5 The Four Creative Purposes for Transmedia Storytelling

Now let's forget all about buzz, all about definitions, and all about what's been done, and finally turn our attention to the juicy affair of why and how to use transmedia tools to tell your story. There are several compelling reasons to go transmedia, and these primarily fall into two basic camps: the business case and your creative vision.

For media companies, the business case is actually quite simple. Transmedia storytelling can provide more engagement and more potential points of sale for any given story, and when it's done well, each piece can effectively become a promotional tool pointing toward every other piece of the whole.

This should be fairly intuitive. Think about the huge number of fans who read the Harry Potter books and were desperate to see the movie—a phenomenon that was also seen with *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, *True Blood*, *Twilight*, and others. Nobody is arguing that *Lord*

Star Wars, the benchmark for franchise transmedia

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of the Rings is a transmedia narrative, but this clearly demonstrates that when fans really love a story, they're willing to spend a lot of time and money for the privilege of staying in that universe as long as possible.

For all the complaints about Hollywood making too many sequels and not enough original works, if the audiences didn't want to spend millions of dollars watching those sequels, they'd never get made.

The business case for going transmedia grows even stronger when you look at long-running entertainment empires like *Star Wars*. The history of the *Star Wars* universe now plays out through hundreds of films, books, and comics; an animated TV series; and video games. As the appeal and the cultural resonance of *Star Wars* became more soundly established, Lucasfilm was able to use its intellectual property to license or create products ranging from action figures and playsets to sheets, swimsuits, and even Pez dispensers.

The value of the *Star Wars* franchise is hard to measure (Lucasfilm is a privately held company and doesn't disclose financial information), but according to analysts, the sky isn't even the limit.

For marketing consumer goods, the business case is a little more complicated because there generally isn't a core story already in existence that can be extended; however, it's all about creating an opportunity for engagement—making a story that your consumers care about will give them a positive association with your brand. This is the basic tenet that the modern advertising industry is built on. (We'll talk about story and branding at further length in a few chapters.)

But the business case isn't enough. Audiences don't like entertainment that feels like nothing but a grab for their hard-earned cash; they need to feel like there is an equitable transaction in place. It's the same thing with transmedia. If you want to succeed, you shouldn't just be bolting on a few components because they're what the industry thinks is sexy right now. You need to have a creative purpose for each

piece, and you have to be acutely aware of how all the pieces fit together to make a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts.

Let me say that again for emphasis: every single element of a transmedia story has to be fulfilling a narrative purpose, without exception.

If you don't also have an underlying creative function for each piece, then the project you make will fall flat, fans will complain, and all those riches to be earned through building a transmedia empire with a robust fan base will not be yours after all.

Following are the most common creative purposes and methods for expanding a single-medium story, either by using transmedia tools or by transforming it into a full-blown, natively transmedia world.

WORLDBUILDING

If you're just beginning to wade into transmedia storytelling, you might want to start out in the shallow end of the pool, so to speak. Assuming that you're creating a single-platform story and thinking about building out just one or two transmedia pieces, the place to begin is with simple worldbuilding.

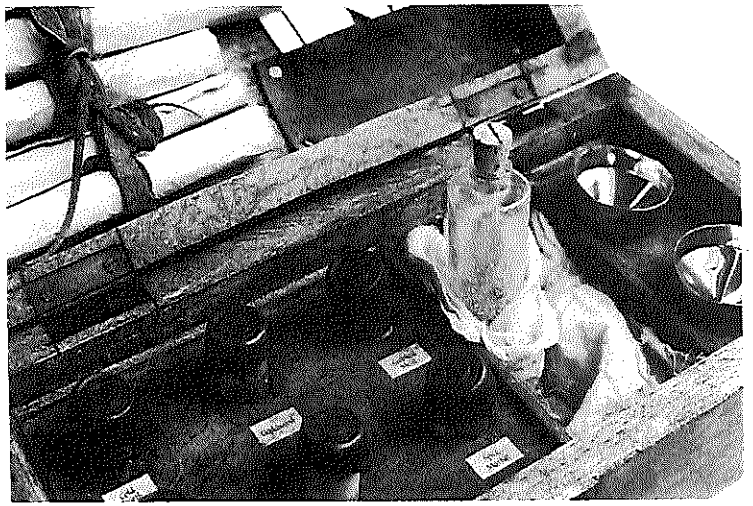
Worldbuilding is all about efficiently conveying information about the time, place, and mood of your story. In cinema, the equivalent might be an establishing shot: the quick sweep over the grounds of the high school before a scene starts in a classroom, for example, or the flyover of the Eiffel Tower to convey that the characters are in Paris.

In a text-only work of fiction, like a novel, you would use descriptive language and telling details, perhaps describing the clothes people are wearing, the architecture and building materials of a town, the weather or lighting, or the smells and sounds, to make a setting come to life in the mind's eye.

In transmedia storytelling, though, the most effective tool is to actually create a small piece of your world and give it to your audience to play with.

This piece of the world is often online—this is the realm of the oft-used fictional corporate websites, for example. *Wall-E*'s Buy n Large (a sort of satirized version of Walmart) had a web presence when the film was launched, where you could "shop" for different kinds of robots. This allowed the future viewer to explore parts of the *Wall-E* universe that weren't in the movie at all or, better, to learn more about robots that were on screen only briefly (and hence learn more about the world they inhabited.)

The Maester's Path marketing campaign for the HBO series *Game of Thrones* was all worldbuilding, in a more literal sense than usual—Campfire Media created a series of "sensory experiences" that evoked the world of *Game of Thrones*, but didn't convey anything about the plot or the characters. (In the spirit of full disclosure, I had the pleasure of working on this project.) The campaign sent a select few bloggers gorgeous chests filled with aromatherapy-like kits, each meant to provide the scent of a particular location in the show. So the Crossroads Inn, a busy pub on two major roads, was represented by the aromas of crusty bread baking on the hearth, the wooden beams the inn was built from, and an imported pear brandy for the inn's higher-class patrons.



