The Ghost Club Storyscape: Designing for Transmedia Storytelling

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Abstract— One of the key questions about transmedia storytelling is how to design a participant's experience across different media so that it is connected and perceived as a whole. We extract four components for building such connections from current work in media studies and production literature and practice. These proposed design components are mythology, canon, character and genre. To test this approach we have designed and developed a group of connected digital media expressions, *The Ghost Club Storyscape,* to experiment with these four ingredients on multiple media.

I. INTRODUCTION

A storyscape is a new story form that is made up of novels, movies, games, and more media artifacts woven into a larger tapestry that we call a storyscape. A storyscape is the object of transmedia storytelling based on Henry Jenkins definition of a unified work told across different media platforms. Jenkins brought forward the vision that media convergence expressed through transmedia storytelling could create a novel way in how one perceives and interacts across storytelling experiences (Jenkins, 2006a). A storyscape is a new kind of storytelling that requires building a story world with much greater depth than just a linear story and defines the users, readers, and viewers as participants.

Storyscapes are a recent development in storytelling concurrent with the rapid development of new and converged media. For example, Henry Jenkins coined the term transmedia storytelling to define the sum total of *The Matrix* movies, games, and other works. The Matrix was also designed consciously to extend a story across this tapestry by the Wachowski brothers(Jenkins, 2006a). Since then Jenkins and other media theorists have extended the definition of these connected stories and experiences to include, most prominently *Lost*, *Harry Potter,* and retroactively the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* franchises.

With transmedia culture being adopted by the mass population, designers face new challenges different from designing for each of the individual media. One example is *Pokémon* where the rules in the game world retained exactly the same when TV series were created. What are the other design elements that can be leveraged as link among different media? How do we design for these connecting elements?

To explore the answers for the above questions, we designed a transmedia storyscape of stories and games to test the relationships and connectors between media. In this paper, we propose four design elements that connect these four sub-systems: *mythology*, *canon*, *characters*, and *genre*. The goal is to create an eco-system for participants to transit from one medium to another while keeping the sense of integration into a larger story. We designed a system called *The Ghost Club* storyscape, composed of a movie, webisodes, a mobile augmented reality game, and a flash-based game. This system provides a platform for us as researchers to empirically study how participants construct a story experience with a transmedia storyscape in the near future.

II. FOUR CONNECTORS

In this section, we discuss the meaning and usage of the four connectors that can potentially link participants' experience across different media. These connectors have been extrapolated from academic analysis and practical methodologies that have evolved in transmedia storytelling.

Mythology – Mythology in the context of transmedia storytelling defines the symbols, cultural landmarks and conflicts, as well as the natural and supernatural rules in the stories. This is a colloquial definition that understands some stories to be contemporary myths. This point of view has been expressed by Joseph Campbell(Campbell, 1949), Karen Armstrong(Armstrong, 2005) and others. Contemporary media theorists like Geoffrey Long(Long, 2007) and Henry Jenkins's(Jenkins, 2006a) use the term colloquially to describe the narrative paradigm that stories create and live within. In the practice of transmedia storytelling by producers like Jeff Gomez the creation of a mythology surround the different media platforms and elements is one of the pillars of transmedia design.

Examples of our use and refinement of mythology as a design term refers to the building of the elements of the story landscape to include main abstract oppositions like *religion against science* or *love against duty*. It defines the rules of the universe and the major characters that participate in founding myths (illustrative stories that define central themes or conflicts.) Further it weaves into the worldview symbols that are significant to the structure of meaning in the story. For *The Ghost Club* it is investigations by Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (two main characters) and the conflict between skeptics and believers. Our storyscape mythology draws from current transmedia storytelling practice and refers to the power of contemporary and ancient myths defined by Joseph Campbell(Campbell, 1949).

