BUILDING TRANSMEDIA WORLDS (Published at Game Theory Online, 2010)

By Danny Bilson

Transmedia storytelling, the art of telling related stories across different media platforms, has recently become the topic of much thought, discussion and implementation. This is not a new concept, but with technology now offering us more platforms, it is finally becoming a substantive and legitimate one. A story can originate in a video game, a book, a graphic novel, a movie, a television show or even a toy.

Star Wars is an important modern example of transmedia storytelling. It began with a film in 1977, and has told its stories of galactic empire and revolution across many media platforms. Fans have been able to carry on interactions with that galaxy far, far, away, in video games, toys, cartoon series, books, comics, radio plays, and almost every entertainment medium that exists today.

But Star Wars is not simply the story of Luke Skywalker as it was in its infancy; it is many stores set in the same universe. I propose that in creating a transmedia property, building the world is more important than building an individual character or plot. We must lay out the rules of a universe and design it in such a way that it can foment rich fiction of all types. Those stories can be of many different characters and their individual journeys, all tied together by their relationship to the same universe or world.

Some have attacked transmedia stories as a cheap marketing ploy created to suck money out of enthusiastic consumer's wallets. I think that if the property is being designed as a revenue driver it can risk failure, as the creativity may be limited by cynical revenue-based restrictions rather than the love of the property by fans. I might also propose that successful transmedia stories are closer to fan fiction than one might think. When an inspired transmedia author sits down to build a world, he or she should really start with the place they'd like to visit the most. Then they can look at the property from the point of view of, "If I love this thing, how would I want to experience it, and in how many ways?" I am a huge fan of the old Microsoft ad that featured the slogan, "Where do you want to go today?" That bit of creative marketing speaks volumes in it's relation to the kind of interactive entertainment that houses a transmedia story.

Being in the video game business these days, I am most concerned with the game as the central hub of a transmedia story. When I approach other content providers to join in the universe, I often explain that for each of us, our media is the central hub. For us at THQ, the movie or TV show is an extension. For the filmmakers the game is the extension, for the fan at home, their fiction posted on the Internet may be his or her central hub. The beauty of transmedia storytelling is that they can all live together and complement each other in a consistent universe. And if you are a fan who loves that universe, you have the opportunity to experience as much of it as you like.

Community tools which use social networks to expand a story or universe are becoming new and interesting access points for transmedia storytelling. These tools can help the fan find their way into and through a multimedia story. They can also help them share them with friends and fellow fans and even create their own pieces of a transmedia universe. I think the quality of those stories will be

filtered by the viral system itself with the best and most resonant stories reaching the most people. Those stories will most likely be the ones that are most consistent and respectful of the universe and its original inspiration.

Finally, we are finding that the ultimate challenge for delivering transmedia experiences is one of production and timing. How can these pieces be built, how often on different systems and at different costs and how can they be delivered in the most rewarding sequence to the fans? For instance, a film may take a year or two to produce; a video game may take three years; and a graphic novel six months. Getting these to arrive in the most dramatic sequence is a new challenge that transmedia producers only now are having the privilege of facing. But it still all starts and ends with a robust and consistent world, created and managed by inspired visionaries, who are themselves its biggest fans.