek myths, medieval romances and Shakespeare's plays are now in the public domain and constitute a shared cultural heritage of all humanity, which anybody can appropriate in any way they like. The proliferation of these adaptations creates the rich, interwoven tapestry of today's culture that forms a kind of master-palimpsest.

The spirit of community radio: The case of *Welcome to Night Vale*

When judged against the worldwide success of the universes of *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* or Marvel, most other transmedia storyworlds pale in comparison. However, these less obvious examples of transmedial worlds are still worth considering, because their niche appeal and less commercial approach to building a storyworld offer more room for formal experimentation and original content. One such example is the transmedial world built by the hit podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*. In this section we discuss the Night Vale universe and how the modalities of the qualified medium of the audio drama podcast allowed for world-building opportunities and the engagement of the audience with the storyworld as these opportunities were expanded.

The brainchild of Jeffrey Cranor and Joseph Fink, *Welcome to Night Vale* (2015, WTNV) is a twice-monthly podcast that details the disturbingly weird life of a mysterious, fictional desert town in the Southwestern United States, Night Vale. It is a place 'where all conspiracy theories are true, where the mundane is extraordinary and the extraordinary is mundane' (Kelso 2018). Delivered in the style of a typical US community radio broadcast, *Welcome to Night Vale* is hosted by Cecil Gershwin Palmer (via the sonorous voice of Cecil Baldwin), and is released in 25–30-minute segments on the 1st and 15th of every month. The show has been downloaded more than 220 million times

(Heathman 2019) and has a cult following which helped propel the podcast to international fame. Often compared with the likes of TV series *Twin Peaks* (1990–1) by way of *A Prairie Home Companion* (1974–2016), it is a narrative universe where the core of the world-building is fleshed out in the 150-odd episodes of the podcast, with additional stand-alone stories featuring the main characters in the two published *Night Vale* novels and the yearly, self-contained live shows, performed in Europe and North America.

As an audio drama podcast, *Welcome to Night Vale* exists primarily as a digital audio recording, accessible on the internet via computers, smartphones and related devices (technical media of display). An audio drama can vary in format and length as well as in its formal properties, from a single narrating voice to a cast of characters. It is recorded by other devices, such as microphones and audio mixers (Heater 2019) that leave particular traces of their recording unless edited out. In the diegetic world, Cecil is in the recording studio of the Night Vale Community Radio building, which is equipped with ‘a recording booth, a production booth, a bloodstone circle, a broadcasting tower [...] a break room where dead interns are buried [and] the office of Station Management, which seems to be larger on the inside than its external dimensions should allow’ (Night Vale Community Radio 2020), among other eldritch features. Podcasts differ from traditional radio dramas in that they are broadcast instead of narrowcast, and although original releases are scheduled, earlier episodes can be accessed on-demand, whereas traditional radio shows are broadcast only once, perhaps with a few reruns.

The audio-only format means that WTNV conveys the entirety of civil life in Night Vale via the use of sound. This leaves a lot of room for the imagination, and listeners readily immerse themselves in the fictional world of the show, since they are addressed as citizens of the town. The power of the radio format lies in the medium’s capacity to ‘bring life to imaginative landscapes that have been rendered impossible to stage by the realist tradition’ (Hill 1996, p. 112). And there is no shortage of impossibly imaginative landscapes and situations: sometimes a large pyramid suddenly appears in the middle of town (episode 9, ‘Pyramid’), and there is a cat, Khoshekh, floating exactly 4 feet above the ground in the station’s bathroom (episode 2, ‘Glow Cloud’). The medium’s lack of visual information also allows the audience to use their imaginations to fill in notable visual and spatial blanks (e.g. ‘What does Cecil look like?’, ‘How is the town laid out?’), which results in a surge of creative interpretations of what is audio canon, ranging from consensus fan art (so-called fanon) that depicts what Cecil might look like to detailed maps of the town (Davis 2013) featuring the iconic locales mentioned in the broadcast (see Hancock (2018) and McCumber (2018)).

