

The “Ontological Fibrillation” of Transmedia Storyworlds. Paratexts, Cyberworlds and Augmented Reality

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Abstract

In this study we shall be trying to examine in more depth the relationships between the processes of trans-medial world-building and their “ontological fibrillation” via the affordances of recent digital technology. The analysis will be concentrating on the contribution from Augmented Reality in the ontological materialization of *The Walking Dead* transmedia storyworld. To this end, the dual configuration of a *narrative continuum* and an *interactive materialization* of the make-believe will be taken into consideration. This assumption will be backed up by our endeavouring to update the conceptual contributions of narratological categories, such as para-textuality, and medial categories, such as cyberworlds and the social media; the trend towards materialization of storyworlds, following in the tracks of a historical-archaeological perspective of pre-digital transmediality will be traced with reference to several scholars within transmedia studies.

Keywords

Transmedia Storyworld; Paratexts; Cyberworlds; Augmented Reality; The Walking Dead.

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A Living Storyworld from a Dead World

Among the numerous digital maps that can be explored using Google Maps one might come across *The Walking Dead Google Map*¹: a collection of locations charted by one user, the function of which is to place in order the elements in the storyworld from the celebrated comic novel (2003-2019) created by Robert Kirkman; thanks to the director Frank Darabont, it became a famous long-running TV series (2010 -), produced by AMC and distributed by Fox. The path taken by the protagonists from Atlanta to Washington is geo-localized on the map and, thanks to the markers laid out along the route an interactive mode is provided, for the consultation of information, images, brief synopses of the principal facts, and numerous other allusions to events illustrated in the comic novel and the TV series. The map becomes a file in graphic form, with which to orient oneself within the tightly packed trans-medial storyworld, whilst holding on to characters, environments, events, behaviour, etc. These elements consolidate the mythologeme of the zombie apocalypse *à la* Romero, within a fictional setting transformed into real, traceable and localizable geography.

¹ <https://walkingdeadlocations.com/> (last accessed: 24/08/2020).

The convergence of the fictional level in a geographical space goes a long way towards consolidating the process of world-building in *The Walking Dead*. The interactive map is a "digital paratext", the function of which is to place in order, in spatial and temporal mode, the information from the narrative world and also indicate the dissemination of the storylines on various medial supports. In the terminology of Jason Mittell, the map corresponds to an *orienting paratext* (2015: 261), i.e. a textual construct that lies outside the diegetic world, allowing fans to build up a profound sense of the narrative through various modes of trans-codification (graphic, virtual, interactive and material) of the narrative elements (characters, events and settings).

Beginning with the franchises committed to the construction of the fictional world, Skybound for the comics and AMC-Fox for TV series, numerous narrative spin-offs have been generated, principally serialized and organized through different media (book-series, web-series, game-series, etc.), which have contributed considerably to multiplying the narratives as well as expanding the fictional space, transforming Kirkman's creation into a continually ballooning transmedial storyworld. In fact, according to Matthew Freeman, *The Walking Dead* is one of the most significant examples for understanding the *world-building* processes of the transmedial entertainment industry: «*The Walking Dead* is about searching the remains of an imaginary world, a world of empty spaces and violent creatures. And this theme of searching is important, since the way in which one goes about conceptualizing an imaginary world shapes the framework and perspectives through which it is made sense of» (2019: 2). Freeman is referring to the capacity of trans-medial storytelling to construct complex worlds in which, among the rich metaphors and symbology embodied in the narratives, there emerge clear auto-referential elements. For example, there is a narrative cycle "A Larger World", in which the protagonists create a network of communities linked up with each other, in order to initiate a sort of social palingenesis from the ashes of a by-now zombified world; this is formally paralleled by the spatial

and temporal expansion of the storyworld via the above-mentioned network of spin-offs².

In this way a breach appears in the meta-narrative, in which the narrative also describes the storyworld's modes of participation. For example, the macro-theme of surviving the zombie apocalypse is described via the themes of *transit* and the *creation of a community network*; it becomes easy to recognise references to the fans' long journeys (through varying, albeit converging, medial territory) in the actual protagonists' journeys to meet up again with their loved ones, or to seek safe places in which to set up new communities³.

In the same way, in order to gather information and accede to the important narrative contents, fans inter-react with *virtual communities* springing up spontaneously in social media channels⁴.

