The creation of Transmedial Narratives
notes by Bob Cotton 2011

So how do you construct a transmedia story? How do you turn a linear narrative into a ‘world’? Move from a sequential story to a non-linear environment or *story-world*? Optimise the various media components and variety of media channels available into a coherent *narrative landscape* that the reader wants to explore?

As various commentators have pointed out (Henry Jenkins: *Convergence Cultures* 2006, Nick Cohen BBC, 2011) Transmedial narratives are not driven so much by the ‘story’ (-the text of the story), but really by two elements: the *concept* and the *story components* - the ‘world’ of the story. The *story-world* is all the context of the story - the characters, the locations, the timeline that the characters share, story episodes, and the spatial, cultural, and geographic context.

Nick Cohen used the following diagram (at i-Docs Conference, April 2011) to illustrate how the BBC is recasting its understanding of transmedial narrative:

2011 Bob Cotton: *Old and New Models of Programme Production* (after Nick Cohen)
From Programme-driven to Concept-driven strategies
As you can see, big broadcasters like the BBC are beginning to look at speculative products (programme ideas) as concept-driven rather than just hanging on the TV broadcast itself, as was the case in the heyday of broadcasting. Now the Concept - the idea - is the hub that drives everything, the television programme or series is no longer the central component, but just one in a number of media channels that potentially carry the story - or better, that ‘shape the story-world’, providing viewers/users/readers with the conceptual framework through which they can explore the narrative, the context in which its set, the characters it features, the ideas it deals with.... The story-world will also include scope for user-generated content - for fanzines, for social network groups, for the kind of ‘story-world’ extras like those surrounding the Star Wars, Star Trek, Dr Who, Pokemon and Matrix core narratives.

Interactive and Digital Media Designers
The mediation of these components is where the most appropriate media or channels are selected (by the author, as well as by users/fans/readers) for components of the story-world. This is first and foremost a role for the generalist designer/creative director - someone with a wide knowledge and experience of using different media. Knowing how to select, specify, and direct specialist input from a range of designers, and media producers, and respecting their input, skills and knowledge in return, is of key importance in this role. One of the principle advantages of the AUCB Digital Media BA is precisely this sense of generalism - a generalism based both on the widespread experience of making content in different media AND on the knowledge that is special to digital - interactive design, interface considerations, coding and development.

Most appropriate Media
Contextual media like timelines and maps speak for themselves, but character portraits? Are these best served by police-style files - photos, identikits, finger-prints? Or Facebook profiles? By illustration, retouched photographs, styled, costumed and cast actors? Written biographical profiles? Video diaries? Interactive interviews? Reality-TV episodes? Encounters in Second-Life style 3d worlds? It is obviously the task of the writer and the interactive designer to determine which media, and which media channels, are the most appropriate for the task, and for the type of audience.

Targeting your audience
The choice of media and treatment for each aspect of the story-world determines how successful the overall mix will be. Of course, determining the transmedia mix most appropriate to your target audience is a question of careful observation, audience and market research, and common sense, as is finding the most appropriate pitch, vernacular and visual style...(the most appropriate language and media-mix for your audience).

The more apparently ‘real’ (logically coherent) the transmedia narrative components are, the more ‘suspension of disbelief’ is achieved - and the more psychologically immersive and sustaining the narrative becomes. Building a logically coherent story-world means trying to encourage and sustain the audiences’ suspension of disbelief - that state of psychological immersion in which we are ‘carried away’ or ‘lost’ within the story.

Building a logically coherent Story-World
Thinking in transmedia terms, different components of the story-world can be presented such that they link to other components. The timeline might link to the map, to incidents in
the narrative, etc. The characters of the story could link into acquaintances, friends, enemies, or to their fan pages, Facebook profiles, etc.

For example, locations can be represented using maps, 3d computer models or virtual-reality environments, real scouted location shoots, video-maps, webcams, CCTV, or travelogues, or complete guidebooks or tourist brochures, or excerpts from encyclopedia entries, history books or websites. Or they can be real locations, overlaid with augmented-reality imagery, data, objects, labels. It is the construction of a believable story-context, each component with narrative hooks, ‘non-submersible units’ (Stanley Kubrick’s essential plot elements), questions and uncertainties that will drive the transmedial narrative...