In terms of media modalities, a contemporary audio drama that mimics a community radio broadcast uses a single sensory modality: all information reaches the listeners through the ear. Thus, WTNV has a limited toolkit for the representation of space, because the medium ‘does not possess the essential concreteness of the theatre space’ (Hill 1996, p. 116). For example, world-building is restricted to verbal descriptions and utterances about spatial features

and physical circumstances. However, due to the sprawling nature of the podcast (which has released over 170 episodes at the time of writing, close to the end of 2020), there is ample room to develop the storyworld into a living, breathing town. In a talk given at Google's headquarters, leading man Cecil Baldwin stated:

[W]hat's interesting about doing a show that is ongoing and episodic and epic is that you always have the chance to change things [and] worldbuild [...] to go off on tangents and explore little cul-de-sacs, and then maybe go back to the main plot.

(Baldwin 2017, 22:52)

Nonetheless, the audio format allows the producers to give voice to the townsfolk, with trained voice actors lending personality to recurring characters. Besides the DJ, we also hear the voice of the citizens in interviews and on-the-spot reports, including the voices of Dylan Marron as Cecil's husband, Mara Wilson as the Faceless Old Woman who secretly lives in your home, Symphony Sanders as 16-year-old militia leader Tamika Flynn, and Wil Wheaton as chef Earl Harlan. Their stories unfold and intermingle with the larger life of the community, and the podcast format, as Joseph Fink states, allows a more experimental style of writing:

With podcasting, you can do all sorts of things you can't do on radio. We've done things like release two different episodes which tell the story from two different points of view. We've released an episode that has three different endings depending on how you download it.

(Brennan 2019)

With regard to time and temporality, the show is uploaded at the beginning and the 15th of every month, but within the fictional universe, Cecil gives the audience hints that he is on air more often, even if real-world listeners are not privy to those broadcasts. In the podcast, time follows the progression of the primary world, like a Christmas edition around our Christmas time (episode 120, 'All Smiles' Eve'), or a Thanksgiving edition in the lead-up to real-life Thanksgiving (episode 78, 'Cooking Stuff'). In every show's storyline, complications within the show build up in the first 12–15 minutes, followed by a non-narrative portion, the weather report, which exclusively features music. During the weather segment, narrative time passes (sometimes five minutes, sometimes five weeks), just enough for the plot to resolve itself in the remaining 7–10 minutes. Unlike with traditional broadcasts, such as the community radio format WTNV is patterned after, the streaming audience can skip and rewind parts of the recording to gloss over particular segments (i.e. advertisements) or to listen again more intently to bits and pieces they might have missed.

Materially speaking, WTNV's stories are mediated via sound waves that are digitally recorded by microphones. Raw recordings are stored on computers

during the editing phase, when audio software is used to edit and polish the recordings to make them suitable for broadcasting. They are then uploaded onto the internet, from where they are available on platforms such as Podbean, Podbay, Spotify or YouTube. Here, users can stream or download episodes to listen to them on their own devices.

Finally, the words and sound effects that make up the show convey cognitive import through semiotic means. As noted media scholar Mary Hill observes, 'being an aural medium, [radio] grants extra signifying power to words, silences, and rhythms' (Hill 1996, p. 112). This is exploited in the podcast to the full extent. The show naturally makes use of all three main categories of semiotic relationships. Hill reminds us that '[r]adio signifiers [...] do not replace that [which is absent] with a thing and thereby produce an illusion of presence. The radio sign works indexically – causally, or as an indication – rather than iconically' (p. 114). When listeners hear the shock or excitement in the voice of Cecil Baldwin as he plays the character Cecil Palmer, they hear a real person's voice, and it is indicative of play-acted shock or excitement. Similarly, sounds of ruffling paper, closing doors and other trivial sound effects are recorded with actual paper and doors and so on.