² There are several spin-offs enhancing *The Walking Dead* storyworld. Among the main spin-offs, those standing out are the two Tv series *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015 -) and the forthcoming *The Walking Dead -World Beyond*. In both cases the spin-offs build two storylines parallel to the starting one: *Fear the Walking Dead* takes place on the United States' west coast; *World Beyond* will focus on a group of boys and girls born after the zombie outbreak (as a sort of zombie apocalypse natives). Beside these spin-offs there are many other serialized narrative extensions employing different media (web-series, book-series, game-series, etc.) and all of these aim to examine in depth secondary narrative facts that have been left open through the main storyline.

³ Moreover, the relationship between the contents of the fictional work and the modality of its fruition find paradoxical confirmation in the presence of zombies and their capacity to overturn the symbology ascribable to the reasons for the transit and creation of the community in reverse, the only aim of which is the dismembering of the social and moral framework of the community of survivors.

⁴ One of the most relevant examples concerns the "wiki-communities" developed online spontaneously around the imaginary worlds of films, comic novels, Tv series, etc, where the properties of collaborative software for *user-generated contents* allow the user to cover a large amount of information regarding the transmedial worlds (e.g. the continuity or discontinuity among

Orientation within a complex storyworld, rich in narrative offshoots, as in the case of *The Walking Dead*, leads the fan towards a sense of cognitive gratification coinciding with absolute knowledge of the make-believe world. However, a desire for total knowledge of the story and its parts does not proceed merely on diegetic levels, but sets in motion a series of texts, contents, interaction and extra-diegetic practices, strongly supported by digital technology, the specific nature of which often consists in trans-codifying the narrative elements into interactive constructs. In this way, the narrative is suspended in order to leave space for medial experience in terms of attraction, immersion and performance, which allow the fan to "explore", "inhabit" and interact on various levels with the diegetic world, thus renegotiating the boundaries between narrative knowledge and interactive experience of the storyworld. Therefore, via a series of para-textual elements, difficult to categorize in their entirety and their material, semantic and symbolic variety, the aficionado is stimulated to explore the thresholds where the virtual make-believe world and the reality of his production clash⁵. For example, as well-argued by Freeman regarding *The Walking Dead*, the channels of social media allow one to spontaneously reproduce the identifying values of a series (2019: 74), and to reveal the actual way in which it was produced (e.g. backstage photos, making of, interviews on set, etc.), reducing the distance between audience and production.

In order to acquire an encyclopaedic knowledge of the storytelling, there are prerequisites for intense involvement in terms of a search for

the several adaptations, the diegetic order in relation to the increase in parallel storylines, etc.).

⁵ According to Freeman (2019: 73), the Instagram contents that especially place transmedial products on the threshold between fictional and real, are stimulating an ontological perception of the storyworlds. On the one hand, it is possible to organize diegetic access (*into the scenes*), e.g. by using contents that confirm the storyworld values (iconic images extracted from the comic novel or the TV series); on the other hand, by providing extradiegetic offshoots (*behind the scenes*) revealing the making of the production, or actors' interviews and their points of view on the narrative, backstage photos, etc.

narrative continuity, interspersed with the multiplication of stories in the various media involved; along with these, it is possible to trace the methods in an *interactive multiplication* of the storyworld, triggering a fascinating relationship of continuity between the virtual, as intrinsic to make-believe, and its materialization in reality via various types of medial engagement.

These two directions hint at the tendency to *unify* the various trans-medialized narrations, in order to obtain the overall sense of the storyworld, and to *actualize* the make-believe via thresholds and access-points, by means of which a whole range of interactions with the storyworld are carried out.

Beginning with the brief opening example of the interactive map of *The Walking Dead*, in this study we shall be attempting to examine in depth the relationship between the diegetic and extra-diegetic dimensions of storyworlds, studying the modes of interaction between *narrative unification* and *medial actualization*. To this end, the analysis will aim to trace these two elements *in nuce* within the historical context of transmediality.

On the basis of the premise that trans-medial worlds tend to build up «a balance between fantasy and reality, between imaginary and real» (Freeman, 2018: 126), we shall endeavour to reflect on the dimension of the “ontological” trans-codifying of storyworld transmedia, geared towards rendering the boundaries between the imaginary and real worlds traversable and interchangeable, whilst exploiting the affordances of emerging digital technology.