***Game of Thrones* scent chest**
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The Maester's Path also included an online audio experience that created the feeling that you were walking around the public room of that inn and eavesdropping on the conversations of its patrons and staff; later, it added food carts in New York and Los Angeles where fans could actually taste regional cuisines from the story's world. The overall effect was a very concrete sense of the world that the show takes place in.

The marketing campaign for *District 9* also did worldbuilding very simply and elegantly, with a series of "Humans Only" ads on bus shelters, benches, and other such places. They took the form of public service announcements instructing the

public to call an emergency number if they saw or were exposed to an alien. This little piece of the alien world didn't tell you much about the plot or specific characters of the film, but it did introduce you to the flavor of *District 9*.

Worldbuilding is entry-level transmedia storytelling, and it can be done either for very little money (as in the case of a one-off website complementing an indie film) or for quite a lot of money, as any number of integrated or experiential marketing campaigns will show you.

But seeing how it's been done isn't always helpful in thinking about how you'd do it for your project. So how would you do worldbuilding for *Romeo and Juliet*? For our purposes, think about trying to establish a sense of place and time for Verona, Italy, in the sixteenth century, as a transmedia extension for a performance of the play. Here are my suggestions, just to get your juices flowing.

Depending on the time and resources you have available, you could do any number of things. On the lower end of the budget scale, you could create a website with maps of Verona and the greater region. The design might be heavy in sepia tones, with any writing being either hand-drawn or in a font made to look like it. Extra points if the design looks like a physical atlas, with paper pages.

These maps and the accompanying notes would illustrate the hostility between the Montagues and the Capulets, perhaps by noting the locations of previous brawls or deaths caused by their conflict. It could also foreshadow some of the important locations in the play, such as the apothecary, the church, and even Mantua, the town to which Romeo is banished in the third act.

I'm also personally a big fan of physical artifacts; these would be particularly easy to distribute at a live performance of the play. They can be a very effective means of worldbuilding (although, alas, they can also be very expensive to produce, especially for larger audiences). You could print and distribute invitations to the ball where Romeo and Juliet meet and fall in love, for example. Or perhaps you could

District 9 bus shelter
Courtesy Sony Picture Entertainment

have an illustrated flyer for that apothecary and his services: love potions, sleeping draughts . . . and poisons.

CHARACTERIZATION

Sticking to worldbuilding as the narrative function provides you with room to create some really interesting pieces without worrying too much about whether you're giving away too much of the plot of your story, or dealing with some of the headaches that come along when you start extending characters across media. But if you do have a little more leeway to introduce characters, you can provide an even richer experience.

For marketers, creating characters in the absence of a world or a plot is a strategy that has been used successfully more than once (think of Dos Equis's "Most Interesting Man in the World," or the golden boy of integrated and interactive marketing, Wieden+Kennedy's Old Spice Guy).

So the second compelling artistic purpose for using transmedia tools in your story is to shed light on a character's personality and motivations. This allows the audience to develop knowledge of and connections to your characters in a context that doesn't necessarily need to extend to the action in the main story.

Be forewarned: there are some serious logistical problems to grapple with when you're doing characterization work in an interactive medium as an extension of a static story. It comes down to time and linearity.

Before

A common rookie mistake, especially for projects creating a companion character blog for a film, is to place a character's online presence in an unchanging state. The character is frozen at some point before the story begins, and the blog gives absolutely no information that is relevant to the big-picture narrative. In theory, this might seem to be a good idea—after all, you aren't weakening the impact of your story any by giving the plot away—but the result is generally really boring. Much

of the interest a character generates comes from how he dynamically changes over time in response to conflict.

You see, a story typically begins at (or very close to) an inciting moment where conflict begins (it's called *in medias res*, or "in the middle of things"). A common piece of writing advice is to begin your story at the latest possible moment. That moment when the story kicks off is, as it happens, also the moment when your characters become most interesting. If there is no tension because you don't yet have a conflict under way, then your online characters run the risk of being boring, and this might create the false impression that the main story, too, is boring.

So if you create characterization pieces that are frozen in time before your story begins, you have to make sure they are interesting in their own right—something that the audience would enjoy even if they had no knowledge of the other pieces. If your main story is about the hilarious lengths a stamp collector goes to in order to acquire a particularly rare piece of postage, then his online presence should be about how he longs for that stamp, about philately as a whole, or about why he loves stamps.

It shouldn't be about what he had for dinner, the fight he had with his partner over yard work, or how he's been sorting through his junk mail and discovered he hasn't paid the newspaper bill for last month. You could make an argument that all of these things give you a better idea of Mr. Stamp Collector as a character and as a person, but none of that is relevant to the story you're planning on telling with him.

During and After

Positioning your characters after the static piece of the story has concluded can also be problematic—unless you're certain that the audience will see the transmedia extension only after seeing the story, you risk giving away the ending and removing much of the tension from the main event. There is an exception for full-blown, natively transmedia narratives, but let's wait on that for a moment.

And what about doing your characterization work from a point (or from multiple points) during your story? It's a great trick, and there are two ways to do it. The

first is to have your character evolve over time, from the beginning of your story to the end.