Canon – Canon represents the official media elements of a fictional universe based on intellectual property rights or some form of consensual agreement to authority by fans and participating communities. Canon is often used to describe the boundaries of official elements of Star Trek and Star Wars media franchises as a way of reconciling contradictory storyline. Lindoff and Cuse, the show runners of Lost, often explicitly labeled some transmedia stories like The Lost

Experience as canonical or non-canonical (Jensen, 2008)

In our approach Canon defines the boundaries of the storyscape and all that has occurred within those boundaries. Some of our work falls within the Ghost Club canon and some we have determined is outside. The table below represents this. The canon represents the history of the story world as written by the authorial authorities and also any canonical texts that are part of the storyscape. Because Storyscapes extend beyond the media into the community there are non-canonical stories and communities that are not authorial design elements. The history of *The Ghost Club* goes back 160 years and include four main incarnations, characters and story threads including Gaslight/ Dickens, Diesel/ Houdini/ Doyle, WWII, and Contemporary. Jenkins and other media theorists have written often on Canon, Fanon, and outside canon (Jenkins, 2006b)

Character – Character refers to the "person" in the stories and the way that character has been a dramatic organizing force in stories and games. In our approach we recognize character as being a major connector across media. Character as transmedia design element extends in three directions. There are embodied characters who are expressed as actors, abstract characters who represent the spirit of the character but not the specifics in look or history and the archetypal character who represents the basic features of that social archetype.

Genre – The genre theory we reference was developed in cinema studies to help define the rules and expectations of categories of movie stories. The film approach is a refinement of literary and other genre approaches to define and categorize similar elements across stories. In our conception, like film genre studies, these genres create a series of explicit expectations and rules that can be merged with other genres or subverted but still exist as a skeleton of narrative and game expectation that enhance connectivity through consistency across media. Genres act as container to define a construct of meaning within stories and define what is legitimate. Our approach to genre is consistent with contemporary media theories approach to genre examples like science fiction where rules are broadly defined.

III. DESIGNING THE GHOST CLUB

We crafted a mythology with central conflicts like skeptic and believer, a history of great events like the investigations of Harry Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and the rules of the universe. We constructed roles and characters that could translate as abstractions across media. We developed a canon of events that took place beyond the stories and media but was explicitly expressed in certain works like the movie. Finally we situated ourselves within genre conventions to frame connections across media with consistency of expectations.

In our design work we have planned movies, webisodes, Twitter-novel, Twitter characters, ghostpedia, connecting websites and iPhone game. What we discuss below is the work that has already been created to test our design approaches. Work is in different stages of completion but everything listed below has at least a working demo.

A. Movie: The Ghost Club

The first movie in the Ghost Club Storyscape is *The Ghost Club* about a team from the Ghost Club that investigates ghosts on a (fictional) reality television show. After returning to the investigation they get more than they bargained for and are confronted by ghosts. The movie is in post production with expected completion in 2012 for festival submission. The advantage of doing a feature film is that it helps elaborate a large set of mythology, canon, character, and explore the genre in an approach similar to the way Lost and The Matrix used serial TV and movies to lay a groundwork for other media elements.

Figure 1. In this scene actors are seen having embodied encounters that can be duplicated in other embodied media.

B. Webisodes, The Ghost Club Girls

The first webisodes are a prequel webseries that follows the three principle female characters of the Ghost Club starting a year before the movie. In the sequence of three webisodes comprising "Interviewing a Psychic," two women from the movie meet the third character for the first time under odd circumstance.