Bringing a Storyworld to Transmedia Life

To whatever extent transmedia storytelling might appear, in evident fashion, to constitute the dominant logic in the formal organization of communication and contents of entertainment at the moment of medial convergence, from the technical point of view, the deeper sense of transmediality seems to lie precisely in its fascinating

indeterminacy⁶: the ability to cover any type of narration (Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman 2014: 4), to evolve formally in accordance with the various strategies within the entertainment industry, ever more globalized and digitalized (Smith and Pearson 2015: 1), to probe the narrative and expressive potential of emerging medial technology, and to stimulate the fans' active participation; all these render it a firmly transversal phenomenon, which extends along various conceptual offshoots and a discursive variety that escapes the restrictions of a general theory. In fact, transmedia studies place at the centre of their methodology the fluid nature and continuing evolution of forms and transmedial processes: «the very definition of transmediality might

⁶ The intrinsic indefiniteness of the transmedia storytelling notion is easily traceable in the several theoretical revisions carried out by Henry Jenkins in a conscientious way (2003; 2006; 2009; 2011). One of the seminal contributions by Jenkins was to start, especially in the pages of his online blog (*Confession of an Aca-Fan*), a very rich debate that has contributed to improving (and obviously to rendering more complex) the transmedia storytelling concept, and to finally achieve some orientative principles based on dialectical issues (e.g. spreadability vs drillability; continuity vs multiplicity; immersion vs extractability). The debate that started from Jenkins conceptualization of transmedia storytelling has touched on film and media studies and narratology and literary theory scholars. One of the most stimulating discussions is the one with David Bordwell. Signalling a little disagreement regarding some initial theorization about transmediality, Bordwell pointed out, in the notion of paratext, borrowed from the precise Genettian (1982) taxonomy, the prefiguration of several formal possibilities realized in the field of entertainment oriented towards disseminating the same characters, contents and events through different media. As is suggested by Jenkins' answer to Bordwell's objections, the argument that fails in its approach concerned the ways in which the stories circulate; this is the premise for narrative continuity, which, according to Jenkins, proves fundamental to distinguishing epistemologically the very broad notion of transmediality from the formal varieties of transmedia storytelling: «a simple adaptation may be "transmedia" but it is not "transmedia storytelling" because it is simply representing an existing story rather than expanding and annotating the fictional world» (2009).

remain decidedly in flux, meaning different things to different people at different times». Transmediality is presented as a cultural macro-phenomenon, «an interdisciplinary research object that can be analysed from different points of views» (Scolari Bertetti e Freeman 2016: 3). Transmediality is suited to becoming an analytical tool for intercepting the dominant logic of the entertainment industry, in the formal production of images and contemporary mythology: «the very nature of a transmedia fictional world means that there are complex story elements, such as characters, events, places, and tropes layered across multiple independent narratives» (Branch and Phillips, 2018: 386). The narrative complexity hints at a sensorial richness bolstered by the immersive and interactive promise of digital technology, in such a way as to conduct the conceptualization of storyworlds towards ontological reflection and allusions⁷. A storyworld corresponds to the mental projection of a world/system evoked from a written narrative (Ryan and Thon 2014: 3). It is the result of a process of world-building that, in the case of transmedial storyworlds, takes shape commencing from the offshoots of narrative elements on different medial levels: «the process of designing a fictional universe that [...] is sufficiently detailed to enable many different stories to emerge but coherent so that each story feels like it fits with the others» (Jenkins, 2006: 335). The characteristic of transmedial storyworlds focuses on the inexhaustibility of the narrative experience throughout a single medial text, and on the close dialogue established between narrative theories and medial theories, within a paradigm such as that of convergence, characterized by the instability and rapid evolution of forms of expression, their mode of creation, production and engagement. From this perspective, one of the points of departure for understanding transmedial storyworlds and their success in the contemporary medial paradigm, is the literary theory of possible worlds, as borrowed from Thomas Pavel and Lubomír Doležel. As heir to this tradition, Ryan (2014) insisted on the representational nature of imaginary worlds: they exist in the perception of the consumer, in his/her interaction with different medial texts and his/her capacity to

⁷ See Branch and Philipps (2018) and Freeman (2019).

arrange the contents in order. Storyworlds impose worlds, universes, abstract systems, inhabited by virtual characters, who, nevertheless, are perceived by fans at varying levels of veracity (32-33). This fabrication of meaning is guaranteed by consolidating the narrative infrastructure that triggers in the consumer a mental picture, which is occasionally complex. In fact, for Ryan, storyworlds subsist on the interaction and the pertinence of a series of founding elements: *existents; setting; physical law; social rules and values; events and mental events*, rendering the narrative experience more substantial in cognitive terms (34).

Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman (2014: vii) try to move beyond the narrative component, detecting in their perception of the storyworld the influence of a series of productive aspects conveyed by the configuration of an extra-textual order, the fruit of a convergence between media, industry and technology, into which the contributions from any participating culture insert themselves (in accordance with – or without – the institutional interactions between fandom and media franchises). However, in analysing a transmedial world, being able to separate the narrative components from the productive becomes difficult, since storyworlds, albeit the fruit of narrative processes, are, as Mark Wolf (2012) promptly points out, themselves mediatized constructs. It is precisely this intersection between narration (virtuality of mental representation) and production (industrial materialization) that provides transmedial storyworlds with *ontological fibrillation*, which emerges in the reciprocal innervations between the fictional-imaginative and experiential-interactive dimensions.

The innervations between the virtual and the real are sustained by a series of extra-diegetic extensions, para-textual constructs that, by operating outside the textual nuclei of reference, take the transmedial world beyond the limits of narrative spaces, hinging on ways of engaging the interactive components of the media in question. In other words, the (hyper)-real perception of a storyworld is triggered starting from medial practice and transcoding, which, transcending in part the narration and the media that have generated it, address simulative and explorative assets, both interactive, ludic and performative; these are provided, for example, by medial technology, which, because it is

still institutionally unstable⁸, is geared towards illustrating and exhibiting, in spectacular fashion, its technical and representational properties, as in the case of Virtual Reality (VR) and, as we shall be seeing, more specifically, Augmented Reality (AR).

Extradiegetic Circulation: Paratexts and Cyberworlds

Several scholars have contributed to broadening the horizons of research regarding transmedial storyworlds, focussing on the relationships between diegetic and extra-diegetic elements, whilst endeavouring not to create hierarchies among the various medial texts (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; Jenkins 2006; 2009; Gray 2010; Hills 2016; Freeman 2018). Within this stimulating sphere of *transmedia studies*, we started to reflect on the transcoding of constitutive narrative and thematic elements of a storyworld in formats that favour interaction, games and performance. We might conceive of these ancillary formats as para-textual extensions, geared towards stimulating in the consumer a sort of *digital astonishment*; these extensions range from the proteiform galaxy, composed of peripherals (Gray 2010) to complex, inter-semiotic transfers to video-ludic worlds and to immersive virtual set-ups, such as cyberworlds (Klastrup and Tosca 2004).

Updating Genette's theory regarding the paratext (1982), Jonathan Gray insisted on the need to include in the analysis of transmediality all the elusive, hybrid textual forms taken into consideration in *screen studies*, as well as surplus material (trailers, teasers, ads, etc.) subordinated to a textual and narrative nucleus perceptible as central; these elements are conceived to enhance the horizons of expectation and economic goals. «When I call for an “off screen studies”, I call for a screen study that focuses on paratexts' constitutive role in creating textuality, rather than simply consigning paratexts to the also-ran category or considering their importance only in promotional and monetary terms» (Gray 2010: 7). In this way, within the phenomenon of

⁸ On the ways and aesthetics of media transitions, see Thorburn and Jenkins (2003).

transmediality, on the one hand the centrality of a media text of reference is deconstructed (films, novels, TV series, comics, etc.), and, on the other hand, the narrative text is pre-eminent. The traditional medial formats thus become conceivable as inner workings of a complex fictional machine arranged in a network of texts of a varying nature, albeit linked to each other. Transmediality is not built solely on narrative continuity, but also on the same level as a narrative ecosystem (Innocenti and Pescatore 2017), in continual and unpredictable expansion, it is more and more often geared towards the attraction dimension, the emotional-sensorial stimulation of users interested in interacting with imaginary worlds:

Film and television shows, in other words, are only a small part of the massive, extended presence of filmic and televisual texts across our lived environments [...] any filmic or televisual text and its cultural impact, value, and meaning cannot be adequately analyzed without taking into account the film or program's many proliferations. (Gray 2010: 2)

Gray's theoretical reflection focuses on the textual constructs that proliferate around the narrative hub of a storyworld (from advertising to merchandising, video-games, web-sites, wikis, etc.), which can be catalogued as peripherals: «A core entity with outliers that might not prove "central" and that might not ever be doing the same thing as the entity, but that are somehow related» (5). One of the interesting aspects of these reflections lies in the various modalities by which the fan's access to, and participation in the transmedial storyworld is guaranteed⁹. The transmedial experience, in its narrative and interactive entirety, emerges in the dual function of *threshold*, as carried out by the