Television has a huge advantage over other media in this respect, because of its episodic nature. Any transmedia extension of a character can evolve over time in conjunction with the episodes' air dates. The TV show *How I Met Your Mother* is an absolute pro at creating characterization extensions for a character—in particular, ladies' man Barney Stinson, as played by Neil Patrick Harris. Barney doesn't just have a Twitter feed (@Broslife) sending out pithy commentary for the man who wants to be a player: "Happy Cinco De Mayo . . . or as I call it . . . the day I attempt to score with five chicks from five different Latin countries in one night." He also has his own series of how-to books describing how to live life the way he does, including *The Bro Code*; *The Playbook: Suit up. Score Chicks. Be Awesome*; and *Bro on the Go*.

None of these characterization pieces ties solidly into the overarching storyline of the show, and so by some definitions you could consider them not transmedia at all. But they are nonetheless an extension of the story world that serves a narrative purpose: illuminating the character and philosophy of Barney Stinson, bro extraordinaire.

How I Met Your Mother is by no means alone in using the transmedia toolbox to extend characters, though most TV shows keep it to the web. The Syfy show *Eureka* has a Twitter account for _S_A_R_A_H_, the self-aware computer house on the show, in which she comments on life as a computerized house, talks about her romance with robot-deputy Andy, and foreshadows events that will occur in the next episode to air. The cable network USA, on the other hand, has embraced the method of creating blogs as written by the shows' characters—*Monk*, *Psych*, *Covert Affairs*.

You can also do characterization and a little worldbuilding at the same time. Pam Beesly and Jim Halpert from the show *The Office* had a wedding website (just like a real couple might in the run-up to any real-life marriage), including information on where the wedding would be held and what other activities guests in town might enjoy. After the wedding episode aired, the website was updated to incorporate a gallery of wedding pictures.

Iconic States

In our example case of *Romeo and Juliet*, the big question is this: when in the story does their online presence exist? Before the play begins, the two of them haven't even met, so their core drama simply doesn't exist. Thus, any extension that occurs before the events of the play would be fundamentally disconnected from what comes after, to such an extent that they might as well be different people once the play begins.

After the play is over, they're both dead. You could extend their characters into the afterlife, or have them as ghosts, but again, this would be fundamentally disconnected from the events and tone of the play itself.

So just how would you build a transmedia extension to characterize Romeo and Juliet?

My solution would be to create something like a Twitter feed, with the pair perpetually frozen in a single, iconic state from the middle of the play. And after a moment's thought, that perpetual state is dead obvious: it has to be after they've met, but before they've married. Think of them as eternally existing in the few hours after the famous balcony scene, always pining for each other, but not yet ready to act on their love.

Some kinds of fiction (James Bond springs to mind) already exist in something close to a single iconic state, making all of this a moot point. And the iconic state is very much a great plan for marketing campaigns that want to create the feeling of a personal relationship with a character, but don't want to play out an actual plot.

We have a stunning example of an iconic, unchanging character in the absence of a plot for consumer marketing: the Old Spice Guy. When actor Isaiah Mustafa wraps that towel around his waist, he becomes a timeless entity representing the tongue-in-cheek appeal of any man who wears Old Spice: a hypothetical perfect man. The extensions of that campaign beyond mere TV commercials have included a Twitter feed and an event where the actor recorded responses to queries on that tweet stream and posted them on YouTube in real time. Those videos have received

millions of views—people seeking out the content to consume because of its entertainment value to them.

If you wanted to take Romeo and Juliet off the web, you could create a volume of letters establishing the relationships between various characters—an unsent letter the Nurse wrote to Juliet, for example, explaining how Juliet took the place of the Nurse's own dead child in her heart, or even angry letters from Lords Montague and Capulet to the Prince of Verona, airing various petty grievances and establishing their enmity.

Stay tuned for more specific tips on how to do characterization in transmedia in a later chapter.

BACKSTORY AND EXPOSITION

Stepping up your game just a little bit more, you can also use a transmedia extension for telling pieces of the story that don't fit into your main narrative, or that shed more and deeper light on the events that happen in your story.

This is where the big fun gets started, and where the line into "definitely transmedia" gets a lot less blurry.

If you stop to think about it, we ask an awful lot from our single-medium stories. They have to carry the entire payload all alone—introduce you to the characters, explain any necessary context and history, and, of course, convey the plot itself. But breaking up your story to put in that context can feel intrusive, especially if it's handled badly.

Think of stopping your action in the middle of an exciting chase sequence because you suddenly have to explain, say, the mechanics of an embezzlement scheme. And then there's the classic: a villain pausing in the middle of murdering the hero in order to deliver a monologue about his plan to conquer the world. That's bad exposition. If it's timed poorly or done to excess, it can completely ruin the pace of your story.

And then again, in the process of creation, you sometimes wind up with a lot of story material that you love, and that would immeasurably enrich or explain the

events of your film, TV show, web series, comic, or book, but that you can't work in gracefully because that plot thread about the childhood friend or the lost notebook just doesn't fit. It's too long, too disjointed, or too confusing for a single work.

This is the reason we wind up with director's cuts of a film, DVD extras of omitted scenes, companion atlases, and even the occasional novel featuring the same story, but this time from the point of view of a different character. It's because the creator had too much story to fit into her original work and didn't want to waste all that creative energy.

Maybe you had a romantic subplot that you cut because it made everything too long. Maybe you had to gloss over a rich explanation of the beliefs and origins of a fringe religion in your fiction, because there was no way to incorporate it that wouldn't have come off like inserting an encyclopedia article or infomercial into the plot, bringing all the action and tension to a crashing halt. Maybe there were some well-developed characters whom you simply adored, but who hardly got a walk-on and two lines in the final work.

Good news: there is no longer any reason for compelling material to vanish forever onto the cutting-room floor, or to disappear in edits, just because it made the work too long or you couldn't find a place to fit it into the flow of the story. Explain, expand, and extend by using that bonus material.

Even if you don't have extra material already lying around, there is often still a role for transmedia in smoothing transitions between films, shows, and books (or any combination thereof). There's still a role for using transmedia tools to explain how and why your world works the way it does.