The webisodes are coequal with the movie in that they share the same mythology, canon, genre and some characters

TABLE I
DIFFERENT MEDIA AND THEIR IMPLIMENTATION ON FOUR DIMENSIONS

	Mythology	Canon	Character	Genre
Movie: The Ghost Club	Skeptic vs. believer; Club History	Main story events	Austin, Caitlin, Jimmy, Noreen, Parnell, Tab, Ghosts, Stanley	Ghost stories, Horror, Science Fiction
Web-isodes: Ghost Club Girls	Club History Skeptic vs. believer	Prequel Back story	Caitlin, Noreen, Tab	Ghost stories,
Flash game: Ghosts R' Us	Collection evidence and devices (FLIR, EMF) Apparitions, orbs, (not blood)	No canon	Character abstractions are used as cartoons and are consistent with the feature film.	Metaphors of horror genre.
Mobile AR Game: Ghosts vs. Club	Ghosts vs. Club Scientific Methodology of the Ghost club The EMF meter The FLIR	No canon (acting out of canon)	Roles are used: Leader, Psychic, Tech, and Scientist. These roles are consistent with the feature film.	Horror: ghost appearances and haunting

C. Mobile AR game Ghost vs. Club[1]

The goal of the augmented reality game Ghost vs. Club is to allow participants to enact the narrative paths that are outlined in other fictional and game narratives. Participants can take on the roles of the Ghost Club and use their own handheld devices to investigate an augmented reality world that blends physical space that we live in with digital ghosts.

Figure 2. Design of the wireframe for the mobile AR game.
(**Top**). Choosing the role in the game.
(**Bottom**). The screenshot when hunting the ghost in the wild. It uses real-time video taken from the camera as the background.

The characters designed for mobile AR game players are the roles in the team, including leader, psychic, tech, and scientist, which are consistent with the feature film.

D. Flash game

The flash game gives users the ability to place themselves in opposition to the Ghost Club. The Flash game represents the most limited connection since it embraces the mythology of the ghost club but other aspects are more abstract.
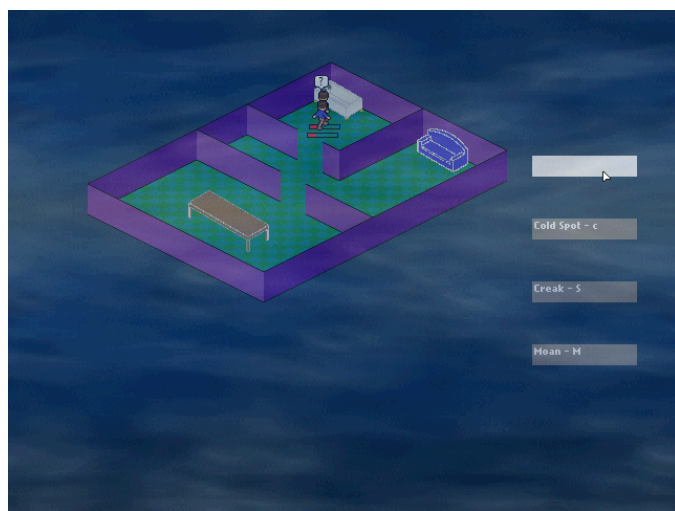

Figure 3. The interface of the flash game

IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This paper introduces a transmedia storyscape system called *The Ghost Club* that is composed of a movie, webisodes, a web-based flash game, and a mobile augmented reality game. The goal of the design for this system is to create a holistic participant experience across multiple media. The sub-systems are designed with four connectors – *mythology*, *canon*, *characters*, and *genre*. While we are still developing these systems, we plan to study cross-media experience using empirical methods to further understand the effects of the four connectors.

At the time when the paper was written, the systems were being built – the movie was edited and the games were prototyped. For the future work, we plan to conduct empirical studies that collect the feedback from the participants. The goals of our studies are to understand participants' subjective experience, how they make sense of different components of a storyscape, and how they connect these components together. Through the user study, we will be able to reflect on the four connectors for transmedia stories (mythology, canon, character, and genres). The participants may consciously rely on some of the connectors more than the other based on their diversity in personal interest and social context. The findings will not only contribute to answering the question of how transmedia stories work, but also broaden our understandings about cross-media, emergent user experience.

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[1] The Ghost vs. Club mobile AR game currently runs on iPhone. It was built on Argon, an augmented reality browser (http://www.argon.gatech.edu/).