⁹ In relation to the source texts, Gray (2010: 36) distinguishes two functions of the peripherals: one that anticipates-introduces the storyworld, in such a way as to enhance the consumers' expectations (*entryway*); the other, which fills the gap during, or after, the fruition of the source text (*in medias res*).

paratext¹⁰: on the one hand, it smooths out access to the various narrative twists; on the other, it permits a series of immersive access-points through medial technology that materializes and spatializes the virtual dimension of make-believe, or which replicates the narrative spaces within digital environments. Since every textual proliferation contains the capacity to influence, or even to change, however subtly, the forming of the meaning of storyworlds, then the conceptual territory of transmediality must necessarily also include those barely narrative (yet strongly interactive) spaces; it must also integrate in their phenomenology the eclectic extra-diegetic dimension.

The notion of paratext therefore advances the dialogue between different worlds and transforms the storyworld into an accessible, explorable and immersive fictional structure. Thus, from a narrative concept the paratext readily becomes a hyper-diegetic tool, which balances the narrative dimension with interactive and immersive spaces and practices, mobilized by digital media. In this way, digital paratextuality aims to enliven storyworlds, taking the notion of transmediality beyond the mere narrative experience, and indicating the relevance of further complex experiences in terms of cognitive and sensorial involvement. This happens in contexts where storyworlds are localized in time and space (Hill 2018: 224), via the infrastructure of attraction, in which the precedence of the narrative experience leaves space for the idea of interactive exploration. Theme parks, fan conventions, cosplaying, fairs, etc., namely, a series of phenomena that Freeman, for example, defines as *leisure-time media* (2018), mean that the fan's involvement lies precisely in crossing the boundaries between the imaginary and the real, proposing various levels of storyworld materializations, such as the acquisition of constitutive elements: e.g. action figures and games that materialize and provide the make-believe of virtuality with performativity; or, through transcoding of contents, environments and actions characterizing the storyworld, in a video-

¹⁰ To Genette (1997:3) the paratext is: «an airlock that helps the reader pass without too much difficulty from one world to the other, a sometimes delicate operation, especially when the second world is a fictional one».

ludic and interactive key. The latter issue is at the crux of Klastrup and Tosca's research (2004; 2014; 2018), geared towards examining the experiential dimension of transmediality. Their line of thought transcends the centrality of narrative texts in transmedial constructs; in fact, the two scholars favour the elision of the prefix "story", in order to concentrate, instead, on the notion of *worldness*, which is more complex and comprehensive: «The [transmedial world] is not defined by the material entity of any particular instantiation (the media platform) but by the shared idea of the world, a sort of platonic approach that situates the ontological status of the [transmedial world] in a disembodied plane» (Kastrup and Tosca 2014: 297).

The creation of settings, characters and events at the centre of fictional transmedial worlds, in forms such as computer-games, to which we might add experiences in VR and AR, contribute to transcoding mental images of transmedia storyworlds in *cyberworlds*, i.e., interactive medial constructs that vie with each other to allow an ontological dimension to emerge forcibly at the heart of the make-believe:

[Cyberworlds] contain the possibility to interact in real time with other users and to actively interact with and influence the world itself. They can be game worlds or entertainment world or social worlds, but most cyberworlds provide all three opportunities (gaming, being entertained, socialising) in some form. Cyberworlds offer some interesting opportunities for the actualization of a transmedial world. They left the user of the world become and act as character in the world, not just experiencing the world from the outside, but actually being transported inside it. (Klastrup and Tosca 2004: 5)

In line with the various functions of a digital paratext, cyberworlds contribute little to the principle of continuity and narrative unification, focussing principally on the interactive components that provide the consumer with access to the world of make-believe, and, at the same time, the materialization of make-believe in the experiential fabric of the

real world. Cyberworlds enliven transmedial worlds, respecting their graphic fidelity, and confirming the founding elements, which, in the words of Klastrup and Tosca, were *mythos*, *ethos* and *topos* (2004); they promise the fan active interference, at the expense of a suspension in narrative continuity, thus positioning themselves at the pinnacle of reciprocal interaction between the virtuality of transmedial worlds and the materiality of the real world, conceptualizing transmediality as a total experience.

Narrative Continuity and Media Actualization

As previously stated, the all-encompassing experience of a transmedia storyworld takes the shape of a condensed series of cross-references between diegetic order and extra-diegetic interactivity. For the sake of a theoretical description of transmediality as an all-encompassing experience, it might prove useful to trace certain developments in the forms of entertainment in the past, which, in some way, anticipated the development of contemporary transmediality, especially with regard to the pervious nature of the boundaries between imaginary and real worlds.

