

Transmedia Storytelling: Social Media Keeping the Story Alive

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In this article, Sydney Ybarra uses genre analysis to examine the multi-platform based genre of transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling is a new modern approach to storytelling in a more technology based society. She discusses the elements of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), looks at genre conventions and characteristics, and analyzes a video series (*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*) to support her findings about the appeal of transmedia storytelling.

Storytelling is an age-old activity that has been practiced for thousands of years throughout many different cultures. Along the way, there has always been room for variation and improvement. One way I can tell you a story today is verbally (if you can stand me talking for that long). Another way I could would be by some lengthy post on Facebook (you might read half of it). Maybe I could even tell you a story by sending out tweets of things I found amusing throughout my day (which probably would only be funny to me), or even by posting pictures to my Snapchat story (but who wants to click through all of those?). However, you might only find yourself interested in what I am talking about if it is a good story. The idea of telling a story across multiple platforms is called transmedia storytelling. By sharing what is going on in my life, in essence, you are experiencing my story through my personal social media outlets.

Now that I think about it, I realize that I have come in contact with the activity system of transmedia storytelling many times without even knowing it. The reason I became suddenly aware of this new way of storytelling is because of a video series I have watched: *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. This multi-platform modern adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that started

in 2012, focuses around the year-long fictional vlog (a blog of video content) of Lizzie Bennet, a 24-year-old grad student with mountains of student loans who still lives at home with her parents and two sisters (Jane and Lydia). This story can be experienced and interacted with in a variety of ways—through the video diaries on YouTube, on Twitter by tweeting the characters, and, if you make a cool enough Tumblr blog, their official Tumblr might even follow you. It is one activity in the system to watch the series on YouTube, but the many other activities include commenting on the videos, interacting with characters on Twitter, or even researching how to create your own fan-based blog about the series.

This series was introduced to me by one of my lovely best friends, who also has a deep love for *Pride and Prejudice* (it's my favorite book), and I have since watched the 100-episode main story, grand totaling around 9 hours, twice (which doesn't include the other videos like Q & A, Lydia's personal videos, the Collins & Collins videos, Gigi Darcy's videos, etc.). I first read the charming, and ever so romantic tale of *Pride and Prejudice* my freshman year of high school and have grown to love it even more since. I've watched the movie adaptation at least a hundred times and I've always fancied the idea of finding a Mr. Darcy. But, before I go all fangirl over the web series (and trust me I will), you might be wondering about the way that transmedia storytelling works, and as someone who has done extensive research about the topic, there are many interesting surprises to be found.

Green Bean Gelatin?

Whenever presented with a new genre, or anything new for that matter, the best thing one can do is research. Since I had no idea what transmedia



Figure 1: From Episode 19: "The Green Bean Gelatin Plan."

storytelling entailed, or what it even stood for, I did what any other basic human being with access to the internet does . . . asked Google. Google gave me a basic definition: "Transmedia storytelling is the technique of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies" (Transmedia Storytelling). That seemed to make enough sense to me. I mean I'm not overly tech savvy, but I can work a computer on a good day. But, for me, this was not enough information to totally grasp the whole concept of transmedia's content, form, and why it works the way it does. Sometimes it is difficult to sift through to

find the “good information,” like how Lizzie worked her way around the green beans to get to the important “gelatin” (see Figure 1). That is why I decided to look up articles about transmedia storytelling, how it functions, and how it is made.

When trying to understand something new, I personally like to know a bit of history behind the idea to gain insight on how it has formed over time. Although transmedia storytelling might seem like a new practice in this digital age, the idea of it goes back as far as the eighteenth century. One of the first articles I read talked about the story of a fictional girl named Pamela. In 1740, Samuel Richardson published *Pamela*, one of England’s first best-selling novels. Richardson initially circulated his book manuscript around a small group of female friends who gave him feedback, after which he made corrections based upon. The story of *Pamela* is about a 15-year-old maid servant who ends up marrying her aristocratic master. At the time the novel was written, the story seemed as if it could be “plausible” and it was based on the idea of the highly sought after “good life” that many people desired. What made *Pamela* effective, like with many transmedia stories, is that there was a blurred line between what was nonfiction and fiction.

