Design Elements of Transmedia Branding

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Introduction

Recent advances in Internet and consumer technologies and new practices of networked consumption have changed the patterns of communication between brands and their publics. Everyday people – as individuals and communities – are appropriating, remixing, and recirculating brand icons in ways that are often beyond the control of those who have historically shepherded the brand message: sometimes, in ways which lowers the cost of spreading the word about new products and services, sometimes in ways which challenges corporate claims. Some of these transactions look like "user-generated content" and others look like "piracy" or "ad-busting." In this atmosphere, corporations need to embrace new engagement strategies, ones which increase the range of possible and permissible meanings associated with brands, ones which open up valid channels of communication with all stakeholders, and ones which play out across the full range of possible communication channels. Engagement has become a key buzz word in the 21st century, whether we are discussing news, entertainment, education, politics, and lastly, but not least, branding. If old branding models were based on tight control over the circulation and messaging, such controls are no longer practical or desirable in a world where if it doesn't spread, it's dead. But, there's still much we do not know about how branding will work in this new and evolving environment.

In the midst of a period of profound and ongoing media transformation that will rewrite the rules around branding and strategic communication, a new method of cross-channel communication is emerging, dubbed by the USC Annenberg Innovation Lab as *transmedia branding*. The Lab has formed a new research group, a co-operation between academia and industry, to explore how the emergence the principles of transmedia storytelling are being applied to branding. Initially, the group will focus on the core elements of transmedia branding and will offer a perspective on what the future of branding may look like. Can this new engagement through multiple media channels increase the effectiveness of branding?

The purpose of this article is to provide an initial framework for design elements and design principles of transmedia branding. It aims to provide an overview that will facilitate ongoing conversation on the topic, rather than an in-depth discussion of each element and principle. Many of the concepts referenced below have been deeply analyzed in the forthcoming book *Spreadable Media* by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green[2].

The Transmedia Concept
The term transmedia was coined in 1991 by then-USC professor Marsha Kinder, while the transmedia storytelling concept was developed by current USC Annenberg professor Henry Jenkins.[3] He describes transmedia storytelling as "a process in which integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story." [4] Transmedia storytelling has been successful as a means of developing Hollywood entertainment franchises, independent and public media productions, and most recently, new approaches to public relations and advertising.

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[2] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013)
[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transmedia_storytelling
[4] http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html

Building on this description, transmedia branding can be defined as a communication process in which information about a brand is packaged into an integrated narrative, which is dispersed in unique contributions across multiple media channels for the purpose of creating an interactive and engaging brand experience.

The transmedia branding framework proposes that for an effective unified, coordinated corporate communication strategy today, collective intelligence, participatory audience techniques and spreadable content are crucial. From the storytelling perspective, transmedia innovation can enhance the effectiveness and reach of the brands in key ways such as:

- Harnessing Collective Intelligence to Deepen and Evolve the Brand: Transmedia storytelling techniques can use the collective intelligence of brand fans (and employees) working together to deepen, enrich, and even map the details of the brand's "storyworld" across media and from many different perspectives. These techniques embrace the role of active audiences to help collectively co-create, expand, and sustain communication in ways that can effectively capture and leverage the value of today's fragmented and ever-changing media landscape.
- Promoting Participation as a Brand Value: Transmedia storytelling's participatory focus can both help strengthen brand story engagement for consumers and employees and also promote meaningful participation (and the sense of brand loyalty that brings) as a core part of the brand's values.
- Generating Spreadability: One of Henry Jenkins' latest concepts is that of spreadability, an alternative to the "viral" model of marketing and corporate communication. Spreadability stresses the active choice of individuals and networks to pass along content they find socially meaningful. Transmedia collective intelligence and participatory techniques can greatly help the spreadability of brand messages.

Why Transmedia Branding?

Since somewhere between the end of World War II and the early days of Mad Men – late forties, mid-fifties – consumers in Western societies have been bombarded with brand messages from every possible channel: the never-ending onslaught of TV and radio commercials, newspaper and magazine ads, direct mail, billboards, announcements at sports events, and more recently emails and online advertising. Many consumers view these and other marketing events as a necessary evil they tolerate in order to gain access to subsidized news and entertainment.