This is an area of transmedia that has not yet been fully tapped, in my opinion: that space between creating one or two transmedia elements for a single-medium work and making a full-blown and completely interactive experience. Such hybrid creations could create a lot of value for both audiences and creators, though, and I fully expect to see more work along these lines in the coming years.

In the Canadian show *The Drunk and On Drugs Happy Funtime Hour*, the online component created by Stitch Media actually covers events that happen between the

episodes, and provides significant exposition that fills in the gaps between the episodes of the main show.

In our example case of *Romeo and Juliet*, there is at least one really fascinating untold story boiling under the surface: the origin of the feud between Capulet and Montague. How did it begin? Who is the guiltier party? What was at stake to make the feud so very bloody? There's an entire parallel story just waiting to be fleshed out.

One could do it by creating a complementary graphic novel focused on that origin story: Montague vs. Capulet. Or, if you'd prefer to keep the story closer in tone and feeling to the play itself, you could compose an epistolary drama. Publish the letters that the Montagues and the Capulets wrote to each other, to friends, or to the Prince of Verona—but this time, instead of merely establishing relationships, create a whole separate storyline with its own conflict and resolution—perhaps the story of the Capulets' dire financial situation, meant to explain why they are in such a hurry to marry off their daughter.

Alternatively, you could expand on the crime and punishment elements of the play by creating a game in which the players must take part in a similar family feud. A player would earn points and status for taking action against his hated rival. But he must be careful not to go over the line, or he risks being banished or hanged. Such a game would introduce a player to the dynamics and consequences of such a feud, and thereby make the events in the play easier to understand and relate to.

Once you give yourself permission to find new stories around the edges of your existing story, you won't be able to stop. Where a story ends and where it begins are completely arbitrary, after all; there's always something else that happened before, and something else that will happen after.

NATIVE TRANSMEDIA

Finally, if one is searching for an artistic and narrative function for using transmedia storytelling, there is the ultimate purpose: creating a work that is meant to be entirely and natively transmedia from start to finish, and not a single-medium

work at all—an experience that you give to your audience, not just a story you are telling them.

In this scenario, you aren't creating supplemental pieces for a performance, film, or written work. Instead, you're creating a story that is fractured into pieces and conveyed through multiple media, often as though the events were really occurring. The project may sometimes have major single-media components, but they won't give you the whole story on their own.

This is master-class, advanced-level transmedia storytelling. It is complex, chaotic, and performative—and if you do a good job, deeply satisfying for both the audience and the creator.

Entertainment marketing has found great success in playing out an interactive prequel to the main revenue-bearing piece, as evidenced by the many prequel ARGs. In this sort of project, the interactive component ends one moment, and the film begins the very next. But entertainment marketing is really just the tip of the iceberg.

Consumer goods marketing, too, walks this path with great success. The *Mission Icefly* game promoting Wrigley's 5 gum even took the transmedia experience to the next level, incorporating key pieces of content into the packaging of packs of gum, so that the audience needed to purchase the product to continue the story. That's a model we're going to see a lot more of, going forward.

The indie film and experience *Pandemic* is a prime example of a work that was meant to be natively transmedia from start to finish. Director Lance Weiler's ultimate execution included the short film, a live scavenger hunt, and an incredible technology build, plus comics, tweet streams, and more.

At the other end of the spectrum, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is a picture-perfect case study in transmedia storytelling as an ongoing business. WWE puts on live events, of course—the wrestling matches. It also leverages its cross-media capabilities, airing those matches on TV and uploading some of the content to video-sharing sites. The magic, though, comes from WWE's characters extending outside of the ring, with Twitter accounts in persona, where rivalries continue to

play out and heat up. WWE wrestlers even appear in character on other shows (*Saturday Night Live*, for example).

Best of all, the WWE keeps a close eye on fan reaction and adapts its storylines to accommodate what the audience loves, what they want more of, and what they completely hate.

If you want to make *Romeo and Juliet* an interactive transmedia experience, the tricky part would be creating a way for the audience to have relationships with the characters. *Romeo and Juliet* as written by Shakespeare doesn't exactly have a clear place for audience participation.

To solve this, I would personally give the audience the part of one of the characters in the story. Not Romeo or Juliet, to be sure, but someone who knows what's going on and takes action to further the story at multiple points in the narrative. Looking with that lens, the right character snaps into focus very quickly: the audience could be Juliet's Nurse.

The Nurse is only a minor character in the play, and yet she has tremendous influence on the outcome of the story. She is the one who arranges the star-crossed lovers' secret marriage, after all. The audience would play the part as Juliet's caretaker, confidante, and advisor. This opens up a dynamic emotional journey for the audience, especially because toward the end of the play, Juliet ceases to confide in the Nurse. Instead, she takes action on her own to secure Romeo's return from Mantua and sets the stage for both of their deaths.

Think about the implications: with the audience as the Nurse, the audience doesn't just feel abstractly sad about the tragedy once the play is over. Instead, they feel both implicitly guilty for their role in bringing the tragedy about, and betrayed by Juliet, who didn't confide in the Nurse in order to get help. The audience would feel that they should have been able to prevent the tragedy, where instead they only ushered it toward its ultimate and unhappy conclusion.

But exactly how do you perform that magic trick? That, dear readers, is what the rest of this book is about.

06 Learn the Basics of Traditional Storytelling

It's possible that you don't come from a storytelling background. Sure, you might already be a filmmaker just looking to expand your film's universe. Or maybe you're a novelist. If that's the case, then you already speak the language of conflict fluently, you know what characterization is, you can draw a nice diagram of good pacing, and you know the relationships between your characters better than you know your own family.

