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DESIGNING A TRANSMEDIA THEATRE EXPERIENCE FOR DRAMA EDUCATION

Adisti Anindita Regar

Introduction

In *Convergence Culture* (2006), Henry Jenkins described a method of storytelling where narrative is told across multiple texts and media: *transmedia storytelling*. Audiences, he explained, seek richer, deeper engagement—a desire which can be fulfilled through immersion in the richer storyworld transmedia storytelling allows. Jenkins offered the example of the *Matrix* franchise, but the popularity of recent franchise-based transmedia storyworlds like the Marvel films, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter* confirm the ongoing attraction of transmedia storytelling and world-building to audiences. My practice-led doctoral research examines the application of transmedia storytelling to theater performance. It defines transmedia theater as a work of cohesive, interactive narrative spread over live performance and accompanying (digital) texts. In this case study, I explore its potential impact on drama education through my development of a transmedia theater piece around Slingsby Theatre’s 2019 performance of *Man Covets Bird* in Adelaide, South Australia.

Contextual review

The need for a multiform, participatory storyworld in the digital age was foregrounded in Janet Murray’s *Hamlet and the Holodeck* (2017), identifying immersion and agency as offered in digital environments. Jenkins highlighted the participatory nature of transmedia storytelling—requiring viewers to seek and follow narrative threads across media channels (2006). In theater scholarship, Chiel Kattenbelt (2008) similarly discussed digital convergence and popularized the concept of intermediality. He described digital technologies as new interruption techniques, able to break spatial and temporal boundaries of performance. Dixon (2007) also expanded the idea of agency in digital media, suggesting it could realize Augusto Boal’s idea of the “spect-actor” in performance. Marie-Laure Ryan (2009) pointed out, however, that higher degrees of interactivity-driven agency are achieved at the expense of narrative consistency and immersion. I propose that transmedia theater has the potential to moderate this trade-off between interactivity and narrativity.

Drawing on past examples of transmedia theater and scholarly works on transmediality, intermediality, and interactivity, I have identified the common attributes and modalities of transmedia...
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Transmedia theatre works fulfill Charles H. Davis’s (2013) concepts of “narrative self-containment” and “narrative additiveness” — each text stands on its own narratively, but brings something new to the story. While my definition of transmedia theater requires performance to be a central element, theater is considered as one medium among others. The accompanying digital texts (I refer to them as paratexts or “narratexts”) need to be viewed outside the performance, rather than within it. Jenkins also pointed out transmedia storytelling employs the technological and cultural affordances of each text. When the piece involves theater, these affordances include the texts’ performative qualities. These attributes allow theater-makers and educators to build a storyworld beyond what is on stage, and create opportunities for active participation through the narratexts (beyond live performance).

Different forms of audience interactivity in transmedia theater works have been explored by Dixon, Ryan, and others. Based on their interactive and narrative qualities, I have identified four transmedia theater modalities: hunting-and-gathering, gaming interaction, social media theatre, and digital dramaturgy. These modalities are the basis around which I developed my narratexts for Man Covets Bird.

Significance for drama education

The initial focus of the research was on exploring storytelling where theater, media, and technology intersect. Developing the collaborative project with Slingsby, whose work caters to students and young audiences, revealed the form’s implications for drama education. The role of digital technology in facilitating creative participation in drama pedagogy has been discussed by Anderson, Carroll, and Cameron (2011), Jensen (2011), and Bell and Borsuk (2020). Cameron (2011) discussed how digital technology allows seamless pre-text (in process drama), engagement beyond dramatic space (through discussion forums), and an “expanded universe.” Jensen (2011) added that in an increasingly mediatized world, the use of technology in drama education contributes to students’ multimodal literacies. Bell and Borsuk (2020) discussed how digital educational resources enhance the accessibility of Shakespeare’s texts in various academic settings.