Advertisers, arguably, are equally dissatisfied with the status quo as they spend enormous amounts of money broadly across all channels. As the saying goes, 50% of all advertising is wasted, but we don't know which 50%. The core problem is that mass advertising cannot cater to individual's wants and needs, leading to frustrated consumers tuning out or becoming irate at the most intruding forms of advertising. Isn't it bizarre that you have to 'unsubscribe' from unwanted email lists, which you never subscribed to in the first place?

Doc Searls in *The Cluetrain Manifesto* distilled the core problem into one sentence: "There is no market for your messages." Instead, he argues, "markets are conversations"[5]. These principles are at the core of transmedia branding: Rather than bombarding target audiences with unwanted and redundant brand messages, brands engage audiences in compelling conversations, across many different channels, in a way that consumers can and are encouraged to participate, interact directly with the brand or with other audience members, create content, and become part of the story.

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[5] http://www.cluetrain.com/book/markets.html

I'm On a Horse
To date the most iconic transmedia branding campaign was Procter & Gamble's Old Spice *The man your man could smell like* in 2010, created by Wieden+Kennedy. It was kicked off with a humorous commercial with former NFL player Isaiah Mustafa promoting the Old Spice Red Zone body wash in a self-deprecating fashion. The spot ends with Mustafa pointing out that suddenly he now sits on a horse. Originally released on YouTube the week before Superbowl 2010, the spot was promoted as a must-see ad. The commercial spread across social media like wildfire, achieving 20 million You Tube views in just three days. It was widely discussed in the media and organically promoted by celebrities via Twitter.

The next major campaign component was a sequence of 186 short videos, in which Mustafa, standing in a bathtub wrapped in towel, responded to tweets by celebrities, members of the general public, and specific online communities directed at the Old Spice Guy. These videos spread as people responded to their surprise inclusion in a major advertising campaign. Moreover, numerous fans shot parodies and posted them on YouTube, and Sesame Street created the 'Smell like a Monster' take-off.

Many cases studies have been written about *The man your man could smell like*, detailing the flurry of creative content pieces, generated by both the brand and the online community. While the creativity and spreadability of the campaign is impressive, so are the return-on-investment numbers as detailed by Event Reports[6]:
- In the first six months after the launch of the campaign, Old Spice sales increased 27% year-to-year. By the sixth month of the effort, month-to-month sales had increased 107%.
- 2 billion-plus total campaign impressions since February 2010.
- 40 million total video views in the campaign's first week.
- A 75% share of all brand conversations in the first three months of 2010 (with women having half the conversations).
- The all-time most-viewed YouTube brand channel (and, with 170,000 subscribers, YouTube's top subscription channel).
- 3,000% increase in Twitter followers.
- 2,000% increase in Google searches.
- 800% increase in Facebook interactions.
- 300% increase in traffic at oldspice.com.

Design Elements of Transmedia Branding
Successful campaigns appear to have a common set of building blocks, or design elements, that are utilized to foster engagement between brands and their target markets. Transmedia branding campaigns share a common set of design elements, which we have identified as: narratives, participation and brands. Each of these notions relies on specific enabling elements, as outlined in the figure below.

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[6] Geoffrey Precourt, *Old Spice: 2010's Standout Campaign Under the Microscope*, Event Reports
ANA Creativity, December 2010, p. 2 (downloaded from WARC)

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Narratives

At its core, people are interested in stories that may be true or fictional, serious or funny, aspirational or provocative, entertaining or thought-provoking – as long as they are engaging. Most importantly, such stories are passed along when people find these narratives meaningful and emotionally engaging. Spreadability is a key enabler of transmedia branding.

As the name transmedia suggests, these storylines travel across different media channels, in different content forms, such as articles, videos, cartoons, etc. As an important principle, pieces of content that collectively make up a narrative are dispersed in unique bits: when storylines become redundant, they will stop spreading. On their journey, the story bits frequently move across channels and may become altered in the process. For example, one unique element in *The man your man could smell like* was a random tweet by a man asking the Old Spice Guy to propose to the man's girlfriend on his behalf. Old Spice Guy responded with a bathtub video doing as requested, which led to the man tweeting "she said yes." The tweet and a corresponding photo were picked up by Mashable.com, crossing the story over into editorial media.

Memes represent a type of content that is particularly suitable for transmedia narratives because their spreadable nature. Introduced by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, a meme "conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*."[7] He cites as examples of memes tunes, ideas, catch-phrase, clothes, fashions, etc. "leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. Memes are "condensed images that stimulate visual, verbal, musical, or behavioral associations that people can easily imitate and transmit to others."[8] Memes are central to the Old Spice campaign, as well as to other transmedia branding examples that will be referenced below.