Dick Tracy - separate transmedia publications since 1931

Let’s take Chester Gould’s comic-strip hero Dick Tracy as an example. (By the way, it’s rumoured that Frank Miller, having already tackled Sin City (2005) and Will Eisner’s The Spirit (2009), is basing his next comic-mediation on Dick Tracy... )

Of course, Dick Tracy is, in a way, a transmedia-star already - since 1931 he has been mediated through comics, radio-series, short stories, television episodes, animated cartoons, several live-action feature films, and through numerous toys, gadgets and franchisable ‘brand-extensions’. He has also been an inspiration for artists, like Andy Warhol, Jean Luc Godard and Jess Collins. By transmedia nowadays of course, we mean that electronic links and hyperlinks provide the stitching that holds the narrative together across several media.

Set in the Al Capone era of alcohol prohibition in the USA, and staged in the windy city of Chicago, Dick Tracy is the story of a detective who faces a surreal and grotesque series of villains - (many of Chester Gould’s creations inspired Bob Kane, the creator of Batman - 1940), including hoodlum Flat-Top Jones (modelled on Pretty-Boy Floyd), the Nazi spy Pruneface, the criminal lunatic Selbert Depool, the Hill-Billy B.O. Plenty, The Brow, Breathless Mahony, the two-faced Haf’n’Haf, and many more...

Mug-shots of Chester Gould’s grotesque villains...
Like Will Eisner’s famous *Spirit* (a decade later than *Dick Tracy*), Chester Gould’s comic-strip detective was first and foremost a two-dimensional, pen and ink, graphic arts creation. Gould specialised in the two-dimensional, he created a two-dimensional art world, quintessentially graphic - flat characterisations, flat colour (when colour was used - in the Sunday comic supplements), and in Gould’s case, a formal rectilinear frame-work, that lent itself to multiple syndications through dailies, Sunday and even evening papers right across the USA. Syndicators - including Tribune, and King Features, syndicated strips
for artists in as many newspapers as possible. Configuring strips on a uniform rectangular frame made it easier to episodise the stories. (For example the Sunday strip could be read from Sunday to Sunday as a weekly, while the daily strip might be *summarised* on Sundays.

[Gould's fascinating surrealistic graphic style, his techno-gadgets (two-way wrist-radios, etc), and his bizarre villains, especially inspired artists in the early 1960s (when we were just discovering popular culture as a suitable subject for the fine arts - Pop Art), notably Andy Warhol (*Dick Tracy*, 1960), and Jess Collins much more interesting *Tricky Cad* (c1960 - Collins’ anagrammatic title).]

Jess Collins was a retired Nuclear chemist who took up art in the 1950s in California - in the late 1950s he began to ‘appropriate’ *Dick Tracy*, re-assembling and collaging
fragments of Gould’s already surreal cartoon into Collin’s own strip, which he called *Tricky Cad* (1960). *Tricky Cad* amplified the surrealism of Chester Gould’s strip, and showed how appropriation in the right hands can be a very powerful medium. Collins’ famous collages are now in LA County Museum of Art. The transformative quality of Jess Collins’ work, reminds me of an earlier appropriation by Max Ernst - his collage-stories *Les Malheurs des Immortelles* (1922), *Une Semaine de Bonte* (1934), *La Femme Cent Tetes* and others.

Max Ernst’s collages of the 1920s and thirties were made by collaging fragments of Victorian magazine illustrations (engravings) together. There must have been a huge supply of these old *Punch, Strand, and Illustrated London News* magazines - and mail-order catalogues - available at this time, when they were still junk rather than valuable antiques. In the same way, Jess Collins must have had access to numerous *Dick Tracy* strips in the comic supplements of American Newspapers. Chester Gould was drawing the original strip continuously from 1934 up to 1971.
The comic-strip feeds the movies - *Dick Tracy* becomes film noire in this 1946 Gordon Douglas B feature...