But, what happens when you move from a written text to other representations of the story, and how does that change the perception of a story? People loved the story of *Pamela* so much that there were group readings, people sold *Pamela* merchandise (such as paintings, fans, prints, playing cards, waxworks), and preachers even preached about the book at the pulpit (Prior). Ask yourself this, why do you buy merchandise of your favorite television shows? Maybe because it shows that you support the story they are telling and want to share that with others. The reason Pamela’s story was so compelling was due to the way that people immersed themselves in the story and made a connection with it. They believed in the story as if it could be real life—their own life even. Actively involving readers like this in a story is what is going to make it the most successful.

I Have Done the Research!

In this day and age, storytelling through transmedia might be even more effective. Since we are now living in a very technologically adapted world, this type of learning about a story through multiple forms of media should be well accepted. To try and understand a transmedia story, you need to look at the key conventions that go into making one. In an article by Anders Gronstedt, he explained that, “Effective storytelling requires a powerful plot line with realistic and relatable characters faced with adversity that go through a journey

of transformation” (Gronstedt). He also says that you have to make a world that is so appealing to people that they become entrapped within it. It cannot be extremely linear, but it must be intricate, which allows for exploration of different plot lines within the story. It has to allow for the people who watch it not to be simply users, but to be part of the creative process. It has to be able to be experienced individually on its respective platforms, but then they all have to work together as a collaborative experience. And, the main platform has to be able to channel all the important details on its own, so that a viewer can get the majority of the experience from it. In other words, not using the supplementary platforms will not make you miss crucial story points, rather they are just there to elaborate further upon them (Gronstedt). When reading a book, you are only aware of the conversations that the author gives you and not the exact dialogue from the implied ones. So, when looking at *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Lizzie’s story is told through the YouTube videos, but additionally, there are supplemental interactions between characters on social media platforms like Twitter. Think of it as an added bonus of private, made-up conversations that are either not directly from the original story or expand on implied conversations.

The tools and practices needed to make this type of **production** are things like the cast and crew as well as the use of social media interaction. It does not always require an excessive budget for casting, props, set, and technical equipment, but when transmedia stories are made, they do require different media outlets like YouTube, Twitter, or Tumblr. If you are using YouTube, this might require a set, cast, script, and camera at least, and Twitter and Tumblr would require content for the posts that would be made. With a site such as YouTube, almost anyone can make videos for themselves on any budget, even if it is just you running around with your camera phone. (Admit it, everyone has once attempted a do-it-yourself video and failed—or maybe that’s just me, at least for the failing part). Most of the props in this series the cast or crew made or owned, same goes for the outfits that they wore. For *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, they had actual casting auditions for the characters and they cast who they needed chronologically. For example, Darcy, who doesn’t come into the videos until episode 59, wasn’t cast in the series until after almost half of the episodes had been filmed. The reason they didn’t cast everyone beforehand is because they were not sure if the series would even take off, but to their surprise, the number of viewers and fans kept (and still are) growing. To be filmed as a higher quality production, it required all the components most video productions would need: actors, wardrobe and makeup stylists, writers, sound people, camera people, video editors, producers, and directors. It took on an effect that was almost like a TV show, which is something we are accustomed to today. While some episodes were being filmed, others were being written, edited, or rehearsed. And even

though it was being professionally done, they had to find a way to edit the videos to still give it that do-it-yourself look to make it plausible and relatable to the life of an average girl filming a video of her own life (thestylishvids). The **activity** of making a transmedia story also plays into the production. The writer has to take a story and remake it to fit into the specific conventions of each platform. They have to first research their story and see how they can make it relevant and applicable to the social media outlets they use.