A narrative cannot exist – would not be heard, seen, read or experienced – outside a medium. Therefore, the notions of narratives and media are inextricably linked. For our purposes, media describes a broad variety of communication channels, ranging from interpersonal interactions to pictures, music, art, letters, books, billboards, objects, and certainly traditional mass media as well as and social media.

It's important to note that the internet is not a prerequisite for transmedia branding. Transmedia narratives have existed for as long as humans have communicated. For instance, the argument could be made that today's major religions since their inception have traveled the world as transmedia narratives. However, today's transmedia experiences are shaped in profound ways by emerging patterns

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[7] Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene, Oxford, 1989, p 192

[8] Center for Communication and Civic Engagement.
http://ccce.com.washington.edu/projects/cultureJamming.html

of networked consumptions and grassroots production, as consumers play a more active role in shaping how stories travel across the culture.

Participation

The notion of audience participation is the key concept that differentiates traditional one-directional marketing communications from transmedia branding. People *want* to interact with spreadable narratives, provided it's the right storyline for the right audience, and they may actively help to localize and reframe messages they think have potential interest within their communities. Participation covers a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from passing on conversations to leaving comments on blogs or articles to generating new content, parodies and additional storylines. In addition to creating, changing and spreading content, effective participation relies on additional notions: culture, community and policy.

As Grant McCracken points out, "corporations live and die by their connection to culture."[9] He refers to culture as "the body of ideas, emotions, and activities that make up the life of the consumer." Getting culture right, he argues, can result in billion dollar swings for major consumer brands.[10] The idea is that brands need to be able to read popular culture in order to engage successfully with target audiences. Obviously popular culture is in constant flux and has generational, ethnic, geographic and religious dimensions that weigh heavily into how people react to brand communication.

Related to culture is the notion of brand community, defined as "a group of ardent consumers organized around the lifestyle, activities, and ethos of the brand."[11] A common example is Harley-Davidson, whose devoted fans transformed a near-death company of the eighties into a top-50 global brand 25 years later. True fan communities curate brand attributes and may even, as in the case of Harley-Davidson, transform the brand entirely as they feel strong emotional ownership. They may do so with or without the support of the corporations that own the brands – there is only so much the owner can do to stop them. Brand communities may congregate in the real world at club meetings or conventions, and/or organize on the web. Extreme forms of communities are described as consumer tribes: "They do not consume things without changing them; they cannot 'consume' a service without engaging in a dance with the service provider, where the dance becomes the service. Participatory culture is everywhere.[12]" Have you ever met a *true* fan of the Apple Mac OS?

Maybe the least obvious factor influencing participation is the notion of policy. However, it's impact on how widely and freely opinions and content are shared cannot be overstated. Policy regulates many aspects of public life, such as the right of free assembly to copyright issues to net neutrality. Clearly, less restrictive policies fosters participation, as people are allowed to freely gather, speak, change, create and spread content.

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[9] Grant Mc Cracken, Chief Culture Officer, 2009 p. 13

[10] McCracken (2009), p 1

[11] Susan Fourier and Sarah Lee, "Getting Brand Communities Right," Harvard Business Review, April 2009, p. 2

[12] Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets, Avi Shankar, "Tribes Inc.: The new world of Tribalism", Consumer Tribes, 2007, p. 2

Brands

Brands are what consumers buy, while products are what companies make. A brand is a promise that the product will perform as per customer's expectations.[13] The words 'companies' and 'customers' in this basic definition indicate brands are inherently connected to the notion of markets. People or organizations create brands for the purpose of achieving success in the marketplace. A market should be viewed as both, a physical or virtual place for conducting financial transactions in exchange for goods and services or, in a political or social context, as a marketplace for ideas.

A brand most commonly refers to a consumer product or service. Other types of brands are products and services targeting other businesses (B2B), as well as individuals, causes and ideas. As of now, most transmedia branding campaigns have targeted consumer products and services, such as Old Spice.

An example of a transmedia-branded cause was Kony 2012, an initiative by the San Diego, Calif.-based non-profit Invisible Children. Its goal has been the arrest and prosecution of Joseph Kony, a notorious Ugandian warlord and human trafficker. The primary strategy was turning Joseph Kony into a celebrity, so he no longer would be able to hide. They achieved this via meetings with policymakers, blogs and twitter campaigns, and an enormously successful documentary video created for widespread distribution on YouTube that garnered over 93 million views. In other words, the Kony 2012 campaign turned the warlord into a (transmedia) brand[14].