This discourse has greater relevance with the increasing prevalence of mobile devices and online learning platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting shift toward online classrooms have resulted in recent scholarship which highlights the potential of these technologies in drama education. Gallagher et al. (2020) discuss the challenge for drama educators to create intimacy through online-only pedagogical work. They propose a re-alignment of online technologies with analog modalities as a possible solution, focusing on social and aesthetic considerations along with the digital. Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy (2020) describe their experiment with facilitating complex process dramas for university students through the online platform Zoom. Their work emphasizes the potential for multimodality, as they describe the efficacy of incorporating images, videos, social media content, and other digital artifacts in this online co-creative process. Tam (2020) discusses the development of the Happy4R drama project to support kindergarten teachers’ and students’ post-pandemic return to school in Hong Kong. All three works frame the pandemic as an impetus to further explore and refine digital tools in drama education, not just to deal with the current situation but to prepare for the uncertainties of the future.

The pandemic has also pushed theater practitioners and companies to engage student-aged audiences through digital means. Disney Theatrical UK began offering online educational resources such as printable activities and career-related videos through their website. Step-pepenwolf Theatre launched virtual programs including video recordings, lesson plans, and
creative challenges. In Australia, my research collaborator Slingsby Theatre created an On Demand program, where parents and educators can purchase packages that include temporary access to recordings of their performances, along with education resources and backstage videos. Transmedia theater would reframe such practices by educators and practitioners within a narrative context, allowing students to engage with dramatic text through storyworld exploration beyond live, or mediated, performance. This project also specifically explores interactions through mobile platforms that can occur at a time and place of the students’ choosing, providing them the space and opportunity for reflection and contemplation.

**Research approach**

The research involves designing a transmedia theater experience with the performance of an existing dramatic text, adapting to the social and aesthetic considerations of the performance and its audience. This includes developing prototype narratexts for student participants to test and provide feedback on. Following the research through design structure of Stappers, Visser, and Keller (2015), prototypes serve an exploratory function. The prototypes are packaged in the progressive web application (PWA) DIGIStage (Figure 53.1), which functions as a digital incarnation of Gaver, Dunne, and Pacenti’s cultural probe (1999). The PWA parses out tasks to students and collects responses digitally, tracking usage through Google’s web analytics. For the first round of prototype development and testing, conducted in August 2019, low-fidelity prototypes were built using placemat content (which I wrote with advice from the Slingsby team). Thirty-six Year 9 and Year 10 students were recruited from St. Mary’s College in Adelaide through Slingsby Theatre’s education outreach program. The students’ activities and responses were randomized and anonymized, following ethical procedures involving underage participants.

![Figure 53.1 Screenshots of the DIGIStage homepage and digital gamebook](image)
The four narratext prototypes represent the transmedia theater modalities above with their respective interactive and narrative qualities. The cultural probe tasks simulate the “associated protocols or social and cultural practices” of each medium (Jenkins, 2006, p. 13). The modalities, prototypes, and tasks were as follows:

Hunting-and-Gathering

This modality involves a non-interactive narratext—engagement is present in the viewer’s decision on viewing the narratext itself (what Eric Zimmerman calls “meta-interactivity” in his 2004 essay). The prototype consists of a series of short stories exploring what happens to a character who appears only briefly at the start and end of the play. The stories were released in three stages, before and after students’ attendance of the performance.

Gaming Interaction

While this modality encompasses a wide variety of genres and technologies within the digital gaming medium, for *Man Covets Bird*, I developed a digital gamebook (choose-your-own-adventure interactive fiction) using the open-source creation tool Twine. The gamebook explores the lives of supporting characters in the play, with multiple-choice questions and a branching narrative structure. The narrative branches are minimal, and choices are predetermined and limited in consequence. The single-player and first-person nature of the game means interactivity is navigational and individual. It follows the character’s journey as they move into the city where the play takes place. In a series of choices, the player decides where to live, how they make a living, who to interact with, and how to interact. Some information from the play is hinted at, with appearances by minor characters—the gamebook was released before the performance and served as a pre-text for students’ viewing.

Social Media

This modality exploits the ability to comment and reply in social media, allowing a communal and reciprocal relationship among students and between students and the production. Following Patrick Lonergan’s discussion of theater and social media (2016), the performative aspect of social media enables co-creation between theater-makers and audiences. As the research could not use an actual social media platform (for privacy reasons), the prototype involves a series of micro-blog entries. These entries are posted by peripheral characters who are connected to supporting characters in the play. The characters form an online social circle, responding to and commenting on each other’s entries. The posts, released after the students’ attendance at the performance, form micro-stories parallel to the events of the play. Participants not only explore a set of characters beyond the play but could interact with the characters and add their own comments.