How the story is able to stretch across multiple media outlets is what makes it truly unique and what makes it transmedia. Not only is the *Lizzie Bennet* series on YouTube, but you can interact with the characters as well through Twitter (like the character tweets seen in Figure 2), Tumblr edits (Figures 3 & 4), and Facebook posts. Figure 2 is an example of my earlier discussion of how implied conversations are elaborated on and shows how Twitter is being used for the supplemental content. Tumblr also falls into the



Figure 2: Tweets between the characters Lizzie and Charlotte.

supplemental outlet category and since I am an occasional user of Tumblr, I decided to go to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* official blog to see what is still going on. I found reblogs and other reposted content of tweets from people that couldn't believe that the show had ended three years ago (March 29th, 2012), fan-made art of the characters, and photo sets from different episodes. Once people have received this bonus content, then that reception allows for them to do with it as they so choose. **Reception** is about how people reuse a certain text and with *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* the audience can interact with this type of visual information by talking about it, giving feedback, or by sharing it with other people. In my research, I found that there were also

people, and the blog itself, still reblogging pictures of the cast, screenshots from episodes they loved, gifs, and people still making fan art, and writing fan fictions (I may have spent a good hour scrolling through).

In essence, the story and the reactions are being used over and over again. The writers know how and when the audience is supposed to react to something, so they make sure that the video or post is in the proper context to achieve the desired reaction. This goes back to the idea of a blurred line between fiction and nonfiction and heavily plays on the **socialization** aspect of transmedia—people engaging with the story and being somewhat of a co-author is what makes it most successful. If they don't interact, then the story dies. In this case, people are still talking about how this story has impacted their lives. And the wonderful thing is, they can continue to do this through the form of available platforms, and by doing so they can keep the story alive.

The Internet Is Forever

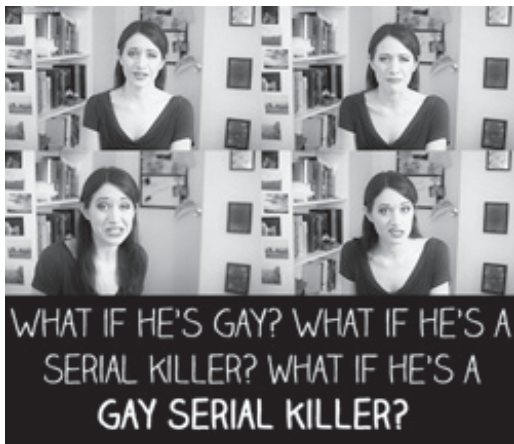


Figure 3: Edit from Tumblr.

What made the *Lizzie Bennet* series so successful, and what made the fan base grow, was the story they were telling and how they were telling it. The fact that the creators, writers, and producers took this beloved story, broke it up, re-wrote it, and adapted it for a modern audience is incredible. They had to live up to and meet the expectations people would have of these iconic characters. It was an experiment into how to tell a story with the possibility that it could go horribly wrong. This also makes me wonder, when the story changes from

text to visual representation, does that change it entirely to make it a whole new story altogether? In some ways, it is a new story, but it still holds on to the roots that allowed it to grow. As someone who has read *Pride and Prejudice*, the language and Austen's writing are not the easiest things to comprehend, since most of us were not around in the nineteenth century (at least I hope). To have proper **representation**, the writers and producers had to decide that this was the way they wanted to tell a story. They crafted their stories in ways that appealed to the audience. It had to be able to capture their attention and keep it, while also incorporating the audience. The predisposition many people have about *Pride and Prejudice*, is that it is just a love story, which is not technically wrong. The great thing about *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is that it is

not solely focused on that part of the story. The series dives into aspects of Lizzie Bennet’s life that would apply more today than just finding love and financial stability through marriage. The episodes start with an overview of her life and the people who are currently in it, like her best friend Charlotte and her two sisters, Lydia and Jane. Love is not ruled out entirely, it just gradually comes as she is figuring out the rest of her life. What matters most is the connection that a viewer can make to the show. For example, maybe your major is Mass Media like Lizzie’s, or you have an annoying younger sister, and of course, there is always relationship drama. The lives of the characters had to be relatable to trials and adventures and the jokes we are accustomed to today, like the important boy questions Lizzie asks in the Tumblr edit in Figure 3 and the unexpected trials of life in Figure 4. According to Zerne, “The massive popularity of the YouTube series suggests that many viewers find this story to be plausible; they accept that women should gain success in both career and love.” In much of Zerne’s article, she talks about how plausibility plays a significant role in whether or not a story is accepted and how that is a factor the show had to work with.

