



## Co-creation in Italian Transmedia Production

Domenico Morreale

Dipartimento Tecnologie, Comunicazione e Società  
Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi  
Via Plinio 44, Roma, Italy

### Abstract

This essay analyzes the forms of co-creation which have involved the operators in broadcast communication, the new creators of non-institutional content and the users in the context of transmedia production, with a particular focus on the Italian situation. The first part of the essay analyzes and compares the definitions of transmedia in literature, aiming to identify the specific characteristics of communication strategies which identify it and to clarify the differences with the concept of cross-media, which is often used wrongly as a synonym. In the second part of the essay, the main study models of transmedia structures in literature are used in order to analyze some emblematic cases of transmedia co-creation which have experimented some collaborative solutions over the last decade in Italy, leading to the production of contents designed for a distribution on multiple platforms, used in a coordinated and complementary manner.

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Correspondence should be addressed to Domenico Morreale, Dipartimento Tecnologie, Comunicazione e Società, Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi, Via Plinio 44, Roma, Italy. Email: [d.morreale@unimarconi.it](mailto:d.morreale@unimarconi.it)

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## The Enabling Context: Transmedia Communication

In the 1990s, there was the stabilization of some technological, economic and social enabling factors which favored the development of a new approach to the design, distribution and enjoyment of cultural content based on the use of multiple media, in a coordinated and complementary manner, in support of a single communication project. In particular, the progressive intensification of the economic interests of large media conglomerates in various sectors of cultural production made it crucial to promote the various assets through forms of content development based on co-creation, which implied the early involvement of various complementary media sectors to the design of related contents and of multiplatform franchises from the very start of the project (Jenkins 2006, Hesmondhalgh 2002). A parallel process affected the media production technologies: miniaturization and lower prices favored their diffusion to a wide audience, not only represented by professionals, with a significant increase in the production of amateur or semi-professional content.

In the following decade, the stage of media content distribution also underwent a process of profound change: the birth of the media centered social network, beginning with MySpace and then with YouTube, creating new channels spreading semiprofessional contents which, for the first time, expanded from the context of domestic use to a potentially global audience (Manovich 2013). In order to describe the emerging figure of the non-professional media content producer, people used a phrase coined by Alvin Toffler, which identified a new subject who was at the same time producer and consumer of content: the *prosumer* (Toffler 1980). This phrase underlined the overcoming of the traditional separation between producers and users which characterized the industrial economy and it introduced the emergence of a participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) in which the different forms of reworking, re-appropriation and redistribution of popular culture enabled the interaction between the two historically distinct categories. This led to the emergence of new players operating, without tradition, in a creative field in which the rules for evaluation were kept within the same community of producers. They were the *outsiders* of digital creativity (Ricciardi 2009). According to some authors, including Manovich (Manovich 2013), the phenomenon of user generated content (content created by outsiders), was driven by the industry of consumer electronics, which wanted to convey and exploit the rhetoric of user-empowerment in order to market their products and by the same social media companies, which made a profit from the traffic generated by prosumers within their own networks.

The processes at the center of the scientific debate led multimedia companies to develop communication strategies which guided the audience through a constellation of related products, trying to anticipate the tactics implemented by outsiders in order to elaborate their own processes of fruition, re-appropriation and reworking of the content (De Certeau 1990 Manovich 2013). This is the model of transmedia communication and transmedia storytelling.

The considerations which led to the theory of the concept of transmedia storytelling were developed between the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. In 1991, Marsha Kinder introduced the phrase transmedia intertextuality in her book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: from Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, in order to describe a phenomenon that characterized some areas of the entertainment media production, in which fictional characters recurred in autonomous and related media texts, intended for various media (Kinder 1991).

In 2003, when the E-Content Report 8 of the European project ACTeN, titled *Cross-media*, was published, the focus was on the issue of cross-media, which would be accompanied by that of transmedia. The E-Content Report 8 was the first systematic study on the concept of cross-media and it identified the distinctive features of projects which used various communication medias in a complementary and coordinated way, in support of a specific theme, distinguishing them from cross-platform projects based on the transposition of the same text through different channels. According to this report, there were four qualifying elements in a cross-media project: the involvement of multiple media/distribution channels which supported one another with their specific strengths, therefore they did not merely reproduce the same content but they made an independent and significant contribution to the communication project; an integrated production, where different subjects, professionals or companies, collaborated in designing co-related content which led to mutual referral; accessibility of content through a plurality of devices; support of a single theme, story, objective, message by the different products.