Individuals themselves can also turn into transmedia brands, and arguably Barack Obama serves as an example. His persona and presidency comes with a crafted story line – the first African-American president as a symbol for change, youth and liberal values – which has been altered by his opponents to represent lack of economic achievement and a frame for a supposedly damaging healthcare reform, dubbed Obamacare. Meanwhile his fans have created memes in the form of pop art images, such as the stylized "Hope" poster which first surfaced in the fall of 2008 and since the 2012 election has been altered to symbolize Governor Romney's defeat. (As a presidential candidate, Romney had stated he would cut federal funding for PBS, with a reference to Big Bird during a presidential debate, which created the meme that the Sesame Street character was in trouble[15].)

Photo Credit: Wikipedia, Twitter

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[13] http://www.managementstudyguide.com/what-is-brand.htm

[14] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc

[15] http://www.examiner.com/article/big-bird-meme-goes-viral-after-mitt-romney-promises-to-defund-pbs

A few months after the Gangnam Style Korean pop song and video were released, a parody spread showing Barack and Michelle Obama look-alikes performing Obama Gangnam Style. The Obama transmedia storyline continues to evolve and changes the brand in the process.

Cultural Jamming of Brands

Not only proponents of a brand have the ability to contribute to and extend a brand storyline in a transmedia context; the same can be achieved by activists. 'Cultural jamming' is defined as "an organized social activist effort that aims to counter the bombardment of consumption-oriented messages in the mass media"[16]: purposely change brand associations in order to achieve a negative perception of brand, clearly in direct conflict with what the owners of a brand want it to stand for. This type of activity frequently happens on the internet and across media. For example, in order to draw attention to British Petroleum's pursuit of Canadian tar sands, Greenpeace in the United Kingdom launched an internet contest asking people to design and upload their interpretation of the BP logo. "The winning logo will be used by us in innovative and exciting ways as part of our international campaign against the oil company," Greenpeace stated on the contest's web site[17]. Participants created 1,926 variations of the logo, which were uploaded to a designated Flickr site where Greenpeace explains: "Their nice green logo doesn't really seem to fit them too well, so we ran a competition to find a logo that we could use to rebrand BP."[18]

BP's official logo vs. a hijacked logo created for Greenpeace's contest

Natural vs. Crossover Transmedia Brands

Some types of brands come naturally into a transmedia existence. These brands not only *have* a story, they *are* the story. This certainly applies to major narratives, such as the Star Wars or Harry Potter franchises, or complex video games such as World of Warcraft.

The Harry Potter brand, for instance, was initially conceived as series of books, which were followed up with a sequence of well-produced movies, which then naturally extended the product line into action figures and toys. Meanwhile, fans created online and offline communities where people could dress and act like the characters from Harry Potter. Parodies came to life, such as the very successful Potter Puppet Pals. Their web episode of the Mysterious Ticking Noise achieved over 135 million views on YouTube as of November 8, 2012. Universal Studios created the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at their theme park in Orlando, Fla., which was announced in a lead article entitled "Wizarding World Revealed to Muggles" in the Wizarding World News.[19] In June 2011, author J. K. Rowling launched Pottermore,

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[16] Handelman, J.M. and Kozinets, R.V. (2004) Proposed Encyclopedia of Sociology entry on 'Culture Jamming'. Unpublished manuscript. As cited in: Vince Carducci, "Culture Jamming: A Sociological Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2006; 6; 116, p 1

[17] http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/files/tarsands/logo-competition.html

[18] http://www.flickr.com/photos/greenpeaceuk/sets/72157623796911855/

[19] http://www.universalorlando.com/harrypotter/

allowing people to explore "the Harry Potter stories in a whole new way and discover exclusive new writing from J. K. Rowling."[20]

Blizzard Entertainment's *Warcraft* exemplifies transmedia brands in the gaming world. The *Warcraft* universe spans a variety of media driven by a singular running narrative. The most prominent of *Warcraft's* components is the massive multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* (WoW) which currently boasts over 10 million active subscribers[21]. The eight-year-old game has a loyal fan base that not only consumes the media but also actively engages and participates in it. Player-made user interface add-ons currently sit at over 3,000 on the gaming site Curse.com, YouTube hosts over 1 million user-generated videos, several WoW novels have made the New York Time's Bestseller List, and a movie is currently in early pre-production[22]. Fans are further engaged at Blizzcon, a real-world convention that celebrates *Warcraft* and Blizzard's other transmedia franchises *StarCraft* and *Diablo*. In 2011 over 25,000 fans attended Blizzcon – many dressed as their in-game avatars – while over 800,000 unique viewers watched from home through DirectTV pay-per-view[23].