But it's just as likely that you haven't had any formal training or background in storytelling. You might be a marketer, an art director, or a strategist who until now has focused on search engine optimization and microsites. If you don't understand storytelling, then being the best producer or content strategist in the world isn't going to help your transmedia project to be a success.

You can get pretty far on instinct (we're all rampant consumers of stories in this world, and you learn quite a lot just by exposure), but

it's far better to be able to make your creative decisions consciously. With that in mind, let's review some of the bare-bones basics of telling a good story.

CHARACTER

Every story starts with a character. Ideally, your characters will be interesting people, or at least in interesting situations. They don't necessarily have to be people that the audience can relate to or like; they just have to be people that the audience wants to know more about, either because they want to know what happens next or because they want to understand your characters a little better.

But how do you come up with characters like that? Sometimes one will spring into your head, fully formed. This is fantastic when it happens. Unfortunately, though, many of us have to work at it.

One common approach is to reach for the familiar. We model characters on people we know, or on the creations of other writers that we happen to really love. Or sometimes we borrow characters we've seen, not just in one place, but in dozens of places: the authoritarian principal from dozens of movies set in a high school; the grizzled space marine from dozens of video games; the high-born lady with a taste for adventure in dozens (or hundreds, or thousands!) of romance novels.

It's really easy to fall back on these stock characters when we're first building a narrative, especially when we're using bite-sized platforms, where every precious line or second of footage has to carry a tremendous payload of story. These stock characters are a sort of shorthand between you and the audience. Demonstrating what kind of person your character is from scratch takes a lot of time and work, after all. You may be tempted not to bother when you can simply cast a dour-faced man as your principal, put him in a rumpled gray suit, and call it a day.

But it's important that you try to resist the urge to populate your story entirely with these comfortably familiar archetypes. At best, doing so lets you concentrate on the other elements of your story—an understandable goal. At the same time,

these shallow characters will limit how invested your audience can be in them; they might feel tired, trite, or boring. Even worse, if you're careless with your stock characters, you might be buying into or perpetuating offensive stereotypes—the sassy gay friend, for example, or the angry black woman.

So if you want to start your character creation process with one of those familiar templates, I highly recommend adding in some character traits that go against the expected type. Take your high school jock and give him a disabled sibling to care for. Give your brassy waitress a happy marriage.

This immediately provides a richness to your characters that makes them a little more multifaceted and resonant. And it gives them a more complex—even unexpected—set of motivations. Bear in mind that your story comes to life in the place where characters and motivations come into contact with a situation.

Once you have your characters, think about what they really want out of life, and what they don't want. What gets them through the day? What drives them to do the things they do? If they won the lottery, what would they do with the money—or is money irrelevant to them? Who or what do they hate more than anything, and why?

Do they have any secrets it would kill them to have discovered—embarrassing, criminal, or sentimental? What are they most afraid of, and why?

You also need to consider how each of your characters feels about the other characters in your story (at least, you do if they'll ever meet). Do they get along? Why or why not? How would you characterize their relationship? How long have they known each other, and how did they first meet? Do they want the same things? Could they work together, if they had to?

CONFLICT

OK, so you have your characters? Great. Now you need to put them into a situation of conflict. Conflict is the beating heart that brings your story to life—the engine that makes your story go. But conflict doesn't necessarily mean fistfights.

Classic narrative theory (as explained by Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch) has defined only seven basic kinds of conflict that every story is about: man vs. man,

WHY ROMEO AND JULIET?

For many of my examples in this chapter, I keep going back to the classic Shakespeare play *Romeo and Juliet*. Here's why:

1. Most people are already familiar with the rough shape of the story. In the unlikely event that you're not, it's the ultimate romantic tragedy: boy and girl fall in love, but they can never be together because their families detest one another. An unfortunate mix-up ultimately leads to them both committing suicide rather than live without each other. Happy, huh? Wikipedia and *CliffsNotes* can fill you in on more details as you need them.

2. It's public domain, so I'm not stepping on anyone's copyright toes. There's not enough space for a complete primer in this book, but know that there are issues of copyright and credit that you should be very familiar with if you do any work in media today.

3. It's widely regarded as a meaningful cultural work, and it's very different from the kind of fare that's usually seen getting the transmedia treatment. Most high-profile transmedia properties today fall squarely into the science fiction and action/adventure pigeonholes: *A.I.*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *The Matrix*, *The Dark Knight*, *Halo*, *Lost*. But there really isn't a good reason for that, beyond the fact that those are the kinds of stories that early transmedia creators have themselves been fans of.

   Unfortunately, this has led to a false perception that transmedia is really only good for stories with a heavy mystery or science fiction element. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just because the only thing you've ever used your blender for is to make kale smoothies doesn't mean that it couldn't make a nice piña colada, too. It's time we have more variety in the kinds of stories we tell with transmedia techniques.

man vs. himself, man vs. nature, man vs. society, man vs. supernatural, man vs. machine, and man vs. destiny.

The common thread here is that a character is placed in a position in which she wants something that she can't easily have. A great way to come up with a conflict, then (unless one is already baked into your initial inspiration), is to think very hard about your characters and what their utmost hearts' desires might be. You should already have some idea about this, from when you were thinking about motivations. Is it true love? A promotion? Just living a normal, happy life instead of being press-ganged into a role as the chosen one? Saving the family farm from foreclosure? Coming home safely from the war?

Dangle that possibility in front of their noses, and then come up with a situation in which they can't have it. What do they do?

That's where your story starts.

PLOT

Your plot is what happens to your characters as a result of your conflict. You can think of your plot as a sort of Rube Goldberg machine, where each event leads into the next, and on to the next, with a certain inevitability once the conflict has been established.

