

Fine-Tune for Depth or for Scale (Not Both)

Transmedia's siren call to creators is as alluring as it is because of the tremendous creative possibilities it offers. But often, large chunks of your project should be determined by the purpose of your story and the resources you have available. The creative specifics of your story can have little or no bearing on the overall structure.

What platforms you use, how much content you create, and whether you fine-tune the story so that it is best enjoyed by a single player or by a community of participants will all affect what kind of audience you attract, and how deep into your story its members will go. All of these decisions are structural ones: they affect the overall shape of your story, like a skeleton, without dictating what the surface details will be.

Structure is dead important. No matter how innovative and compelling your story is, if it's structured poorly, nobody will ever know.

Every industry has its own version of the 80/20 rule. It's a blanket rule of thumb in business, and depending on which version you learned, it might be that 80 percent of your profits come from 20 percent of your customers. Or 80 percent of your problems come from 20 percent of your features. Or 20 percent of your employees do 80 percent of the work.

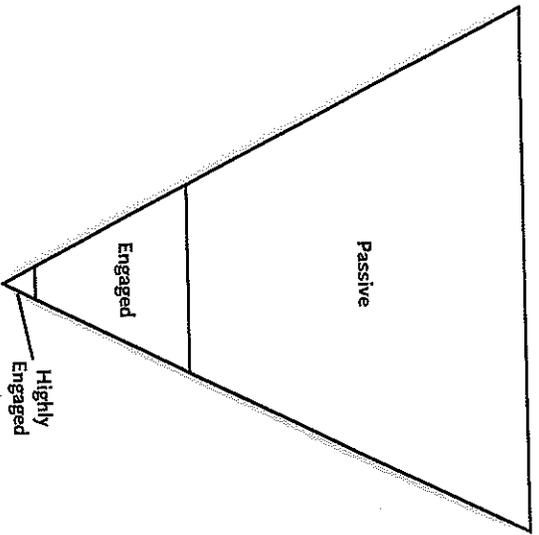
Transmedia has its own version, too: 20 percent of your audience is responsible for 80 percent of your activity. The specific numbers will vary depending on your project, of course, but the principle is sound: most of your participation will come from a small segment of your audience.

Often the audience is divided into three rough categories: 80 percent passive viewers, 15 percent engaged audience members, and 5 percent superfans. Passive viewers will follow along, but they won't do much beyond that. Engaged audience members will seek out new information and participate in some interactive elements of your story. The most highly engaged players are the ones who join forums to talk about your story, try to solve every puzzle, travel hundreds of miles to go to live events, create and update wikis or guides to your story, and so on.

Unfortunately, the more engaged groups are also the ones with the smallest numbers, hence the engagement pyramid.

That means that when you build a deep experience that requires a lot of audience initiative, it's possible that the lion's share of your audience will never see most of that content, and might not even know it exists. At the same time, the immersive feeling created by deep content is one of the key elements that make transmedia narratives exciting. There is an inherent tension between making a narrative that is very rich and deep, and making a narrative that scales to a larger audience but is shallow. This fundamental tension between depth and scale informs every structural component of a transmedia project.

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The engagement pyramid

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narrative or a portfolio piece would benefit from making a richer experience for fewer people. A common method is including Easter eggs or chains of interaction—essentially locking away story-critical content behind barriers that require action from a player to overcome, like solving a puzzle or sending a text message to a character. That's not always a pragmatic approach, though. That's because there's another way to frame mass-market or shallower experiences—they're a lot more accessible.

Most businesses would say without hesitation that their priority is to make something as mass-audience and accessible as possible, and forget about depth. Sadly, this risks damaging the quality of your overall experience. Something that tries to engage everyone equally well can wind up engaging nobody at all. Still, designers working in marketing, for example, should carefully weight their experiences toward the broad-but-shallow end of the spectrum. That doesn't mean that you can't put in any deeper elements, but whenever possible, keep accessibility by even fairly passive audience members as your top priority. This means keeping the bulk of your content out in the open and telling players not just where it is, but how it all fits together.

