Transmedia Television Drama: Proliferation and promotion of extended stories online

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Abstract

Transmedia storytelling associated with television drama has existed online for more than sixteen years. For most of its existence, this material has been dominated by texts associated with the promotion of television series. This additional material has made inroads into prime-time television and most high-rating television drama productions have established an online presence. This study concentrates on additional content that is available online in relation to all Australian drama productions and some international drama productions in a five-month period. This paper asks what additional material in particular exists, finds out the prevalence of promotional material in comparison to storytelling and seeks to discover if any distinct categories of television drama productions provide more transmedia texts than others. A significant amount of additional material was discovered to feature promotion over storytelling. Differences in approach to this type of storytelling can be seen between public, free-to-air commercial and subscription broadcasters.

Introduction

According to Henry Jenkins transmedia is "a technique of telling stories across multiple platforms and formats, with each element making distinctive contributions to…the story world" (Jenkins, 2006a: 334). By using different media formats, transmedia creates "entry points" through which consumers can become immersed (Rose, 2011: 3) in a narrative. Transmedia storytelling has been implemented to increase connections with audiences for video games, films, comic books and television (Consalvo, 2003: 322).

This paper presents a pilot study that uncovers evidence of television drama production following this approach in recent programming. This study seeks to answer the question: What type of additional content is out there, how much is there and what types are in evidence across public, commercial free-to-air and subscription models? This pilot study is in part preliminary research, as preparation for a larger study of transmedia production processes in television drama for a doctoral thesis. Comparing the instances of storytelling material to other online texts with a clear promotional purpose is another outcome. This will add to the discussion of transmedia, and texts like webisodes, as little attention has been given to this additional material in a broader creative industry context. It is significant to discover what inroads into television drama transmedia texts have made.

Fiske argues that storytelling has driven television drama (Fiske, 1987: 129). In fact, television drama is seen as one of the drivers that made television a "pervasive mass medium" (Dunleavy, 2009: 1). Television drama occupies a special place in Australian culture (Screen Australia, 2013a: 19). It is protected by government regulation (Barr, 2000: 229) and is consistently popular with local audiences. Despite changing habits, popular Australian drama has maintained its audience size from 2008 to 2012 (Screen Australia, 2013b), explaining Australian commitment to local drama production. New media laws coming into effect in 2013 support this outlook with a slight increase in the amount of Australian content required by the free-to-air networks, but other impacts are not clear (Hirst, 2013).

Television has always favoured an episodic format (Williams, 1974: 56). Television drama has been able to build elaborate story worlds, create characters and complex story arcs through seasons that typically comprise six, 13 or 25 episodes. Since the mid-1990s, television dramas have provided audiences with additional material online by utilising

transmedia storytelling (Dyess-Nugent, 2011: 1). A television drama program's website often includes webisodes, character blogs, program websites and social media presences. This approach is seen by some (Jenkins, 2006a: 98) to extend the story world of a program and to create a more engaging and immersive experience for audiences. This approach offers viewers the chance to interact with a program and, in some cases, to share insights on the show with the program's creators.

From a production point of view, the proliferation and use of new online technologies, including smartphones and social media, have increased possible connections with audiences through storytelling. In 1996, *Homicide: Life on the Street* developed an original web-only series called *Homicide: Second Shift*, which featured detectives of the Baltimore homicide squad that worked after the regular television series characters had gone home for the day. In 2012, *Conspiracy 365*, a conspiracy thriller aimed at young adults, offered online audiences Character Video Blogs (Vlogs), an original webisode prequel series, as well as opportunities for fans to upload their own show-related video material, games, character dossiers and a range of other story- and production-based material. This transmedia approach follows that each new text adds an original and beneficial contribution to a program's diegetic world, while at the same time existing as an individual story node (Jenkins, 2006a: 98), with some independence from the key narrative. A viewer is generally not obliged to view a particular webisode or read a character profile to understand a series, regardless of whether it is accessed between seasons or between episodes. It is understood that as audiences connect with more transmedia materials, more connections are made with programs; thus, a deeper understanding can be obtained of the characters, plot and the setting of a story world (Hills, 2002: 138).