Some writers will plan their plot meticulously in advance in an outline or treatment. Others sit down to the page and just go, and find out what happens next as it flows out of their subconscious. Neither method is superior, but you have to absolutely and without question understand what work each part of your story is doing.

It is especially important in transmedia to have a plot that goes from beginning to end before you launch. It's fine for that plot to be a skeleton with little to no meat on it, but you have to know where you're going, or you risk your story meandering, bogging down, or fizzling out entirely somewhere in the middle. There are few things worse than realizing that you've painted yourself into a corner in front of a live audience, so to speak.

In this initial plotting, you may find that your starting idea just isn't strong enough to carry the story the whole way. If you get stuck on what happens next, one good trick is to introduce a new element that throws a wrench into your story's status quo—a car crash or other accident, a freak storm, an election, even a whole new character entering the scene. Play with each idea for a while, and think through the implications the way you might with a game of chess. Stay a few moves ahead. If it still isn't working, go back a few steps and change something.

Every house has what are called load-bearing walls; those are the support beams that hold up the roof, and if you were to knock down those walls, the house would fall down, too. Likewise, every story has what I call load-bearing plot points—those pivotal moments that absolutely have to occur if the rest of the story is to hold together coherently. Often these are changes in your characters' relationships and motivations over the course of the story.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, it isn't particularly crucial for Romeo and his friends to make fun of the Nurse, as they do in one scene, but if the tragic pair don't meet and fall in love, then nothing else in the play makes sense. That's a load-bearing plot point. In *Star Wars*, you need Luke to receive near-death visions of Obi-Wan Kenobi to understand why he goes to the planet Dagobah to be trained by Yoda; you could remove that particular element, but if you did, you'd have to replace it with something else that does the same job of motivating Luke to abandon his post and find Yoda.

As you become comfortable with plotting, you'll begin to discover that the specifics of the plot are practically irrelevant. The important thing is the web of tensions and relationships that occur as a result of each piece. If you need a character to be in a bad mood, it might be because the milk for her morning coffee went sour, or because she got into a car accident on the way to work, or because she's received a notice that the Wizard's Union will be auditing her reagents inventory.

However, if the piece you use to do that work is too showy, then it might overshadow the main part of your story. That car accident on the way to work has a cascade of implications involving health, stress levels, money, and time—if you just need your character to be in a bad mood for one morning (and not bogged down in

insurance claims for the next week), then the accident might not be your best choice to put her in that mood.

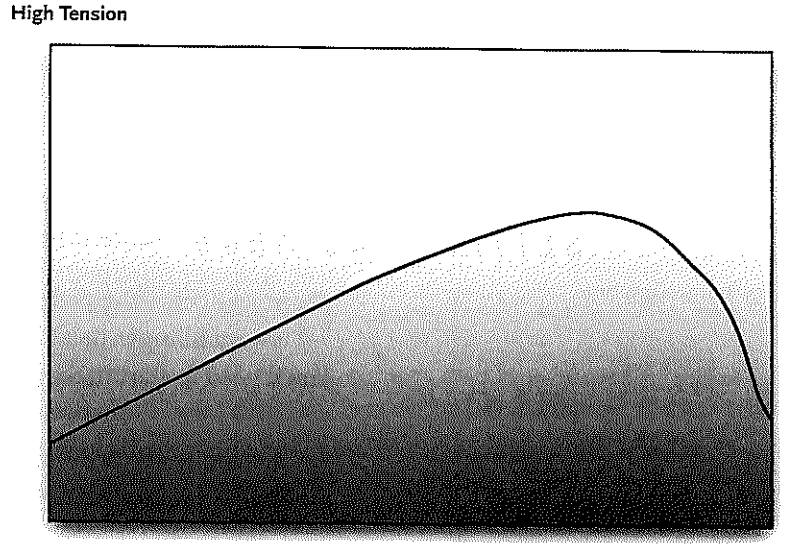
Plot is very much like a complicated machine. If you want to be able to tinker with it and not have it break, you need to figure out how it works in the first place. The only way to do that, though, is trial and error. Your instincts will get better, and you'll err less over time.

RISING TENSION

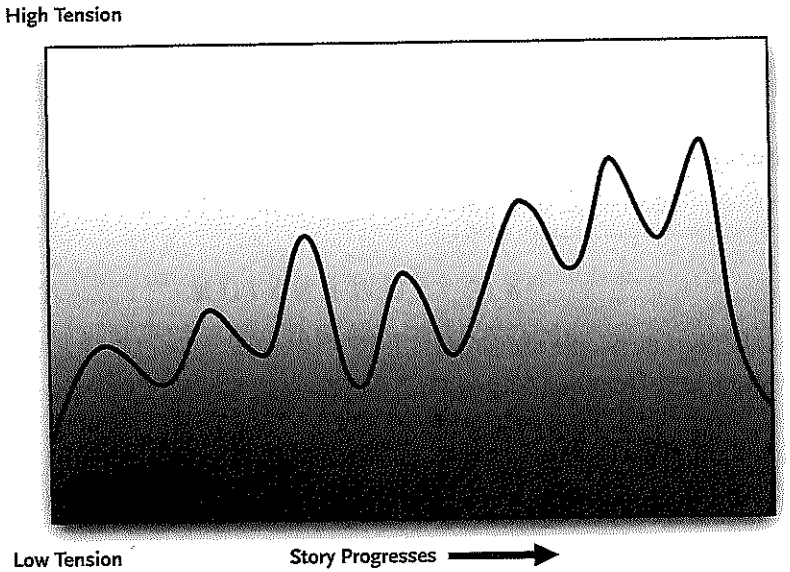
We all want to make our stories really gripping, the kind of thing that people can't stop reading or watching, and can't stop thinking about between installments. A lot goes into making that happen, but one of the most important elements is rising tension.