Bear in mind that there's an interesting wrinkle on this that can occur in live, performative, or interactive transmedia projects. Sometimes, that top few percent of your audience who get the most from your story will actually become part of the story for everyone else. This can be formalized on your end, with phone calls, videos, or other submissions from your audience being cut in with your canon content, or with specific audience members getting a shout-out.

Even without that, in challenge-based games, the top few percent who are producing mind-blowing solves and unlocking progress for the whole community often become a part of the entertainment—that mass majority of the audience is watching the deepest, most involved players playing the game, on top of following the story itself. It can rise nearly to the level of a spectator sport.

Is it strictly impossible to do deep and mass-audience at the same time? No. No, but . . . there's another rule of thumb in most industries: you can get something done cheap, fast, or well, pick any two. The equivalent transmedia storytelling

pick-two-of-three is again a little different: cheap, deep, or mass-audience, pick two. It's possible to play to both ends of the rope and make a rich and very deep experience for an audience of millions, but it'll cost you. Know what your priorities are.

THE COST OF FRAGMENTATION

Many transmedia stories rely upon the audience's ability to collect and make sense of multiple story fragments—tweets, blog posts, and video footage, for example. But there is a distinct drawback to having a highly fragmented structure: the more fragmented an experience is, the more difficult it is for a mainstream audience to follow.

It takes effort to seek out that next piece of a narrative. Not always a lot, to be sure; sometimes it's a single click, one little Google search, or 10 bucks to spend on the next film or book. If you're switching media, that friction becomes a lot higher. People have an innate resistance to switching from watching movies to reading novel tie-ins. That same resistance keeps people from shifting from playing a video game to watching the movie version. A similar resistance will keep people from filling in a username and password to register for your site; it's easier just to close the window and not bother.

This friction erodes the number of players that follow you every time you switch media in a transmedia narrative. Still, there are techniques that allow a creator to tell an immersive and authentic-feeling story, while helping less sophisticated players to put the pieces together.

Let's say you want to create a very accessible story, but you don't want to sacrifice depth to do it. What specific actions can you take?

1. **Cross-link heavily.** This should be a no-brainer, but it's very easy to overlook. If you're creating a transmedia story with multiple websites, tweet streams, and so on, make sure to provide links from every one of these sites

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to all the others. Or, better yet, create a single meta-site that is about your story but not a part of the story world itself. Use it to aggregate these links and take the work out of simply trying to follow the story for your players. If you do create a meta-site, it's then crucial that you link back to that site from every other location you use. Print the URL on your promotional materials. Put it in your credits. Make it absolutely unmissable.

2. **Provide rolling recaps.** It can be easy for people in your audience to lose track of what's happening in the story, particularly if they've inadvertently missed some pieces of content (or, for a real-time narrative, for audience members who come to the story midway through).

It's a good practice to provide periodic recaps of the pivotal events in the story so far, as in TV with the "last time on this show" montages, or in long book series with a quick summary at the beginning of each book. You can also do this in the guise of a character, if so desired, particularly if you have a character who is serving as a guide (more on this in Chapter 13). But you can also sum up the story so far on a meta-site—the same one you use for cross-linking.

3. **Map out your intended audience path in a flowchart.** If at any point you are chaining content, so that (for example) you need to send Friar Lawrence an email before the star-crossed couple can have their secret wedding, then you need to be sure that the audience knows who Friar Lawrence is and how to find his email address. This is applicable not just to locked content, but also to revelations. Make sure you have a good grasp of what your audience learns about the story, and when.

Trace those chains of discovery to make sure that every link is present and obvious. If possible, have someone who doesn't know much about your story test out your content to make sure you've done a good job of putting signposts for your audience members so that they don't get lost.

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Here are a few questions to ask yourself while you're deciding how to structure your story across multiple media, and a few tips on how the answers to those questions should change your design.