Also in 2003, the essay *Transmedia Storytelling* by Henry Jenkins was published in *Technology Review*. In this essay, the author focused on the narrative projects, specifically

analyzing the large multimedia franchises which gave birth to new models of co-creating fictional universes, capable of accommodating more stories and characters within declinable narrative lines for multiple media. Corporations can use this strategy to enhance their assets, intercepting and retaining an audience of different age groups, inviting them to move through a constellation of media to maximize their user experience.

Since then, the phrases cross-media and transmedia were used with similar meaning, until the Producers Guild of America settled the issue by formalizing the figure of the transmedia producer in its *Code of Credits* (the guidelines for securities that may be included in the credits of multimedia productions) of 2010. According to the *Code of Credits*, a transmedia narrative project or franchise must consist of at least three narratives, existing within the same fictional universe, and recounted on different platforms. The narrative extensions do not simply reproduce the same story but they offer a contribution at least partially different from those offered by other platforms. The transmedia producer deals with the design, development and production of transmedia content, managing the narrative continuity of the project through different platforms and creates original storylines for new platforms. He also deals with the design and development of the interactive components of the transmedia project<sup>1</sup>.

A common feature in transmedia projects is the use of different media in a complementary and coordinated way to support a single communication project, accessible through a variety of media, where each channel of access provides a perspective or a contribution which is separate and distinct from the other and in which the fruition requires a strong performative component (the user must act, move from one media product to another in order to deepen the user experience and recompose the whole picture of the communication project).

The processes of creation of transmedia projects involve a significant cooperation between different media sectors, in order to attain a co-creation which can be outlined both in the field of broadcast production (with a systemic design which is prematurely shared by complementary sectors of the media industry and of the communicative universe that will host the various narrative lines) and from the perspective of participatory and cooperative design in which the most active segments of the public are involved, through strategies of engagement and peer production.

## Co-creation Strategies in the Italian Transmedia Production

From the mid-2000s, in Italy, a number of transmedia projects oriented to co-creation between professionals/broadcasters and outsiders have been developed. This co-creation has been understood both as a co-participation in the development of content in multiple media sectors, and as a collaboration in the production between broadcast subjects and outsiders. In the following sections, we will analyze those Italian projects which have combined strategies of transmedia communication with productive solutions based on co-production either between different media sectors, in order to involve a wide range of audiences and to make them interact, or between broadcasters, media companies, outsiders and prosumers in order to include the contribution of the user-generated content in the enhancement processes. These projects will be analyzed with reference to the models of analysis of transmedia communication present in literature. Some common features that characterize the Italian experiments of transmedia co-creation will be highlighted.

In 2008 the show *Black Box* appeared on television and on the web. The show was produced by 360 Playmaker and MTV and it was broadcasted on MTV Italy. This was the first example of transmedia co-creation, that is a form of co-design practiced by different media sectors in order to create a product whose use implies that the user moves across multiple platforms in order to complete a process of additive comprehension of the story. Every episode of the show revolved around an individual story, narrativized and presented in short chapters, in which the main characters played themselves and the host intervened as a mediator, giving interpretations as the narration developed and interacting directly with the audience and with the main characters of the story. At the end of each TV episode, the main character was asked to reveal the story ending. The ending was not revealed on TV but on the web. The spectator then visited the MTV website in order to conclude his user experience: the story was fragmented in two sections, each one utilizing a different channel and being narratively independent from one

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<sup>1</sup> The code of credits for transmedia projects is available at the following URL:  
[http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc\\_nm](http://www.producersguild.org/?page=coc_nm) (accessed: September 30, 2016)