For Freeman, the way in which the stories are redistributed through different media, is historically conditioned (2016): it reflects a series of transformations, up-dates and transversal dialogues between cultural, communicative and industrial branches. Within transmedia studies, especially the contributions of Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman (2014), Freeman (2016) and Bertetti (2018), have shown how transmediality is not at all a new phenomenon, thus sparking a lively debate on a possible formal origin of pre-digital transmediality. The conceptual crux of transmedia storytelling deals with the transmission of content using various supports, in accordance with the principles of *sameness*, *variation* and *extension*. As several scholars have correctly pointed out, these principles hint at phenomena of transmission of knowledge that is ever-present in the various forms of culture, (e.g. in biblical stories [Bordwell 2009], [Johnson 2013]) and epic sagas [Evans 2011]) and in emerging medial forms, when old media were “new”, such as the case of *Don*

Quixote (Scolari 2013), a text characterized by a marked predisposition to self-referentiality with which to exhibit the expressive possibilities of the "new" narrative form of the novel. The question of the origin of transmediality is difficult to resolve and also not very useful if examined from a historical perspective lacking a benchmark and the prerogative of "metaphysics of the original"; however, the utility of these lines of thought lies in the subsequent enlivening of the general debate, continuing beyond affirmations of unbiased rhetoric regarding the "new", which has characterized certain attitudes in the study of digital narration¹¹. In this sense, an archaeological perspective allows us to curb any enthusiasm triggered by novelty wrapped up in interactive digital contents, anchoring these phenomena between the continuity and discontinuity that can be traced between the past and present of media, and in the contribution of digital technology in its configurations between audience and production in today's entertainment industry. Historicizing transmediality means drawing on the intrinsic tendencies of stories to overreach their own semiotic boundaries (*transtextuality*) and to observe the discursive fields (industry, media, technology, consumption) implied in the modalities with which cultural production takes place: «transmedia entertainment is intellectually useful as a concept not for its newness but because it can help articulate a longer history of production and consumption from socialized exchange of culture» (Johnson 2013)

Following the archaeological evidence traced by Scolari, Freeman and Bertetti in *Transmedia Archaeology* (2016), we can single out the emergence of a trans-textual predisposition in affirmation of the entertainment industry, influenced by the evolution of mass media. The three scholars have tackled diverse case studies over a period of time, addressing the redefinition of trans-textuality, and focussing their analysis on aspects regarding the narrative continuity *in nuce*, that is to

¹¹ I refer to the enthusiastic rhetoric of novelty that has characterized some of the initial academic research about the innovations carried out with computerization and digitalization within the cultural processes; e.g. see Laurel (1993) and Murray (1997).

say, around the configuration of those concepts that, right in the era of cultural convergence, will lead to the Jenkinsian notion of transmedia storytelling. The analysis by the three scholars singles out, in the field of production of pulp fictions, a reference model (*transmedia pulp*) for observing the systematic nature of adaptations and other modes of inter-semiotic transfer, for example, from comic strips to radio-drama, novels, films, etc., fantasy and science-fiction products.

In these adaptations there is a recognizable trend towards mass-medial ubiquity of the heroes (*character centered approach*) and their world (*storyworld centered approach*), i.e. those approaches to the generative process of a more complex transmedial structure organized on the principle of narrative continuity between the various medial texts in question. Narrative continuity between one medium and another becomes systematic with the gradual serialization of the entertainment content: from dominant industrial model (especially in the 1930s and 1940s) serialization becomes an expressive cultural form, a model for the organization of the contents of stories and entertainment. The formula for serialization has its origins as far back as the second half of the 19th century at least, with Charles Dickens' novels in instalments, and the cinema of the 1910s; this permitted the intensification of formal artifices in narrative continuity, proposing long story arcs, secondary, parallel and alternative off-shoots, but also greater complexity as regards characters, and other expedients as prerogative of the persistence of stories in the fan's memory: «Seriality has become a conscious part of creating immersive story worlds [...] these properties have a serial storytelling structure, multiple creative forces which author various parts of the story, a sense of long-term continuity, a deep character backlog, and a sense of permanence» (Ford 2007).

If the pulp fiction industry, thanks to medial ubiquity and serialization, can be thought of as a workshop for the formal development of transmedia storytelling, the imaginary worlds that focus on the clash between reality and fantasy, readily become fields of investigation for the analysis of the ontological dimension of transmediality and its realization as all-encompassing experience.