Digital Dramaturgy

This modality signifies a process of forming and organizing narrative and/or design elements of transmedia storytelling based on digital interaction with students (similar to process drama). Since the play revolves around a man’s relationship with his bird, participants were asked, prior to attending the performance, to submit pictures of imagined birds along with a short text. The intention was to project the pictures onto the set during the performance, but technical and time limitations did not allow this (although the participants were made aware of this intention). Instead, we published a picture gallery at the conclusion of the cultural probe period on the DIGISTAGE app.

Participants accessed the narratexts through links from the DIGISTAGE homepage. A calendar function on the app listed tasks and reminders, along with notifications. A Google Analytics
page was set up to gather data, and a post-testing survey was conducted. The testing and cultural probe took five weeks. The results comprise of user submissions and comments on the PWA, usage data from Google Analytics, and survey responses.

**Preliminary results**

The results of the first round of cultural probe are marked by several limitations and challenges. Most notably, the lack of user-generated content (posts and comments) outside of the bird pictures meant that the analysis was focused on survey responses and usage data.

Of the different modalities, the digital dramaturgy and gaming interaction prototypes—the two shortest tasks—were most popular. When asked to rank different prototypes, however, participants who had engaged in the hunting-and-gathering and social media prototypes ranked them higher. While over half the participants opted out of reading any of the short stories in hunting-and-gathering, those who opted in ended up reading more than one in the series. With the gaming prototype, participants responded they would have liked more choices, more characters, and a different format to choose-your-own-adventure. Participants did not respond positively to the social media prototype, with almost half saying that they would have preferred interacting on an actual social media platform. They were enthusiastic about the digital dramaturgy prototype, but similarly would have liked to see the effect of their contribution in the performance (as originally intended with the projections). When asked what type of transmedia theater prototype they would create, more than half the participants chose modalities where they could explore the play’s world further and interact with characters—this shows an overall excitement for an expanded transmedia storyworld.

**Discussion**

While these results are far from generalizable, in an exploratory context they provide findings for future research and development of transmedia theater experiences. Overall, the participants were receptive to opportunities for agency (through active participation) and immersion (through storyworld exploration). Transmedia theater’s appeal appears to hinge on broader narrative and interactive qualities. Furthermore, while the affordances of digital (particularly mobile) technologies provide accessibility beyond the temporal and spatial limitations of theater performance, they do not guarantee engagement. The quality of the content of the narratexts and their interaction with the main dramatic text still dictate the desire to take part. The students sought authenticity and effortlessness in their engagement, preferring practices and technologies they are accustomed to. Sophy Smith (2018) refers to this as transcending the immersive into an integrative experience, bringing the dramatic storyworld into students’ lives rather than thrusting the students into the storyworld. In the gamut of drama education tools, transmedia theater is suitable for teaching concepts of narrativity and interactivity. Its greatest educational value, however, may lie in the augmented experience it offers, allowing students greater desire to engage with dramatic texts.

**Future research and conclusion**

The next stage of research involves developing high-fidelity prototypes based on participants’ feedback, which will subsequently be released to the general public as a transmedia theater piece. The output will serve as a departure point for future research and creative endeavors in transmedia theater. One possible area of research is in integrating transmedia theater into drama education,
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using process drama to develop a transmedia piece. At the moment, the research team is looking into a collaboration with an ensemble of young artists to investigate this possibility, expanding the digital dramaturgy modality into a narrative co-creation engagement between artists and audience. Another possibility is the development of a transmedia theater app like DIGIStage as the “killer app” that Cameron (2011) refers to. Such a mobile app could facilitate a wider use of technology in drama education through a standardized digital-narrative-based educational resource.

As drama education continues to prepare students for an uncertain future, the field itself needs to continue to adapt to uncertainties and explore new ways of teaching, engaging, and creating. The intersection between drama, technology, and education is full of potential and, within it, transmedia theater’s ability to enhance students’ viewing and learning experience through storyworld creation and exploration.

References