another. What kind of transmedia strategy was adopted by Black Box? In 2006 Gary Hayes proposed a classification of the transmedia projects based on a scale which ranges between maximum and minimum redundancy of the content of the various assets. At one extreme we have those narrative projects (called pushed) which are presented on various media but in which the content carried by each asset has a low level of differentiation. At the other extreme, however, we have those projects that require a high interdependence of the content conveyed on different media channels and a low level of content redundancy. This content should be enjoyed in its entirety in order to experience the global narrative experience (the so-called experiences). Between these two extremes we can find the extra types and the bridge types. In the extra types some content is added to the main media product. This content is coordinated by the media product and it is distributed on various platforms, which offer additional materials aimed at the segment of audience represented by the fans. In the bridge types, each content is connected with the other through references and clues (bridges), and each asset has a different perspective on the story told while ensuring accessibility and autonomy from one another with respect to the content (Hayes 2006). *Black Box* adopted a bridge model, with a main media product (the TV program) and a web content which represents its digital extension. The goal is to encourage the audience to explore MTV's online channels and to create a community dedicated to the social enjoyment of the audio-visual content, which nevertheless remains the main content. Black Box engage its audience in a performative fruition while different media departments are involved in the co-creation of narrative adaptations of the story for the television and the web.

The web series *Freaks!* (2011-2013) by Claudio Di Biagio, Matteo Bruno and Guglielmo Scilla was an Italian transmedia project which paved the way to a strong partnership between broadcasters and creators of online content. *Freaks!* carried out a conversational interaction (Jensen 1998, 2008) based on spreadability (Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013) and media conversations (Manovich 2013). The authors of the series are members of the category of web authors called YouTube Stars, video makers who became popular thanks to their personal channels within the social platform of Youtube and have a large number of subscribers and views. The process of joining their audiences by working on a collective audiovisual work was the key to the success of *Freaks!*, which strengthened its spreadability thanks to the management of the medial conversation and of the dialogue with the audience acquired by individual YouTubers. This audience then contributes to the redistribution of the same videos (by embedding them in different contexts and on multiple platforms and social networks) and to the increase their information assets (through comments, integration of keywords, ratings...). In his book *Software Takes Command*, Lev Manovich gives a clear explanation of these dynamics, speaking of media conversations typical of social media:

«One of the characteristics of social media is that it is often hard to say where “content” ends and the discussions of this content begin. [...] Often “content,” “news” or “media” become tokens used to initiate or maintain a conversation. Their original meaning is less important than their function as such tokens» (Manovich 2013).

The online success of *Freaks!* generated interest among broadcasters, so that the series was one of the first examples of migration of a web series content to a national television channel (Deejay Tv). *Zio Gianni* of *The Pills* and *Il Candidato* of *La Buoncostume*, represent a further step towards processes of co-creation between broadcasters and Youtubers. These are actually products designed for television distribution which create a transmedia connection between the social platform and the television channel by putting in place the interactivity of conversation (Jensen 2008) and activating the online fan base of the authors, offering perspectives and complementary points of view on the characters of the series.

The Italian web series *Lost in Google* by *The Jackal* put in place a sort of collaborative writing and continual media conversation with the users, who could affect the screenplay of the following episodes with their comments, or see their narrative proposal published online on the official channels. In this case the co-creation of content involved the participation of the Online Communication company *Ciaopeople*, the youtubers *The Jackal* (their brand was acquired by *Ciaopeople* following their online success) and the users of their video channel through an online platform. In fact, between 2011 and 2012, the web series engaged users through a conversational and registrational form of interaction (Jensen 2008): the best comments to each episode, either in the comment section of the episode on YouTube or on the official website, were used to write the next episode. Interactivity is intended here as a meta-designing activity,

enabling participatory and collaborative mechanisms which are the basis of co-creation models mediated by technology (and by the interactive interface). The focus then turns, from interactive content to participatory storytelling, a type of narrative which is constructed by giving the users some control over the development of the story and by creating cultural activators, content which can be decoded through riddles and mysteries which engage the users and force them to take action in order to rebuild the plot and the story. This leads to a social, collaborative and performative experience: the users are invited to share information and skills, they need to act so that the storytelling may continue and, in many cases, they also need to interact with the authors and the storytellers in the creation of the story.

Another example of Italian transmedia project which led to the creation of communities around content experience, and encouraged forms of co-creation between authors and users is *Frammenti*. *Frammenti* was a transmedia series broadcasted on CurrentTV between 2009 and 2010. It is an Italian example of Alternate Reality Game which used co-creation strategies in the production of a transmedia serial.

According to Jeff Watson the *Alternate Reality Game* is a

«form of interactive transmedia storytelling that [takes] the substance of everyday life and [weaves] it into narratives that layer additional meaning, depth, and interaction upon the real world. In an ARG, players discover the game through an encounter with one or more access points embedded in real world contexts. These access points, known in the parlance of ARGs as “rabbit holes”, lead players into a dynamic matrix of story components distributed across various kinds of digital and physical media» (Watson 2010).