As noted by Wolf (2012; 2018), Freeman (2014), Bertetti (2018), and others, the imaginary world of Oz created by Frank Baum, is one of the case studies *par excellence* for understanding the immersive dimension of transmediality *in nuce* (as yet unaware of its role), but in which the coincidence of serialization, narrative continuity and multimedial materialization of the imaginary world, appears quite evident. From the point of view of content, the novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), focuses on access to a parallel world, arranging the narrative precisely on the basis of Dorothy's capacity to traverse two diverging ontological regimes (the reality of Kansas and the virtuality of the land of Oz). Under a formal aspect, Baum's original project adhered to the idea of serialization, arranging the narrative into a further thirteen books. In parallel to the planning of a long narrative cycle, Baum and other authors multiplied the world of Oz into numerous transpositions in diverse expressive codes, rendering it an imaginary experience entailing the use of different media¹²: theatrical musicals, radio, comics, video-games and numerous cinematic adaptations, including the 1939 film version, *The Wizard of Oz*, in technicolour, directed by Victor Fleming and the 2013 "prequel", *Oz the Great and Powerful*, directed by Sam Raimi. Many of these adaptations have contributed to enhancing, if not intensifying, the perception of the existence of an imaginary world, inserting new details, shifting to periods before and after the incipit of the original novel.

Michael O. Riley (2018), for example, identifies the publishing success of Oz in Baum's descriptive ability and the wealth of details and information about the secondary world; to this perception we might add the contribution of the medial ubiquity of various adaptations in consolidating perception of the imaginary world in terms of a mappable space.

The Fairylogue and Radio Plays (1908) stands out among these adaptations, a complex staging (of which there seem to be no remaining traces) that exploited cinema's meta-medial capacity in the first decade

¹² To examine in depth the multifarious adaptations of Baum's novel, see Riley (2018).

of the twentieth century, in terms of its elasticity in imposing and integrating diverse expressive languages in order to create a total experience generated by the co-presence of multiple expressive forms: live performance, proto-filmic images of magic lanterns, music played by a live orchestra, presence of an external narrator (Baum himself). Baum's multi-medial arrangement of the installation makes use of the attractive power of the moving image, emphasizing the ability of the emerging cinematographic medium to confuse the boundaries between virtual and real in intriguing ways, and via the exchanges between various techniques, to build up around the viewer the imaginary world described in the book.

Augmented Storyworlds: The Walking Dead – Our World

The archaeological example of the wizard of Oz indicates the mighty capacity of stories never to burn themselves out and to build up their transmedial dimension by providing revelations and access to imaginary worlds¹³. Various strategies intercede in the sphere of media franchises, or great media conglomerates, issuing paratextual extensions to create and reinforce models of consumption and brand loyalties.

¹³ It is fascinating to note how along his prolific literary production Baum had intensified the tendency to figure ontological realms collapsing on each other. Although *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is Baum's most successful novel, the following year he published *The Master Key. An Electrical Fairy Tale* (1901), a novel in which the technology of Augmented Reality seems to have been prefigured, especially its function in opening passages to other worlds and to making the invisible visible. In the novel, the protagonist wears a pair of glasses incorporating an odd technology allowing him to gather visually information about the surrounding people, especially if their intentions are kindly or spiteful. Therefore, it seems easy to recognise, in the glasses envisaged by Baum, the technological ability of contemporary extended reality devices (e.g. Google Glass and Microsoft HoloLens) to visualize virtual information directly from reality and to interact with it.

These strategies multiply the methods geared towards transforming the narrative knowledge of a storyworld into an "economy of experience" (Hills 2016): for example, through the *total merchandising* of simulacrum objects (such as action figures, or board games¹⁴) procured from the virtual dimension of the fictional world; or honing the immersive techniques that contribute to the ludic conversion of the storyworld – *gamification of the storyworld* (Freeman 2018). The utilization of interactive paratextual forms can be seen to be more and more relevant in the economy of transmedial experience, since it sets in motion the intrinsic *ontological fibrillation* of imaginary worlds.