Henry Jenkins argues that transmedia's growing presence is evidence of a more complex form of storytelling: "a movement away from self-contained episodes … in favour of longer and more complicated program arcs" (Jenkins, 2006a: 78). He sees this complexity and transmedia storytelling as a natural progression for television producers (Jenkins, 2006a: 116). Trisha Dunleavy believes that this narrative complexity has "been a potent indicator of progressive, sustained change" (Dunleavy, 2009: 132). While this could refer only to a rise in more convoluted plots, within a program itself, Max Dawson places these transmedia texts as part of more narratively complex story worlds, and he views webisodes as an extension of James Sexton's ideas of "leakiness" and Jason Mittells' "narrative complexity" (Dawson,

2011: 204). These scholars argue that traditional forms of television, such as drama, need to adopt processes such as transmedia storytelling to satisfy audiences who are seeking entertainment across many platforms.

Television networks have been cautious in their approach to what material to offer viewers online. During the 1990s, increased deregulation and cross-platform ownership was seen as easing the transition, so television and the Internet became more closely aligned (Dunleavy, 2009: 132). In the past 15 years, joint ventures between multinational information technology companies and broadcasters have become more common. Enterprises such as *Ninemsn* in 1997 (Channel 9 and Microsoft) and *Yahoo!7* in 2006 (Channel 7 and Yahoo!) emerged as the industry norm. Broadcasters also launched online services in their own right (United States' NBC, ABC and Fox's launch of Hulu in 2007 and the United Kingdom's BBC launch of iPlayer in the same year). These partnerships were necessary and significant in terms of facilitating distribution of this type of material online. For this study access to webcasting was a key consideration. Kim argues that networks' primary motivation for placing content online in this period was the need for new advertising revenue, greater control of distribution and the need to protect existing copyrighted materials (Kim, 2010: 120). In the early 2000s, when discussing the convergence of television with the Internet, many industry-based publications framed the discussion in terms of opening up new opportunities for advertising revenue. Charlene Li observed in 2005 (cited in Graham 2005) that "The advertising dollars are there, so now the sky's the limit!", referring to the growing trend of webisodes as typical. From a production point of view, many factors, including storytelling needs, motivated what material was placed online.

The Role of Promotion in extended storytelling

The increasing use of extended material online in connection to television drama has been influenced by promotional motivations. Scholarly discussions of transmedia have often acknowledged the role of branding and promotion in shaping content (Jenkins, 2006a; Dawson, 2011; Dena, 2009). This paper defines promotion as "the act of furthering the growth or development of something" as stated in the *Miriam Webster Dictionary* (2013), but it also places promotion under the term Public Relations, as: "the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig, 1992: 4). While the term 'promotion' is used in this instance, it is important to note that while material placed on television drama websites can often fall under this definition, it is not advertising.

Advertising has been differentiated from the transmedia approach, because of the level of engagement. This perspective argues that "[r]ather than bombarding target audiences with unwanted and redundant brand messages" (Tenderich, 2013: 3), audiences are engaged in conversations. It is the participatory and interactive elements of transmedia engagement that place it beyond a traditional definition of advertising: "An informative or persuasive message carried by a non-personal medium & paid for by an identified sponsor whose organization or product is identified in some way" (Zikmund and D'Amico, 1993:603). This study seeks to classify additional material as being storytelling or promotionally based to further discussion of the role of storytelling use in engaging audiences.

Webisodes

As television drama programs established sophisticated websites, webisodes linked to television dramas represented a clear indication of the pressures linked to storytelling and promotional needs. Sometimes referred to as digital shorts (Dawson, 2011:206) ,webisodes can be defined as "the short-form ancillary texts produced by television networks, studios or independent producers as digital extensions of present or past television series for commercial and/or promotional purposes" (Dawson, 2011: 205).

Since the mid 1990s, webisodes have been placed online in connection with television drama series, and they are now viewed as having clear characteristics in their own right. Max Dawson argues they can be analysed in a substantive way, similar to other texts such as novels, films and television drama programs (Dawson, 2011: 225).

Webisodes are often viewed simply as shorter, additional versions of television programs, and are often produced by the core creative team and feature 'stars' of the show. Commercial pressures may more heavily influence them than the programs they are connected to. They can be under-resourced (in terms of time, finance or access to key personnel) and include more obvious product placement and/or endorsement (Dawson, 2011: 207). The ambiguity between the promotional and storytelling motivations of webisodes has fuelled industrial action in North America. A typical webisode can be placed before, after or during the timeline of a show. The HBO network's series *Big Love* placed three prequel webisodes five years, three years and 14 months before the opening of season one in a lead-up to the second season in 2007. A webisode series can also focus heavily on supporting characters; for example, Channel Ten's *Offspring* webisode series, called *Offspring: The Nurses*, has done

this for three seasons since 2010. Webisodes can also be a place for creative freedom, only retaining the setting and style of the original show while introducing completely new characters or toying with the audience's ideas of the program's conventions.