1. **What is the purpose of this project, and who is it for?** If your purpose is to gather an email list, then submitting an email address should be a core activity that participants must engage in at some point in the story. If it's creating awareness of a social issue, make that the key conflict of your narrative. If it's telling a good story and making a little money, make sure you're creating something that's worth paying for. And always, always make sure that your project uses platforms and conventions that your target audience will be comfortable with.
2. **Should the story play out dynamically in real time, or should it be a static experience in which you can go back to the beginning and start over at any moment?** Real time creates a very immersive and immediate feeling, and is much better for obtaining publicity or community building. You do risk creating a barrier to entry for audience members who missed the beginning, though, and once it's over, you need to either restructure it or accept that it's over. Which one you choose will often be decided by your overall goals for the project.
3. **How high a barrier to entry am I putting up?** Requiring registration, locking content behind challenges, and requiring high-end technology are all elements that can immediately erode your potential audience. That's not to say you should never do these things; there is often a good reason to require registration—for example, if you're making a single-person narrative and need to track progress over multiple media through that login. And if part of the purpose of your game is to promote a new technology, then it's only natural to use that technology, no matter how much (or how little) market saturation it's achieved. Just be cautious about what it is you're asking your audience to commit to.

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WHAT MEDIA SHOULD I USE?

In an ideal world, the media you'd choose to use would be the ones that serve the story best. Bam, you're done. Unfortunately, in the real world, we have to be a little more pragmatic and take into account a giddy whirlwind of factors, from time and budget restrictions to audience sophistication, accessibility, and scale.

Your audience should influence which media you use. A great transmedia campaign uses the platforms its target audience already calls home, and doesn't use the ones that the target audience thinks poorly of or doesn't have access to at all. Just as an example, a project for tweens that requires access to cutting-edge technology is limiting its audience out of the gate. Tweens might not have access to the latest smartphone or iPad, and aren't likely to have the resources to acquire one, either.

Almost every individual or company will start out stronger in the creation and production of one medium over others. You need to play to your strengths. If you and your team have a filmmaking background, then focus on that and make as much mileage with it as you can: create a core film component, then add on episodic web content or unlockable video in a mobile application.

If your background and strength lie in text, then stick with that. Focus on books, blog posts, emails, and updates on social media. If you come from a traditional gaming background, focus on points of interaction and interlinked games small and large. If theater is your strong suit, then build an experience rooted in a live performance or a series of live performances, with elements that extend outward from there.

Most transmedia projects tend to be grounded most solidly in a single medium anyway, with other components acting more as satellites orbiting the main event than as entire stand-alone projects. That may change in time, but for now, there's absolutely nothing wrong with sticking to what you know best.

That's not to say that you shouldn't try to stretch to include more and different media every time you design a new project. You should, absolutely! Every platform brings something else to your project. Tentpole pieces like TV, books, and

Film create solid revenue streams, of course. Social media and the web are excellent for allowing interaction, or the feeling of interaction, even with millions of people. Splashy live events make for fantastic publicity. But don't feel obligated to include any medium if you don't realistically think you can pull it off, or if it won't add anything to your story.

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Special Considerations for Blockbuster Transmedia Franchises

Some of the world's most beloved transmedia projects are mammoth undertakings that include feature films, novels, comic series, and video games—in short, franchise entertainment. The most successful franchises are the ones where there is space for the audience members to imagine themselves as part of that world. *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*: these are all worlds that are very much bigger than the action on the main stage.

One of the amazing things we can do with transmedia is allow fans to have a place where they belong in a story world that they love. So it's a natural fit for franchise entertainment to move more and more in the direction of transmedia storytelling.

The much-lauded *Why So Serious?* campaign for *The Dark Knight* was an enormous stride in that direction. It's garnered awards, huge amounts of press coverage, and incredible fan love. And why is it such a big deal? It's because it took a world that did not have space for

an audience to live inside it—Batman's Gotham—and created canon spaces where, for the first time, players could imagine themselves fitting. They became voters and accomplices. It turned a property that previously had not been very well suited to a transmedia experience and created one that suddenly was; the world wasn't just Batman and his allies and enemies anymore.

There is a common criticism of such extended experiences for entertainment franchises. It suggests that they don't create new fans; they merely service the fans that a property already has. That's probably true. But it's not entirely fair, either. All of that fan energy and excitement generated by a transmedia experience brings more people into the fold. The person who was sent a Joker mask by the campaign was very likely already going to see the movie, but maybe his roommate wasn't going to, or his cousin, or the person he enthused about the film to at work or at the coffee shop or on the bus. Those people, exposed to that catalyzed fan energy, are then more likely to become fans, too—or at least check out the movie when it hits theaters. Exciting your fans makes them contagious.