As previously mentioned, in the initial example in this article, the storyworld *The Walking Dead* proves to be an interesting workshop for observing this fibrillation. Pertinent to the theory of other possible worlds, the zombie apocalypse at the centre of the storyworld, allows us to configure a parallel world, which appears as the dreadful reverse of the known world. This world is totally zombified, where humanity shows up in its most searing and perturbing deviation, in terms of horror and violence. Furthermore, based around a long-standing cinematographic myth, the narrative nucleus of *The Walking Dead* retraces and takes to extremes certain established stratagems (e.g. humanity's ways of surviving), organizing them into a network of storylines parallel in time and space (q.v. various official spin-offs), thus creating a world in continuous evolution and paradoxically "alive". Alongside the narrative extensions, an interactive dimension is laid out; this is based entirely on the interference of the fictional zombified world with the real one: from the dissemination of promotional contents in the social media, to theme parks and guided tours to Sonora, the place where most of the TV series was shot, to various types of video-game, from the "classics" such as *First Person Shot*, to those involving strategy

¹⁴ For example, within the official merchandising of The Walking Dead franchise, it is worth noticing the publishing of a cookery book for survival in the case of a "real" zombie apocalypse: <https://www.shopthewalkingdead.com/products/the-walking-dead-the-official-cookbook-and-survival-guide?variant=44002701074> (last accessed: 24/08/2020)

("platform games"), to those with more narrative ("point and click games") where the player reproduces the philosophy and basic morals of the storyworld¹⁵ – a virtual staging of the outstanding places in the make-believe world (exploration in VR¹⁶ of Alexandria, the capital of the "new world" of the survivors) which consent a cognitive and spatial extension of the storyworld (Atkinson 2018: 23).

I would like to conclude by analysing the applications of technology in Augmented Reality (AR), in order to illustrate the intensification of interference between the make-believe zombified world and the real one. AR is a medial technology, the spectacular nature of which hinges entirely on the close dialogic relationship between the real and the virtual. In his pioneering study Ronald Azuma (1997) noted the basic differences between definitions of *virtual environments*, where perception of the real world is suspended, and *augmented environments*, in which data and information are superimposed directly on to the physical world, without substituting the latter with a simulation of the action space in *computer graphics*:

Virtual Environment technologies completely immerse a user inside a synthetic environment. While immersed, the user cannot see the real world around him. In contrast, AR allows the user to see the real world, with virtual objects superimposed upon or composited with the real world. Therefore, AR supplements reality, rather than completely replacing it. Ideally, it would appear to the

¹⁵ For instance, in *The Walking Dead: The Game*, a serial "point and click" videogame produced by TellTale Game, the player is stimulated to make tough decisions as if he were a character in the storyworld (e.g. the preventive use of violence; which character to try to save from the zombies; suspicion regarding other survivors, etc.). The interesting result is the emotive enrichment of the gameplay with doses of positive and negative feelings of empathy toward various characters.

¹⁶ At the time of writing this article, the release of a new VR video game had been announced: *The Walking Dead – Saint & Sinner*.

user that the virtual and real objects coexisted in the same space (356).

The Walking Dead – Our World is an app-game in AR that allows one to transform real space into a zombie apocalypse, to create extended reality, i.e. a hybrid, unmappable space, where cyberspace and physical reality, human interaction and machine-interface renegotiate their borders¹⁷. In the game, the smartphone's nomadic screen along with the technology of the global positioning system (GPS) reveal the presence of living dead in the surrounding urban spaces, thus impelling the player to eliminate his enemies, collaborating with copies of the storyworld characters in computer graphics. Moreover, the player can enter virtual groups of survivors, extending the gameplay to socialization practices implemented by the online dimension and by multi-playing. In this way he/she will manage to emulate, in immersive and faithful manner, the *worldness* in *The Walking Dead*: reproducing the pop myth of the zombie apocalypse (*mythos*), configuring a hybrid space for action (*topos*) and killing the zombies, emulating the ways of survival at the centre of the *ethos* of the storyworld. All these elements lead to the transfiguration of real space into the imaginary space of a post-apocalypse, and the transformation of the player into one of its inhabitants. In this way an intriguing ontologization of the storyworld is set up, in which the zombie apocalypse is projected forward into the space of reality, mediated with devices (smartphone) that configure the experience of the everyday: «*The Walking Dead – Our World* is a mobile game that encourages users not to escape from reality by entering a fictional storyworld [...] but rather to believe in the imaginary world as itself reality by traversing the line between real and virtual» (Freeman 2019: 103).

Finally, the technological affordances of AR, together with the overlapping between the virtual dimension of fictional space and the

¹⁷ To examine the media concept of Extended Realty in greater depth, using a semiotic approach, see, Biggio, Dos Santos, Giuliana (2020).

real space of everyday experiences, emphasize the symbolic link between the world of the living and that of the living dead; this is at the heart of the thematic approaches, not only in *The Walking Dead*, but in all medial mythology regarding zombies.

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