In *Frammenti* an enigma was proposed in each episode of the television series. The viewers were invited to solve the enigma within a week, interacting with each other on the Web, communicating with the characters of the series through their profiles on social networks, exploring real places where actors hired by production gave some clues, in various Italian cities. In each episode of the series, they retraced the stages the players had gone through and they presented the solutions identified, thanks to which the players could continue their adventure. In this case, the Current producers experimented a formula of co-creation which allowed for forms of collaborative storytelling ascribable to the so-called *Experiences* in Gary Hayes's classification. The *Experiences* are stories in which the plot is fragmented into a multiplicity of micro-content scattered across multiple platforms, which the user must reconstruct through performing activities, games, online explorations and in the physical world.

In 2012 Andrea Phillips, in *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling*, indicated the property of "fragmentation" as a characteristic feature of transmedia storytelling. Designing a transmedia story may implicate the fragmentation of the story into single portions which are then spread on multiple media products and distribution channels. It may also implicate that the story is told within a single media product (a film, a comic book, a book) and its fictional universe is expanded through additional content distributed on different media. In both cases the result is a high level of fragmentation of the story: a classification of transmedia projects can be given according to the size of the narrative fragments. These can be placed on a continuum (represented by the *Transmedia Fragmentation Spectrum Model*) ranging from projects consisting of large narrative blocks, or chunks, that coincide with individual media products (books, movies, television series...) with a high level of autonomy to projects whose narrative blocks are very small and interdependent: for example, the *Alternate Reality Game*, a project of which *Frammenti* represents a unique example in the Italian broadcast scene.

In 2014 a web series project which implemented a transmedia *bridge* model for the promotion of a book published by the Italian editor Rizzoli, was launched on the web. The name of the series was *Under the Series*, it was produced by Anele in co-production with RCS and Trilud. Two elements created a diptych set in the same fictional universe: the 10-episode web series and the novel support each other and allow for the exploration of the fictional world from two different perspectives. This was not a mere transposition of the book but a transmedia storytelling in which each medium brings an independent and specific contribution to the process of experiencing the story. The characteristics of the target of the urban fantasy genre constituted the impulse and motivation for the first Italian experiment in transmedia co-creation which combined publishing companies and TV production companies (both authors and production companies worked directly on the expansion of the fictional universe). In his book *Transmedia Storytelling e Comunicazione*, Max Giovagnoli identified three communication systems which can characterize three types of transmedia project: the supportive

communication system, in which different platforms support each other in promoting the main theme of the narrative project, the competitive communication system, which requires the creation of original and independent content for each asset in order to trigger competitive dynamics between the audience and the omnivorous communication system, in which the storytelling revolves around a main platform, usually the web, on which the other media depend in the distribution of the story (Giovagnoli 2013). *Under The Series* adopted a supportive communication system, like most of the Italian transmedia examples studied, in which a main media product (some editorial content, as in this case, or a film or television content) was the center to which the various audiences intercepted through other platforms of the transmedia system converged. *Under The Series* represents an example of that type of transmedia that Nuno Bernardo defined *Brand extension* in his book *Transmedia 2.0* (Bernardo 2012). Unlike *Stepping stone* projects, which are web-centered and test the effectiveness of a story on online digital platforms in order to extend it on different assets, and unlike *Organic transmedia* projects, "agnostic of platform", story-centric and not platform-centric, *Brand extension* is strongly anchored in a main media product, around which some complementary content set in the same fictional universe is created.

In 2015 the experimentation of transmedia storytelling reached the public service of the main Italian broadcaster, thus obtaining for the first time some real mainstream space. *Ray.it* is the RAI web platform launched in February 2015 from the collaboration between Rai Fiction, Technology and Production Management - CTO and the Department of Communications and External Relations. *Ray.it* is aimed at a young audience (15-30 years old), and it uses a transmedia approach aimed at extending the narratives of the most successful television series of RAI through a series of extra content and/or companion, especially designed for online use. Therefore, the complementary use of television and web communications wishes to create multiple points of contact between the audience and the television programs which are most popular among the specific target. The models that Gary Hayes defined as pushed and extras are used. They consist in the creation of a channel that ensures a multi-platform use of content without interruption (due to the availability of the television series on the web) and on the offer of extra content related to the fictional universes of the TV series, aimed primarily at an audience of fans, keen on interactivity of conversation (Jensen 2008, Manovich 2013) and eager to participate and collaborate.