Through the course of the story, you need to provide the feeling that things are getting worse and worse. More and more must be at stake all the way up until the end, when all or most of the tension is resolved (for better or for worse).

It's especially easy to see the stakes gradually but steadily raised in comics or action movies, but rising tension is used everywhere, even in classic literature. Romeo and Juliet fall in love, and their families hate each other. That's pretty bad. Then they secretly marry, so there's suddenly more at stake than the two pining for one another across a balcony rail; they've made a vow. Then Romeo kills Juliet's cousin and is banished to another city, leaving Juliet a secret but abandoned wife who must choose whether to honor her marriage vow and betray her family's hopes for her, or abandon true love but get along with her family. The situation gets steadily more awful for them without stop until the story's tragic conclusion.



Tension rises from the beginning to the end of a story



Tension should rise and fall, but the general trend is upward

That's not to say that there should be no respite for your characters, or that nothing good should ever happen to them. Ideally, they should be subjected to a series of ups and downs, as long as the general trend is toward more tension, higher stakes, and worse situations—at least up until your climax, when your tension needs to resolve enough to leave the audience satisfied. Really, the emotional arc of your story should look something more like it does in the chart to the left.

There is quite a lot of narrative theory one could apply here. If you're responsible for the overall shape of your story, it's a good plan to learn more about the formal three-act structure, the five-act structure, and Joseph Campbell's thoughts on the classic hero's journey. You can certainly experiment with other forms, but it's always a better idea to experiment only once you have a solid grounding in what has and hasn't worked in the past, and why.

SETTING AND MOOD

Once you have the skeleton of your story providing its general shape, you can move toward filling in detail and deciding whether it will have feathers or fur, so to speak. You'll need to start making choices about setting, mood, and even theme. It's best if you make these creative decisions in parallel with big-picture structural questions about which media to use and how to guide your audience from one to the next.

Setting is of paramount importance in transmedia storytelling. Your setting is where your story takes place—the world your characters inhabit. Often it's the same world as ours (or at least a small cross section of it), plus or minus a few fictional characters. One of the things transmedia excels at is worldbuilding—that is,

establishing the feeling that your fictional place really exists, or showing what it's like even beyond the scope of the characters on stage.

Mood, on the other hand, is the general tone of your story: lighthearted or serious, sarcastic or somber. Mood will be reflected in what occurs in your plot, but also in how it's presented: the lighting for video and photography, the specific words used in text, even the colors and fonts of a website. Ultimately, mood is the cumulative result of a thousand small creative decisions over the span of a project.

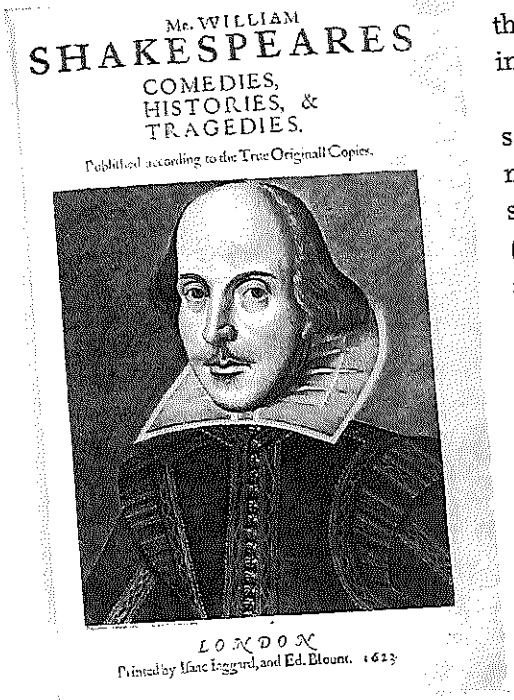
Setting and mood can be more difficult to manage for a transmedia narrative than for single-medium stories, because each component may have a different creative team behind it. If that's the case, then you need to have some baseline understanding shared among all of your creative teams of what your story should look and feel like, for the sake of continuity. A story about heroic adventures in the Amazon shouldn't take a left turn and become a comedy of manners when it switches to another medium.

That definitely doesn't mean that you need the same plots to repeat themselves endlessly, and you don't need to always convey the same moral messages. But you do at least need to maintain a baseline consistency of tone.

If you absolutely must break consistency by having one element be comical and another dead serious, be sure you're doing it for a purpose. A business goal might be tapping multiple markets—for example, bringing an adult-focused story to the children's market. An artistic goal could be establishing an unreliable narrator. Just be cautious; changing tones is not a technique to be used lightly.

THEME

Somewhere deep inside, your story is about something more than your characters and your plot. And I don't mean on the surface level, where your story is about (say) a boy and a girl falling in love; it's the message that's dressed up in your plot. For Romeo and Juliet, you could say that the theme is one of hatred destroying everything. (Though, to be fair, Shakespeare was a very rich writer, and it's difficult to pin



The First Folio, a 1623 collection of Shakespeare's plays

him to just one theme. You could just as easily say that our favorite play is about the lengths people will go to for love, even when it goes against their own best interests.)

Ideally, you know what your story is about at its heart. But I consider consciously writing with a theme in mind to be an advanced technique. It's more my style to write a work, then discover when I'm nearly done that it's about something that I didn't notice or realize when I was in the thick of it. My first (unpublished and honestly pretty awful) novel was on the face of it a story about a woman in Fairyland. But once I finished, I realized that it was all about how complicated the relationships between mothers and children can be (very deeply so)—perhaps not surprising considering that I was expecting my first child when I wrote it.

So don't feel bad if you decide to ignore theme for now. Just know that it's in there, and look around for it as you go. Once you find it, you may see opportunities to tweak the details of your story here and there to resonate more strongly with that theme.