You probably have some examples of this in your own experience. I know I started reading *Harry Potter* because of all of the fan energy around it, that's also why I read *Twilight*. Giving your audience a focused outlet for its passion leads to a conversion of peripheral audience members into fans, and people who were never a part of the core audience into peripheral audience members. Participation is the engine that drives fandom, and fandom drives a story's success.

Not every franchise will be a good fit for transmedia expansion, though. The first *Twilight* book, for example, was poorly suited to it; there wasn't much of a world there outside of the couple in love. But it's a problem that can be fixed. Subsequent books in the series increased the scope of the world more and more, fabricating group dynamics and government structures that add up to a world bigger than just Bella and Edward and their true, sparkly love.

There are particular challenges that come with making such a goliath transmedia project. For one thing, you need to maintain consistency across all of your media in terms of story continuity, look and feel, overall tone, and, of course, quality.

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It is absolutely crucial to the long-term health of a big transmedia franchise to make sure that every single audience-facing component is consistent with your story world's themes and canon. Story bibles and an integrated creative process help to make this possible.

STORY BIBLES

If you could have a single visionary executing every single project in a story universe, that would be ideal. Eventually, though, a world gets beyond the scope of a single person's creative vision, and yet consistency has to be maintained. Hence the story bible. The purpose of a story bible is to make sure that teams of creators who may not get to communicate with each other directly are nonetheless on the same page.

At a bare minimum, a story bible should include the same kinds of information you'd want in a Wikipedia article—who the main characters are and their defining characteristics, plus a summary of the overall plot. At best, it's an encyclopedic reference to everything about your story and the world it takes place in. You might want to include:

- Every scrap of information specific to your story world. A story bible for *Star Wars* would have to describe the Force. Other specific information might include maps, location descriptions, corporate profiles, family trees, and wildlife guides. If something is different from our own world, that information belongs in the bible.
- An index of every single piece of canon material in existence or in production, and where to find it. No scrap is too small. Twitter streams and feature films alike should be listed, each with a little bit of context about that piece's relationship to the greater story world, what characters appear in it, and a plot summary.

- A timeline that includes significant events in your universe and what time periods are covered in which pieces of media. It's all right for chronology to be a little ambiguous overall, but you'll need to be clear about the relationships between the fragments. (This isn't as important if you're planning on sticking to a single iconic state throughout your story.)
- Secrets and upcoming revelations. The story bible should include every important fact, no matter how secret it is from fans. It's not the place to be coy and hint at something. If Bob is the crown prince of Valhania, but he won't find out until after another two films and a year of comics, it still needs to be in there. That information could affect creative decisions across the board.

If it's possible, creating a digital and searchable version of all your media is a huge help: books, scripts, blog posts, tweets, everything. Visual reference materials, too, are useful. Photos of actors, sets, costumes, concept art, and other art assets can become a visual library for future reference and maintain visual continuity.

A story bible isn't enough, though. It's a step in the right direction, but the weakness of a story bible is in that area where the story is still being fabricated. If the tale of a character's first kiss has never been told, the teams from two branches of the same universe might notice that opportunity at the same time and use it in completely different ways. That's the sort of conflict in canon that fans find deeply upsetting.

So it's even better if you have a continuity manager along with your story bible (or, if necessary, a small team of continuity managers). The continuity manager can act as liaison between disparate creative teams to make sure that no significant conflicts arise during production.

Companies like Starlight Runner Entertainment even specialize in helping to map out plot threads and story lines—sometimes years ahead of production.

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Not only does this significantly reduce the chance of a major, glaring continuity error, but it also allows a sprawling franchise to map out precisely where any elements of intertextuality will lie, resulting in a more integrated and vibrant narrative thread.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Some creators believe that you have to write your story bible before you can get to work on your actual story. On that front, I'm very much a story bible naysayer. In fact, I've worked on only two projects for existing properties that came furnished with a story bible at all! In lieu of that, I've relied on referring to scripts and photo galleries, or sometimes even fan-created reference material like wikis. (Don't scoff at the idea of fan reference works; these volunteer efforts can be more accurate and more comprehensive than anything you'd have the time or resources to make yourself.)