*Lo Staggista* is a web series project of 2015 which represented the first Italian example of transmedia promotion put in place for an Italian blockbuster. The story of the web series took place on the set of the movie *Natale con il boss* (*Christmas with the Boss*), produced by Filmauro, and it starred the intern in charge of filming the backstage. The transmedia model adopted here was the *bridge*, since the two parts of the content are independent from the point of view of usability (they are self-conclusive and usable independently from each other) and related from the point of view of the narrative. The Web series and the film were linked by some "bridges" that invited the viewer to experience all the complementary content (the fate of the protagonist of the web series, for example, was not revealed at the end of the series but in the film). The distribution of the series adopted a multi-platform approach: the directors Zero and Carlo Tozzi produced eight episodes aired on a double episode on MTV8 (television), on the web site Rds.it (web radio) and on the Filmauro Youtube channels (web video). Cinema, radio and the web represented complementary platforms for a project of co-creation (which involved audiovisual, radio and web production teams) aimed at promoting the film through a system of multi-platform contents.

Gabriele Mainetti's film *Lo chiamavano Geeg Robot*, released in 2016, is another example of how the transmedia promotion strategies are entering in the editorial plans of major publishers and mainstream producers, also in Italy. In order to promote the movie release in the cinemas, they created a comic which was strictly connected with the film, offering a parallel and complementary narrative, not simply a transposition but one element of a transmedia diptych which extends the fictional universe in which the story is set. The homonymous comic book was therefore created thanks to the collaboration between the Italian distribution company Lucky Red and Italian sport newspaper *Gazzetta dello Sport*. The latter distributed the comic book at newsstands together with its newspaper. This was an example of co-creation similar to the strategy adopted by the best known and studied of transmedia franchises: *The Matrix* by the Wachowskis. *The Matrix* represented the reference point for the strategies of co-creation based on collaboration of different media sectors, from the earliest stages of the project, in the development of narrative content which is coordinated, complementary and set in the same fictional universe.

Both *Lo Staggista* and *Lo chiamavano Jeeg Robot* are examples of promotional projects which were developed through processes of transmedia co-creation. In his 2011 book *Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling*, Robert Pratten identified three types of transmedia project: the *franchise*, the *portmanteau* and the *complex experiences*. The *franchise* consists of content which is autonomous and can be used independently (movies, comics, books...), but is set in the same fictional universe. The *portmanteau* are multi-platform projects which allow for a single narrative experience. Finally, the *complex experiences* combine the features of the previous two types: broadcast media products with a stand-alone access, interwoven with interactive and participatory experiences that allow the user to deepen and enjoy more intensely the user experience. These last two projects can therefore fall within the category of complex experiences mentioned by Robert Pratten, adopting a bridge model and a supportive communication system: the center, the main media product, is always the film content, whose transmedia extensions represent secondary narratives.

## Conclusions

Transmedia projects are being offered by a growing number of broadcasters and players of online communication, defining and consolidating certain models of co-creation that are based on strategies of brand extension and on a two-step process, where successful *outsiders* are involved in the production processes of the broadcaster, also in order to enable a kind of interactivity in conversation which is seen as an opportunity for contact with the younger audience on social media. By using the analytical models of transmedia in the literature, this essay discussed different forms of co-creation, with particular reference to the Italian scenario: the cooperation between different media sectors in the development of narrative or communicative content which is coordinated and complementary, and the adoption by broadcasters and producers of strategies to create a strong link with the online audience, focusing on participatory and collaborative solutions aimed at involving the public in the elaboration and expansion of the stories told through the media products.

The experiences show that the Italian experimentation of transmedia co-creation is mainly linked with the less complex models of cross-platform design. The broadcast model, in both cinema and television, is predominant: the bridge structure, with a supportive communication system and brand extension goal, is the most common transmedia form. This is mainly due to its ability to support a main media product (broadcast) on which the majority of the production and marketing investments are concentrated. Web-centered solutions, organic transmedia, experiences and alternate reality games are still confined to independent forms of experimentation which do not give an impulse to forms of co-creation which involve collaboration between broadcasters and outsiders, except in rare cases (such as in the series *Frammenti*).

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