For audiences, these texts are often discussed in transmedia terms. They are sometimes perceived as being more successful, in transmedia terms, than other texts such as novelisations or fan-generated content because of closer similarities to the content of the key text (Scolari, 2009: 598). Although webisodes are frequently critically acclaimed and popular with fans, other viewers criticise them for either being too complex or too peripheral or "dull" (Sezza80, 2011: 1.) While there is no doubt that webisodes are often associated with television drama and other genres such as reality television, there is little information available in terms of evidence of the proliferation of these texts. Most scholarly work accessed during this research discusses webisodes in terms of transmedia relationships, or they comprise analysis of texts, analyses of audience impressions or commentaries on blog sites (Palomba and Wertz, 2013; Dawson ,2011; Jenkins, 2006b).

This pilot study uses a mixed methods approach using elements of content and textual analysis. For the most part data was analysed by "creating codes and themes qualitatively, then counting the number of times they occur in the text data" (Cresswell, 2003: 221). Codes were designed from prior research (Weerakkody, 2009). When examining these texts some textual analysis of content was required to take place, using a narrative analysis approach (Weerakkody, 2009: 204). The purpose of this was to create a typology of web content to see how much existed, what type of content it is, and how it was distributed across different services. The time period of five months was chosen for reasons of feasibility and to cover a range of programs in terms of length of seasons aired.

Method

This pilot study focuses on the online representation of some Australian and international dramas, specifically examining additional material offered and excluding the distribution of programs directly.

For the purpose of this paper, 'television programs' are defined as all Australian television drama series that aired on free-to-air and subscription television services between 1 January 2012 and 1 June 2012, for the first time. International dramas that rated highly enough to be

placed in the top 10 rating programs on a weekly basis (both free-to-air and subscription services) were also included. Subscription ratings excluded sporting events. International programs were limited for reasons of feasibility. Ratings reports from this period were obtained online from the *Oztam* website and the Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association website. Australian drama production output at this time was monitored through television programs guides such as *The Age* newspaper's Green Guide, *Tvguide.com* and *Encore* magazine's listing of Australian drama productions.

Websites associated with programs were accessed through networks or individual channels' websites. International programs that were distributed locally on free-to-air or subscription services were accessed online through local web presences associated with channels and not viewed on other international websites (linked usually to the country/channel of origin). This decision was made in consideration of international channels occasionally blocking content to Australian audiences and some websites often airing different (future) seasons of programs and/or content aimed at local audiences. Additional material from programs uploaded unofficially to video-sharing sites such as *YouTube* was not considered.

A list of programs was then created. Using this list, program websites were accessed and analysed. After viewing 20 television drama programs' web presences, all featuring webisodes, during 2011, some trends began to emerge. Each website was classified in three ways. First, the website was categorised according to whether it featured webisodes and what type of storytelling the webisode utilised. The second category analysed websites in terms of other video content, and evaluated these texts in terms of being narrative-based, promotional, production-based or user-generated content. The third category examined all other non-video-related content on the site and analysed this material in terms of being story- or production-based, social media content or promotional. Other information about the program's network and production details were also noted.

Limitations

This pilot study was limited in terms of time. Analysing a longer period, in terms of 12 or 24 months may offer further information. Examining *all* Australian and international dramas broadcast during a set period may also produce further information. The decision to only access material available on websites intended for Australian audiences, and not to access international websites or video-sharing sites such as *YouTube* or peer-to-peer file-sharing

sites such as *The Pirate Bay*, excludes points of contact that some audiences make with this type of material. The amount of additional material now provided online through social media portals such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* was also not considered.

Findings

Thirty-seven television drama programs broadcast in this period offered additional material, and all programs had an Australian web presence. Twenty-eight programs offered a form of video online, while only seven programs provided webisodes. Compared to international programs, it appears that Australian drama programs provide more material to viewers, with half (six) offering webisodes and 10 out of 12 offering additional video content. International programs offered one webisode out of 25 and over half (18) provided additional video content locally (see Table 1).