Other sounds effects are iconic: in episode 47, 'Company Picnic', announcers from Night Vale's rival town, Desert Bluffs, take over Cecil's place at the microphone, and at one point during the broadcast announce that a corporate-mandated, 15-second sound clip is to be played, described as 'a deep rumbling sound, like a giant dragging its prone, misshapen body across baked, waterless earth' (14:00–14:15). Due to the unfortunate lack of recordable giants in our world, the sound clip only mimics the sound of the fictional event. In some cases, voice modulation is used to provide an additional layer of meaning. In episode 42, 'Numbers', we hear the announcer of a numbers station calling out numbers with added static to simulate the low sound quality of spy broadcasts – it's *as if* the voice was coming from an actual station. Lo-fi sound quality is also used to suggest that something has been recorded on another medium, such as old tape, as in episode 33, 'Cassette', in which Cecil finds his childhood tape recordings.

On some occasions, however, voice modulation is used to signal that a shift or transformation has taken place in the diegetic world. One conspicuous example is episode 61, 'BRINY DEPTHS', in which Cecil is asked to utter the eponymous phrase. The words 'BRINY DEPTHS' are spoken in a clear, unmodulated voice at first, and then, as the broadcast progresses, it becomes more distorted and is sometimes accompanied by a piece of instrumental string music, suggesting that someone might be using it for an occult reason. The same episode is notable for other sound effects that fulfil symbolic purposes. A letter is sent to Cecil, but the address to which it is sent is not written in the standard postal format. Instead, it is represented by an audio recording, described by fan transcript site Cecil Speaks – Night Vale Transcripts (2015) as '[Perhaps the sound of ocean waves and birds played at 8kbps, followed by what sounds to me like three blows on a party horn, then a few moments of ambient crowd

noise]’, which might imply the presence of an alien intelligence which does not communicate using human words.

After the surprise success of the podcast, the cast has gone on to perform *Welcome to Night Vale* live as well. Initially, performances featured live readings of earlier scripts, and on the first anniversary of the show, a special episode was made (episode 25, ‘One Year Later’). These performances have been noted to bridge the medial gap between the radio and the theatre: ‘Despite it being a live reading of the podcast, the vibrance of the voice actors made it seem more like a stage production. Baldwin’s stage presence was captivating. He encouraged dialogue and audience participation throughout numerous parts of the show’ (Shin 2018). Since then, live shows and world tours are regularly produced with original scripts that allow for Rocky Horror Show-style audience participation.

Since there are no video recordings of such live performances, because the showrunners forbid them in an effort to preserve the intimacy and exclusivity of the live shows, we can only speculate how the cast and the audience interact with each other. In interviews, Cranor has intimated that ‘sometimes we have call-and-response, or somebody from the audience who has to be addressed in some way’ (Oyeniya 2017, n.p.). Nonetheless, it stands to reason that *Night Vale* performances on stage break medial barriers and use the physical bodies of the audience members to incorporate them into the world of the live show. In a report about the 2018 touring live show ‘A Spy in the Desert’ in Tennessee, journalist Ainsley Kelso (2018) noted that ‘one fan was brought up onto the stage to perform with the cast’, and the writers of the live performance asserted that ‘we are obviously thinking about what the audience is seeing. What the audience is feeling. How we can use the benefit of being in a room together. We have the option to use physical comedy’ (n.p.).

In a stage performance, audience members can see and touch cast members, which might engage people more at the cost of having their mental images of the fictional characters shattered. Cecil Baldwin has stated that the script of the performance ‘acknowledges that everyone is in the same room [...], if you are live on stage, you can’t deny that’, and the use of stand-alone scripts ‘allows people who are not super-fans of the podcast to walk in and get what’s going on’ (Baldwin 2017, 43:14). These concessions are worth taking into consideration when analysing *Welcome to Night Vale* as an intermedial phenomenon. There is also a financial incentive, according to Joseph Fink: ‘a podcast is free so in order to make money from it, you have to figure something else out [for the live shows]’, hence the exclusivity and the audience participation (Brennan 2019, n.p.).