Influence, appropriation, homage, borrowing, all these permeate the fine arts and the popular arts. Here Jean Luc Godard uses the film-noire genre, adds Chester Gould’s Dick Tracy trenchcoat and trilby, and features the tough and gaunt Eddie Constantine as the hero-cum-reporter investigating the planet *Alphaville* - and driving a Ford *Galaxy* (of course)!
**Dick Tracy Merchandise**

1990 publicity sheet for Warren Beatty’s *Dick Tracy*

http://www.swapsale.com/dicktracy.htm
Dick Tracy tin police car c 1950s

c1946 Remco/Chicago Herald Tribune: Dick Tracy wrist radio
Monthly comic book - c1940s, Chester Gould’s diagrammatic drawing style...

Gould wasn’t nearly so fine a draftsman as Eisner, but his crude characterisations and clumsy figure-drawing were neatly subsumed in his powerful graphic narrative and his inventiveness. It says a lot for public appreciation of his work that Dick Tracy was in production as a major syndicated strip and drawn by Chester Gould continuously from 1930 to 1971
pop-up book Dick Tracy

1947 John Rawlings: *Dick Tracy meets Gruesome*
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJ426aNvNmQ&feature=player_embedded#at=137](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJ426aNvNmQ&feature=player_embedded#at=137)

Ralph Byrd as *Tracy*, (and Boris Karloff as *Gruesome*) - one of several feature-length Dick Tracy movies made in 1940s.
As we have noted (above), the *Concept* takes centre stage in this new era of transmedia narrative - an era that’s been around really since the 1930s. Transmedia is ‘new’ and even more relevant today, because there are several new media channels, outlets or hubs that we have to include in the media-mix, and *that the story-world components may now be electronically linked together*.

**Transmedia channels in mid-20th Century:**
- comic strip
- comic book
- illustrated book
- monthly comic
- annual comic
- board game
- toys and other merchandise
- bedroom posters
- pop-up book
- radio series
- Television series
- Feature Movie series
- vinyl records

**21st Century transmedia channels**
- all the above, plus:
Will Eisner: *The Spirit* (from 1940)

Eisner’s graphic jokes are more 3d than Gould’s, but *The Spirit* shares a kind of comic identity with *Dick Tracy* - plus the addition of the face-mask. The *Spirit* has a more laconic, hip, style, and was aimed at more adult audiences. Will Eisner is widely regarded as the master comic-strip illustrator and auteur.

**Some media are better than others**

Looking at Chester Gould's remarkable graphic work, and at Will Eisner’s *The Spirit* (above) one is reminded that *some media are better than others* in the sense that they are the native or original medium of expression, chosen and developed by the originating artist because that is what they are good at. Even Frank Miller directing the movie of *The Spirit* - a fellow comic artist - cannot be said to have created on film anything like the cognitive experience of the comic strip. And the comic-strip is very special in this sense - the auteur strip-artist has the power of the writer AND the illustrator to create a very personal narrative in words and pictures.
Is this what makes the comic-strip such a powerful medium? Cartoon readers have some considerable advantages too - they can scan the page or the spread as an iconic image, as well as serially ‘reading’ and looking at the image-texts, and they are in intimate control over the tempo in which they do this - they turn the page, pass from one frame to another, admire the artwork, study the drawing, re-read the page, the story, the comic-book. They are aware of the paper (originally cheap pulped newsprint-style paper - thus ‘pulp-fiction’), its texture, the quality of print (and often mis-registered color Benday or half-tone dots), the smell of the printed page (in new comics), the patina of previous usage (in second-hand-comics), the ‘mythology’ of the comic - by which I mean not just the contents, the story, but the comic-genre itself - a cheap, popular, accessible, ‘democratic’, art-form of popular culture in which the artist could still be a singular voice (or in which the comic could still be the product of a very small team - artist, inker, writer, letterer, etc). One is also aware (especially in the transmedia context) of the power of the strip-cartoon as a storyboard:

2002-3 George Hull: creative director of ESC: storyboard visual for Matrix Revolutions

So in the comic-strip cum-storyboard, the drawing becomes a developmental tool as well as a potential central medium for the central or associative narrative.

But what of designers who can’t draw as well as George Hull, Will Eisner, Chester Gould and the rest (and there are a lot of us)? We have to take inspiration from Jess Collins and Max Ernst, and go the collage route. Consider another favourite and essential tool of the designer, the concept board:
The concept board is a collection of sketches, photographs, magazine and newspaper clippings, adverts, graphics, colours, shapes and other materials collected to indicate the context of an idea for a new product or other designed artefact. The designer collects these ‘reference materials’ in order to evoke the idea, the style, and the context of his proposal.