That's not to say that there isn't a time and a place for a story bible; any universe that passes that key threshold where it no longer fits into a single person's head definitely needs one. But it's something that can happen just as well at the tail end of the creation process.

If you get bogged down in defining the minutiae of a universe's flora and fauna or city names, that's time you aren't spending on defining the characters and conflicts that make your story interesting. If you're prone to forgetfulness, then yes, of course you can and should keep notes on important story elements as you fabricate them, or as you think of them.

But just as you don't need to make an entire transmedia project all at once, you also don't need to fabricate an entire story universe in one fell swoop. It's OK to start with just one story and fill in the reference materials later on. Leave yourself plenty of room in your world to expand into for now, and you can shoot for the moon later.

Q&A: CAITLIN BURNS

Caitlin Burns is a transmedia producer with Starlight Runner Entertainment, where she's worked on blockbuster franchises like *Avatar*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Transformers* for clients like Disney, Microsoft, Coca-Cola, and Hasbro, among many others. She is also working on an indie transmedia film project called *Jurassic Park Slope*.

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

A: No matter what you call a multiplatform project, whether it's a single story arc or a super arc that encompasses seven years of a franchise, transmedia storytelling is here to stay. The challenge that is ahead of the industry now is figuring out how to plan for both short- and long-term applications of the concepts to make better stories that allow for more creators to be involved in the creative space of a project. This is something that successful creative visionaries, like the Camerons, Bruckheimers, Lucases, and Spielbergs, already know: they are the ones who control the story, who have the big picture, but they can't be everywhere at once, and they can't physically make every decision on every platform of every story in their universe. The same problem applies to smaller projects that are just getting into multiplatform spaces. The harsh reality is that a filmmaker is not a game designer, a comic book writer, or a novelist. They need one another to create a project of a certain scale.

Story is the through line; no matter what industry your experience is in, you're human, and you understand a good story. Coproductions and increasing collaboration are the ways through the storm.

The final frontier keeping entertainment lawyers up at night is that the audience members, the fans, are a creative community in their own right; they desire and expect immersive experiences that allow their voices to be heard by the

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stories they love. Not only this, but they want places where they can flex their creative muscles as well, contributing new ideas to the story world in a tangible way. The creators at the helm will have to consider them as stakeholders in their story world just as much as the filmmakers, game developers, and novelists who are under contract to build the narrative, or ignore them at their peril.

Q: *Starlight Runner* is without exception the authority in managing sprawling transmedia properties. What tips or techniques would you offer to a creator who is trying to get a handle on a big universe? Are there any special tools to learn?

A: The real trick to dealing with groups on other platforms is to be able to speak about the story first. No matter what the intricacies of development on a specific platform are, the story will have to emerge there somehow. Story is the key-stone for all of the interlocking projects. Get familiar enough with the story that you can talk about it in a platform-neutral manner.

The second big tip is to write stuff down. Once these projects are up and running, there will be lots of creative conversations, not only in set business meetings, but at lunches and dinners, or randomly when someone is stuck in an elevator or in the shower. Being able to write down the ideas that come up before those ideas are lost is key, and getting into the habit of doing so is vitally important so that these insights can be shared, remembered, and referenced down the road.

Q: *We hear a lot about Starlight's story bibles—what belongs in a bible like that, and what do you think should be left out?*

A: Ah, the Mythologies: what they are is encyclopedic references to the entire story world. In addition to some super-secret analysis that I can allude to only vaguely, this is where you want to put as much reference as possible for people, places, things, and concepts that are important to the story world. An important takeaway about this type of document is that it has a lot of details that aren't

necessarily vital to what is going on at the moment, but that might turn into stories down the road. The other take is that they're platform-neutral; anyone working on any platform can make use of them regardless of specialty or background.

Q: How do you manage a project with several creative teams to make sure all the pieces feel related?

A: Again, this all goes back to story; if you've done your work and know your story, the story becomes your guide. If it feels like you're pushing the boundaries of your canon, you have to be able to look at the actual research you set down and defend why you would or would not move in that direction. If you can make a strong creative choice and defend it with research to back it up, then you are golden; if you can't find a good reason to do what you're doing, then at least you have a real sense that you may be going off the rails.