Similar growing pains hallmarked the creation of the first novel, simply titled *Welcome to Night Vale* (Fink and Cranor 2015). Most of the difficulties with the writing process were caused by the fact that Cranor and Fink were tackling a new medium. Describing their dilemmas candidly, they admitted:

You can’t write a novel the same way you write something people listen to. We thought a lot about visual rhythm, you know, sentence length,

paragraph length and how that is related to how people read it in a way we don't have to when we write for audio. The biggest thing we really had to think through was how to end it, because the way a continuing podcast works, it's kind of a juggling act. You are constantly landing stories, but at the same time, you are constantly throwing stories in the air, because otherwise you don't have anywhere to go. You always need to have something in the air. But with a book, everything needs to land at the end. You can't leave a bunch of stuff hanging in [the air].

(‘Welcome to Night Vale’ Goes from Podcast to Page, 2015, n.p.)

The most obvious consequence of the medial change is that the novel brings the familiar setting alive on the page without Cecil Baldwin's vocal performance. Nonetheless, interspersed in the narrative, we find segments titled ‘The Voice of Night Vale’, which are put into the mouth of Cecil but lack the surefooted delivery associated with Baldwin. A more traditional narrator takes over Cecil's role as the main mediator of events, flitting from character to character to tell the story of the novel. The narrator often knows more than the character it follows, providing direct insight into the thoughts of the characters. When one of the protagonists, Diane, talks to the angels (who are all named Erica, as established by the podcast), we are given a look into the Ericas' minds: ‘This was not why they were sad. Their sadness was unrelated to the conversation. It was not unrelated to the dirt-covered bundle on the kitchen counter’ (Fink and Cranor 2015, p. 61). In line with the unsettling, mind-bending atmosphere of the podcast, sometimes the narrator involves the reader more directly than we would expect, based on our familiarity with classic, third-person, past-tense narration:

Imagine a fifteen-year-old girl of mixed-race parents. That's pretty good. That's very close, she might say to anyone who described what she looked like. Diane didn't know what she looked like. She never cared to know. Many people would tell her anyway.

(Fink and Cranor 2015, p. 71)

The lack of a clear, unambiguous external description owes something to the original broadcast format that treasures the listener's imaginative gap-filling, as does the direct, imperative address of the audience.

In summary, *Welcome to Night Vale* is a media franchise that has been transmediated from the airwaves to the page and stage. In the process, characters and locations which audiences have originally heard about and imagined in their own heads successfully grew more fleshed out. Fan communities have attempted to create a shared set of images and facts that anchor the disembodied voices in a pseudo-physical environment. As the original performers went on tour, they used their physical presence to complement their vocal performances and brought their audience materially into the world of Night Vale. Subsequent novelizations have attempted to bring the intimacy of the

original vocal performances onto the page using the toolkit that novel writers have had for centuries to give a glimpse into the inner lives of the characters through the use of narration. The three different approaches show that different media are capable of realizing different material, sensorial, spatiotemporal and semiotic configurations to provide their audiences with a shared sense of fictional reality.

Conclusion

The very same processes of worldmaking that have made *Welcome to Night Vale* successful have enabled the creation of the transmedial worlds of the Sherlock Holmes universe and the transfiction *Penny Dreadful*. The reason why transmedial worlds have proven so popular is undoubtedly due to the alliance of the human imagination and the profit motive. Audiences who like stories set in a particular fictional universe will crave more of the same, by extending the stories of characters and places previously known, or by exploring the gaps of earlier cultural texts, or by reinventing their old premises for new sensibilities and audiences. Whatever the impulse behind the expansion, revision or reiteration of storyworlds, new media products garner attention and circulate in communities so that old intellectual properties may be judged anew.

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