Media and entertainment brands *are* the story, and their transmedia nature enables them to engage with pre-existing fan communities and cater to the culture of these communities.

However, most products or services that consumers or companies purchase do not come with a ready-made story they want to share. Since a narrative is central to transmedia branding, companies are presented with two options: create a story or join a story. Whichever route they choose, in order to be consistent it is essential that the story – topic, tone, characters, etc. – is in alignment with the way a brand speaks and behaves.

Old Spice wasn't a story at the time *The man your man can smell like* campaign was conceived. Its brand image was that of an old, stodgy product line, and the brand associations were carried by images and symbols of early 20th century large sailing ships. When the campaign was created, it consistently carried over both themes. Effectively utilizing self-deprecating humor gave the campaign an authentic, human touch. For example, the Old Spice Classic shower gel is sold using the slogan "The original. If your grandfather hadn't worn it, you wouldn't exist.[24]" In the initial campaign commercial, actor Isiah Mustafa projects from a bathtub to a large sail boat and eventually lands on a horse. Throughout, the look and feel of the campaign commercials is consistent with that of traditional Old Spice images.

The alternative to creating a storyline is joining with an existing one. If the right storyline is accessible, a brand has the opportunity to leverage existing audiences, which increases the odds of effective spreadability. In October 2012, one month before the release of the movie *The Hobbit*, Air New Zealand

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[20] http://www.pottermore.com/. For a critique, see Henry Jenkins, *Three Reasons Why Pottermore Matters …*, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/06/three_reasons_why_pottermore_m.html

[21] Richard Cobbett, *Mists of Pandaria pushes World of Warcraft Back over 10 million subscribers*, http://www.pcgamer.com/2012/11/08/mists-of-pandaria-pushes-world-of-warcraft-back-over-10-million-subscriber-mark-but-for-how-long/ (November 2012).

[22] William Bibbiani, *The World of Warcraft Movie Is back On*, http://www.craveonline.com/film/articles/193509-the-world-of-warcraft-movie-is-back-on (August 2012).

[23] Ray V, *Blizzcon 2011 World's Largest Online Pay-Per-View Event*, http://www.rayv.com/wp content/uploads/2012/07/Blizzcon-LR.pdf (2011).

[24] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Spice

launched a new air safety video staring many of the mythical species — hobbits, elves, dwarfs, orcs and other monsters — from *The Lord of the Rings* movies, which relied on New Zealand for the outdoor scenery. Elf flight attendants recite the full legally mandated text of an air safety announcement. The video includes a quick appearance by the films' director, Peter Jackson, who slips a ring onto his finger, and promptly disappears.[25]

Transmedia Ethics

Transmedia branding raises a number of ethical issues, and therefore a priority for future work should be ethical best practices. Several areas of ethical implication seem to emerge. The first one is the notion of privacy, which has much been talked about in the context of social media. The production and spreading of user-generated content bears risks of exposing private information about third parties. The second area of ethical implication is the notion of truth and transparency. In the *Art of the Heist*, car maker Audi stages a fake violent break-in into the Audi car dealership on Park Avenue, where two individuals steal an Audi A3. This break-in is the beginning to an online and offline transmedia narrative about this new product line. The day after the theft, at the New York auto show, instead of seeing America's first A3, attendees would see signs reporting the missing car. The ethical dilemma is best summarized in a sentence taken from the official case study on YouTube: "If you had asked the attendees at the show what happened, they would have shrugged, not knowing themselves if this was real or not.[26]"

Transmedia Branding Research Group at the USC Annenberg Innovation Lab

While still in its early stages, transmedia branding presents viable alternative to more traditional forms of branding. The Annenberg Innovation Lab at the University of Southern California has established a research group tasked with exploring how transmedia branding continues to evolve. For more information, visit http://www.annenberglab.com/ or email burghardt.tenderich@usc.edu.

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[25] http://www.latimes.com/business/money/la-fi-mo-air-new-zealand-hobbit-safety-video-20121102,0,3338637.story
[26] Transcribed from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5w2CNB9clw