

The Ethnography of Collectible Miniature Game Storyworlds

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In many of today's popular entertainment franchises (especially speculative fiction & fantasy), stories and characters unfold across multiple media channels and products. As Jenkins notes, the strength of transmedia storytelling lies in the fact that multiple texts are integrated into an overall narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium. In its ideal form, a transmedia story speaks to the strengths of each individual media platform. A story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through digital game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa. However, there also needs to be a strong narrative connection between the separate manifestations of the story in the separate media platforms. Ultimately, the best kind of transmedia storytelling isn't about telling the same story over and over again, it's about telling different parts of the same story in different media in order to create a meta-story that transcends any one specific delivery platform.

Transmedia storytelling also makes sense from an economic standpoint. Different media attract different audiences. Films, television, and literary fiction probably have the most diverse audiences, while comics and video games have the less diverse audience (though that is certainly beginning to change). As Jenkins has pointed out, a well conceived and crafted transmedia franchise attracts a wider audience by pitching the content differently in the different media. If each story product offers fresh a fresh experience to the player/reader/user/audience, then a crossover market will expand the potential gross within any individual media. So, people who may not play video games, but enjoyed the Lord of the Rings movies might experiment with a related game title. Ultimately, any given product is an entry into the franchise as a whole, providing new levels of insight into the meta-story.

In fact, this transmedia phenomena has reached such a level that many creative storytellers (commercial or otherwise) are beginning to think about multiple media channels not so much as an opportunity to repeatedly tell the same story or one large story, but as an opportunity to create holistic storytelling realities in which many different stories can be told. In the best cases, what wraps each of the stories in a transmedia franchise together is a storytelling reality that is

specifically designed (and evolved) with continuity and canon in mind. The reality connects the stories together, and creates a layered storytelling matrix of interlocking events, people, economy, philosophy, technology, and culture that is not only fed by the stories, but in turn feeds the stories, making them part of a living world. While fictional realities such as J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, Frank Herbert's Dune reality, and H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos were once rare exceptions, many creative storytellers are imagining and building worlds that serve and expansive storytelling sandboxes.

The inevitable question that must be asked is whether story products (video games, novels, movies, comics, etc.) that exist within a rich and compelling storyworld provide greater enjoyment for the audience than story products that do not. Is the creation of a storyworld (a process that both time consuming to create and to manage) a wise investment for storytellers (game designers, novelists, comic writers, etc.)? It is within the context of this question that the study presented herein was designed to explore the interaction (or lack thereof) that a player/reader/user has with the meta-storyworld in which the storytelling media that they are consuming is embedded.

Over the course of the research, the authors of this paper engaged in an ethnographic study of HeroClix players, a tabletop miniature role playing game. The game itself, which is published by WizKids Games, draws its gameplay mechanic, characters/miniatures, and gameplay scenarios primarily from the Marvel and DC comic book universes. As such, it provides an excellent opportunity to explore the impact (if any) that a rich and compelling storyworld, a hallmark of comic books (especially those highlighted in the HeroClix game itself), has on a player's entertainment experience.