Table 1

List of all Television Programs

Australian Program	Free to air/ Public/ Subscription TV	Webisode Type	Online Non-Video Content	Other Online Video Content
Offspring	FTA	A2	B4	C1, C 2
Danger 5	Public	A1	B4	
Laid	Public	A4	B3, B4	C2
Woodley	Public		B2, B3	C3
Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries	Public		B4	C2
The Straits	Public		B1, B2, B3, B4	C1, C2, C3
Conspiracy 365	STV	A1	B1, B3, B4	C1, C2 C3, C4
Packed to the Rafters	FTA		B1, B2, B3, B4	C2, C3
Tangle	STV		B4	
Outland	Public	A1	B2, B3, B4	C1, C2, C3,
Bikie Wars: Brothers in Arms	FTA		B1, B2, B3, B4	C2
Tricky Business	FTA	A4	B3, B4	C2, C3
Non-Australian shows				
The Simpsons	STV		B2, B3	C2, C3

Family Guy	STV		B2, B3, B4	C2, C3
Hart of Dixie	STV		B3, B4	C3
Futurama	STV		B2, B3, B4	C3
Victorious	STV		B3, B4	C3
Big Bang Theory	STV		B4	C3
Game of Thrones	STV		B4	C3
Revenge	FTA		B3, B4	C2
New Tricks	Public		B4	
Law and Order: SVU	STV		B4	C3
Grimm	STV		B2, B3, B4	C2, C3
Last man standing	STV		B4	C3
The Walking Dead	STV		B4	
Modern Family	FTA		B2, B3, B4	C2
Midsomer Murders	FTA		B4	
NCIS	STV		B4	C3
Lewis	STV		B4	
iCarly	STV	A1, A4	B1, B3, B4	C1, C3, C4
Wizards of Waverly place	STV		B3, B4	
Homeland	FTA		B3, B2	C2
New Girl	FTA		B2, B3, B4	C2
The Vicar of Dibley	STV		B4	C3
Jessie	STV		B3, B4	
Two and a Half Men	STV		B4	
Downtown Abbey	FTA		B3, B4	C2, C3

Key to Table:

Webisode type	Other non-video online content	Other online video content
A1: Prequels/linking segments/cut scenes A2: Parallel storylines A3: Similar narrative styles A4: Cut Scenes	B1: Story-based B2: Production-based B3: Social media content/interactive B4: Promotional	C1: Story-based C2: Production-based C3: Promotional material C4: Fan-made

Webisodes were analysed in terms of storytelling and their relationship to the key television drama text. Webisodes were divided into four categories. The first category of webisodes is **prequels/linking segments/cut scenes**, in which the webisode extends the story into areas not covered time-wise in the narrative space of the show. Typical webisodes can take place before or after the episode, between seasons, or years into the past or future. They can show additional cut scenes or compress time between episodes. The second category is defined as **parallel storylines**. These webisodes generally take place within the story world at the same time as the key text unfolds, but they deal with peripheral characters or events. The third category is **similar narrative styles**, which is generally more independent of the key text from a storytelling point of view, and its relationship to the key text is defined as offering a similar viewing experience in regards to acting, editing and writing, but it features less narrative connection to a television show. The fourth category is **scenes (cut, sneak peeks or extended)**, which offer webisodes that are simply additional scenes that have been cut from programs before broadcast, longer versions of scenes that have been edited before broadcast, or scenes of a forthcoming episode that are available early.

The most common form of webisode both locally and internationally is the first category. No analysed webisodes fit into the third category. Three programs offered webisodes in terms of scenes from the program, and only one offered parallel storylines. It is worth noting only one international program offered webisodes, but it offered two distinct types of webisodes. Five of the eight webisodes offered original material created specifically to extend the story world of the television program online.

Websites had a range of video content that did not fit into the above webisode definition (see Table 1). Other online video content offered on television drama program websites were placed into four categories. The first category, **story-based**, represents video set within the diegetic world of the program, including material such as characters addressing audiences directly to camera, comedy sketches or, in one case, a brief documentary outlining the geographical features of the area where the drama was set. The second category, **production-based**, uses short videos about the television series' creation process to offer 'behind the scenes' information. The third category, **promotional material**, comprises trailers for upcoming episodes, which usually highlight the next broadcast time. The fourth category,

fan-made, consists of television program websites utilising user-generated content that is usually created in response to requests from show creators, and that features references to the television program.

It is important to note that many programs offer video content across more than one category, and in one case all categories. Thus, there is evidence in Australian dramas of 20 instances of other online video content being offered across 12 programs. Information offered in the form of promotional material, such as trailers for upcoming episodes, occurred in 20 cases. 18 sites offered video material that examined the production process, mostly comprising interviews with key actors discussing their roles. Fan-made material appeared once in the international and Australian categories, and other story-based video appeared in five out of the 37 websites examined. Between the international and Australian sites, both were similar in the fan-made and production-based categories, with more story-based material on the Australian site and more promotional-based video on the international site.