Fashion and textile designers, and advertising creative directors, often use a similar device called a ‘mood board’ to express the context, the colours and the concept behind a new range, collection or brand.
Some convergence of mood-concept-board/comic strip/collage story-strip might produce interesting results, and become a valuable tool for exploring narrative ideas - if one isn’t a brilliant drafts-person or cartoon artist.

Another tool of the advertising designer is the marker-visual - a relatively crude drawing showing the flow and ‘feel’ of the idea, created using felt-tip or fibre-markers...

Howard Rushfirth (Rushfirth Creative) marker storyboard ideas...from http://www.rushfirthcreative.co.uk/

The important thing is to get the idea down on paper so that the creative team can follow your thinking, or so that the client can be coaxed into adopting your approach. The next step beyond the concept/mood board and/or marker visual storyboard is the animatic - a quick and dirty animation, perhaps using elements from the concept-board and marker-visual storyboards. These used to be hand-animated using a studio Rostrum camera, but nowadays are more usually constructed in Flash, Director, Keynote or After Effects - or even in Powerpoint if you’re desperate. In new media terms, the equivalent of the animatic is the rapid prototype - a simplified model of the proposed app or interactive site - so that it can be tested as a ‘proof of concept’ of the finished project.

The other essential design tools in the Transmedia world are the concept map and relationship diagrams:

The purpose of maps and diagrams like this are to illustrate the relationships between components of the Story-World - to map-out the potential experience-design of your tranmedia narrative - how the user is going to find all the elements of the story-world, and what kind of experience they will have when they do.
Summary

Transmedia is the shorthand for a multimedia storytelling across a range of media channels. It is also therefor a means to create a nonlinear narrative - a method of interlinking conventional linear narratives, and other story-related components within a non-linear framework or infrastructure. A transmedia ‘publication’ of Dick Tracy for example, might start with a map of Chicago, or even a ‘Sin City’ CGI of a comic-strip Chicago, with the Dick Tracy narratives transposed to map or model locations, pop-up comic pages would provide the linear narratives, while the characters, locations and other story objects can be embedded within the map or the model to be ‘discovered’ or linked-to by the user.

There are several strategies for transmedia narratives summarised above, but what is central to this article is that the idea or the concept are the central driving factors determining the production of these kind of narratives. But from the user’s point of view it will always be the native or original story/art/film/game that will be their starting point for further exploration of the transmedia ‘story-world’. Such transmedia productions have most often in the past resulted from dedicated fans exploring the ideas of the original story (Star-Trek fans learning Klingon for example at the Klingon Language Institute - http://www.kli.org/). More recently transmedia productions have been orchestrated by agencies in the development of brands (as an extension of ‘integrated marketing’), but as Henry Jenkins points out, these kind of ‘art-focused’ narratives may have wider implications in an era of collective intelligence:

“Transmedia storytelling is the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence. Pierre Levy coined the term, collective intelligence, to refer to new social structures that enable the production and circulation of knowledge within a networked society. Participants pool information and tap each others expertise as they work together to solve problems. Levy argues that art in an age of collective intelligence functions as a cultural attractor, drawing together like-minded individuals to form new knowledge communities.


Its the consideration and respect for the powers and the seductive qualities of every single medium in the transmedia mix that will make a successful multi-channel, multi-media narrative, the selection of appropriate media for each component of the story-space, plus of course, the interlinking of the story-world components, whether by hyperlionking, social networking, viral media or simply word of mouth.
Further reading:

Chester Gould: Best of Dick Tracy Volume 1 (2011)

Henry Jenkins: Game `design as Narrative Architecture
http://www.anabiosispress.org/VM606/1stPerson_hjenkins.pdf

Henry Jenkins: Convergence Culture - Where Old and New Media Collide (2007)

Scott Bukatman: Terminal Identity - The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction (1993)


Tom Abba: Hybrid Stories - Examining the Future of Transmedia Narrative from http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/science_fiction_film...