ORIGINALITY

It's easy to think that your story needs to be incredibly original to be good, and that if you have a great idea, that's enough to pull the audience through the whole thing. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There are entire industries built around telling the same basic stories again and again. The entire romance novel industry, for example, thrives on endless permutations of the same story: two people falling in love and overcoming obstacles to live happily ever after. Another common story is the one in which a crime is committed, and a detective (or someone acting as a detective) must find and collar the culprit.

But these stories and others remain evergreen because of window dressing and details of execution. You could sit two writers down and tell them exactly what story to write, but their stories would always be completely different.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This has been just a light once-over on the basics of good storytelling—enough to get you through this book, but probably not enough to build a rockin' career with no further outside wisdom. If you're a creator who doesn't have a strong storytelling background already, I highly recommend that you read these books, for a start:

On Writing, Stephen King

Writing the Breakout Novel, Donald Maass

Story, Robert McKee

Writing Down the Bones, Natalie Goldberg

You can also gain a lot from joining a writer's group or an established online community. Giving and receiving critiques from other writers can help you to identify your strengths and weaknesses as a creator. Talking with other writers about writing can help you learn about what works for other people, too. It might not always work for you, because everyone's work and creative processes are different, but more knowledge is never a bad thing.

And if you're serious about becoming better at telling stories, it is of the utmost importance that you look at all the movies you watch, the books you read, and the games you play with a critical eye. Analyze the characters and what their motivations are; map out in your head the patterns of rising and falling tension. See if you can spot underlying themes. Try to take the story apart in your head like a watch; and once you've broken it into its component pieces, try to put it back together again so you understand exactly how it works.

But most of all, keep writing, and then do the same thing to your own stories. Be brutal with yourself about what does and doesn't work. The conventional wisdom is that you have to write a million words of garbage before you get to the good stuff. It takes even longer (and maybe never happens at all) if you aren't looking at your work with a hard, critical eye toward improvement.

If you keep working at it, you will inevitably get better and better. Don't ever give up. Just keep working at telling better stories.

All that said, if you have an idea for a story that you think is really crazy, and you genuinely think nobody has done anything like it before, don't let that get in your way, either. Make the stories that speak to you, whatever they are.

Q&A: NAOMI ALDERMAN

Naomi Alderman is the award-winning author of the novels *Disobedience*, *The Lessons*, and *The Liar's Gospel*. She was also the lead writer on *Perplex City* and the runaway crowdfunding success *Zombies, Run!*, a mobile, story-driven running game.

Q: *Where do you see the art and business of storytelling headed over the next few years?*

A: Well, I don't think we're going to lose our taste for stories, that's for sure. We're surrounded by more and more stories, and not just in drama: in reality TV, in advertising, on product packaging, not to mention in our conversations. Sometimes I feel that every different part of our lives is somehow being turned into a story. And the traditional linear story will always have a place.

But we're interacting with each other differently, too. We expect to receive messages from our friends on the fly everywhere we go, so stories are likely to follow us there as well. And stories are becoming more complex. If you compare something like *The Wire* with *Leave It to Beaver*, there's a huge complexity multiplier, not just in the moral world, but also in character depth, number of stories happening at any point, and number of characters you're expected to keep track of. We're getting better at keeping up with more complex stories, so I expect that trend to just keep going, or even accelerate.

Q: *What would you recommend that transmedia creators learn about to improve their craft?*

A: Role-playing games are the best possible training, I think, for writing and running a story on the fly. I especially love *Call of Cthulhu*. Read *Masquerade*, if you

haven't before, and see how it's put together: pictures and words that tell a story together, but more than a story, a whole experience. You could do worse than take an improv class! And make something: something small, maybe just for your friends. You'll learn more by making a small experience and seeing what works and what doesn't than by taking a dozen classes.

Q: *How is transmedia storytelling different from writing flat novels—and how is it the same?*

A: Certain things remain the same: a good character is the same. Good characters are complex and multilayered, which means that they want more than one thing, feel two different emotions about the same person, sometimes contradict themselves, have secrets and fears. Good people are sometimes bad. Bad people can sometimes be good.

And the question of *why* you're telling this story remains the same, I think. Even if you're advertising a product, even if you're working for someone else, you need to find somewhere that the story connects with *you*—with what you believe, with what you've experienced, with your own truth. I think that if you don't believe it, you won't be able to tell it.

And now how is it different? Well, primarily, I think, because you need to leave room for your players or your audience. You give up a little bit of control, in exchange for input from your audience that can absolutely bring a story to life. The difference is basically in the arena of plot: you get to make the characters, you get to decide what the story's about, but you don't get to decide every element of the plot, because wonderful, unpredictable human beings are in there.

Q: *What does it take to get good at telling stories?*

A: The same thing as it takes to get to Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, practice. Keep writing. Finish things. You will never ever ever ever ever get better if you leave everything half finished, or keep on revising the first bit over and over.

Push through, even if you know it's terrible. Only when you've finished it will you know what you have, and will you be able to learn how to do it better next time.

Some things I had to learn: pacing, and how to trust myself. Early on I had a lot of problems with getting so excited that I could actually finish a story that I, um, ended prematurely. It's good to concentrate on . . . how to draw it out for long enough to make it enjoyable without going on so long that the reader gets completely exhausted. Luckily, with writing, you can put your story away for a few weeks and then experience it very fresh when you pick it up again.

And on trusting myself: the longer you go on, the more you know that a story will just emerge if you let it. If you follow your thought, if you don't squash it and say, "Oh, I can't tell *that* truth, I can't talk about *that* part of life." I can highly recommend an exercise I did once for a project I was working on: writing a full story every day for 21 days. After that, I saw that sometimes what emerged was terrible, sometimes it was great, but just putting in the work was what was important.

You may b