Table 1 also outlines the content on websites that was not video and was largely text- or prose-based. This content was separated into four categories. The first category, **story-based**, features material written within the diegetic world of the program, and it can feature such texts as character blogs or written material belonging to characters of a program. The second category, **production-based**, describes the process of making the television program. While some websites feature details about costuming, location or profiles of creators of the program, other websites feature material that focuses on actors' opinions of their character's roles and their struggles with the acting process. The third category, **social media content/interactive**, contains material that either directs audiences to follow the program on social media platforms or allows viewers to post written material in response to content posted in the form of comments. The final category, **promotional**, represents additional material that emphasises scheduling and describing the show in basic terms. Typical websites in this case will carry information that describes the premise of the program and short summaries of key characters and actors.

The most common material on the websites was promotional, with 11 out of 12 Australian drama programs listed and 23 out of 28 international programs offering this material. It was much more common for sites to offer links to social media platforms or production-based information than story-based material.

Discussion

While there is evidence that storytelling is a strong focus of additional material online in connection with these programs, in terms of quantity, there are many more instances of websites sharing information with audiences that have a basis in promotion. Thirty-three sites offered non-story-based promotional videos and 22 offered video texts such as trailers. This was compared to seven sites with webisodes, five with video material based in a show's diegetic world and four with material aimed at expanding the narrative of the program.

The findings indicate that a website that offers scheduling and other basic promotional information is the minimum standard in terms of web presence, which fits with Jin Kim's (2010) view that networks are merely occupying space online. It is also worth noting that many of these shows are international dramas that are available on subscription television, which often use more sophisticated websites in their country of origin. A show such as *Game of Thrones*, which is distributed in Australia on Foxtel's Showcase, has much less material than the U.S. HBO site. In terms of additional material that programs offer, all 37 programs offered a website and 35 of them offered material of a promotional nature.

Webisodes are uncommon and it is unclear what creative decisions are made to produce or not produce them. Why a popular program such as *Offspring* on Channel Ten chooses to create webisodes, and a program aimed at similar audiences, such as Channel ATV 7's *Packed to the Rafters* does not, is unclear. A more detailed examination of the production process could reveal motivations in commissioning this material. While there were only seven instances, two were programs aimed at young adults (*Conspiracy 365* and *iCarly*), and both of these examples offer the most material in terms of volume in storytelling and promotional texts. Both programs were the only ones to feature user-generated video content. Video blogs (Vlogs) were also in evidence in two programs (*Conspiracy 365* and *Outland*). Other online video content is heavily geared towards behind-the-scenes interviews on production and actors' thoughts, as well as promotional material. This material occurred almost four times as often as storytelling-based video, even after factoring in webisodes.

Comparing free-to-air and subscription television with public broadcasting, it appears that public broadcasters tend to offer more additional material and more material for extending

the narrative world of programs (four of the seven webisodes were on public television). Free-to-air appears to be the next most generous, with subscription television the least. Speculation around costs involved with marketing television shows could explain this if it is perceived that subscription television providers are under more financial pressure. In comparison, Australian drama, which costs much more to produce for local networks compared to purchasing international programs, had more resources for webisodes and other video based in the diegetic world of the program (six out of the seven webisodes and four out of the five instances of video material respectively).

Further Research/Conclusion

Expanding the scope of a study such as this to include all dramas broadcast in a region over a longer period should provide further evidence of trends. Considering materials offered through social media platforms and television drama aimed at children and young adults could reveal new trends as these programs appear to offer the most innovative and sophisticated online presence. These programs offer the most points of contact between programs and their audiences, in terms of volume and in variety of texts, in terms of a transmedia approach these programs would offer a more immersive experience.

The intent of this pilot study was to find evidence in terms of the proliferation of transmedia storytelling connected to Australian and international television drama online. While there are more instances of promotional material we can see that transmedia texts, as outlined by Henry Jenkins, are a presence in recent television drama programs. This is significant as we can now begin to understand the proliferation of these texts as an industry trend in Australian and international production. As part of a new approach we can now see different aspects such as the public broadcasting model being more prolific in creation of these texts and children and young adult programming offering the most sophisticated engagement. Recognising this new way of communicating with audiences is important as traditional television production is in transition and emerging trends such as transmedia approaches could offer new audiences and revenue for a troubled industry.

This pilot study is the first, to my knowledge, to add to discussion of transmedia texts using this approach and moves beyond close textual analysis of individual stories to see these texts in a broader, industry-based context. This discussion should continue so that the trend can be

mapped as a growing, decreasing or stagnant part of television drama production. This research is a first step in that direction.

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