The **ecology** (which refers to the environmental factors and forces that affect a text) of a transmedia story determines if the story is accepted by viewers depending on if it is set somewhere they can relate to or somewhere they deem plausible. Because of the time period and social culture *this* story takes place in, rather than the original setting of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is easier for viewers to position themselves in the environment. One major question that is tackled by all the characters in the show is whether a woman’s success and happiness depends on financial security, stable relationships, or both. The series suggests that a combination of both is what we should work to achieve, whereas the original book says love should lead to financial stability. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* puts positive development of one’s career before relationships. It challenges the role put on women of performing a successful balancing act between their career and personal relationships. The new context of the series is appealing to the modern-day person.

Overall, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* storyline focuses on finding the career that is best for you, and then finding someone who supports you in it (Zerne). It suggests



Figure 4: Edit from Tumblr.

that even with all the conflict, you can still achieve the happiness you are looking for. All of the situations that Lizzie and her sisters go through the audience can connect to and they serve as almost modern-day role models for young women of this generation. Hopefully, it is a story that we will be able to experience again and again and look back on for advice thanks to our forever internet.

Convoluting Plans

So, in a way, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is a new story. It may have the same characters and concepts from the original story, but it has been fashioned in a way that is totally new. Most of the **distribution** of transmedia is done online, therefore it has the potential to reach all types of audiences imaginable. The content of the story is put on a media platform and then it can be accessed by the general public. Interaction allows them to distribute the story even farther. Even though you can watch the videos for free on YouTube, and you can make free accounts



Figure 5: My laptop sticker from Redbubble.

on Twitter and Tumblr to interact with it, these are not the only way that the story can be viewed. You can buy the entire series on IMDb, iTunes, Amazon, Google Play, or on DVD from the DFTBA (Don't Forget to Be Awesome) website owned by John and Hank Green. Also on the DFTBA website there is other fan merchandise you can buy like mugs, posters, buttons, and even a printed copy of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries Pride and Prejudice* book adaptation. Or if you are like me, you can buy stickers for your laptop from Redbubble (see Figure 5). There have also been two other books written to go along with the web series: *The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet* (by Bernie Su and Kate Rorick) and *The Epic Adventures of Lydia Bennet*. These bonus content books give greater details and different interactions with other characters in the series who might have been seen onscreen, like

Charlotte, or had just been referenced to, like Lizzie's father. These things bring up the question of whether or not transmedia is a type of branding because of its underlying or convoluted purpose. In the article "Transmedia Storytelling in Higher Ed," by Gregory Cohen, he explains that:

Whereas a brand strategy hopes to leave an impression and provoke action, transmedia storytelling recruits the audience as co-authors of the brand narrative, without knowing for certain where it will lead . . . in transmedia terms this means building brand 'worlds' or mythologies that tie every communication and experience back to a brand's underpinning values, offering up a different part of the world or story in the different places it populates (Cohen).

The series may have first started off as just a story, but it has since developed into its own brand. And since it is transmedia, it has the ability to market across its platforms to different consumers by including them in the story. What Cohen tries to explain is that the audience helps direct and distribute what type of brand they want. Transmedia is an extremely effective way of getting across the message and has recently been used not by just *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, but by more marketers and companies for product sales.

I Regret Nothing!

In Jane Austen's opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice* she says, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a person in possession of the internet and social media, must be in want of communication!" Well, maybe she did not say that specifically, or really at all, but I believe she would agree that excellent communication helps a story thrive. All the ideas of transmedia storytelling rely on whether or not a story can be effectively communicated through its conventions. Not only does transmedia storytelling have its own conventions, the story it is telling also has to be flexible enough to follow the conventions of the various media platforms that it uses.

Thinking of transmedia in terms of CHAT really helps to shed light on the great amount of effort it takes to produce such a work. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is an excellent example of successful transmedia storytelling, it won a Primetime Emmy for outstanding creative achievement in interactive media for Pete's sake! (Outstanding!) It's also a great learning opportunity if you have ever been daunted by the idea of reading *Pride and Prejudice*. Think of it as an explanation of the book in language and form that we can understand and then can apply to the actual understanding of the original text. It also makes for a great lonely weekend of sitting in your bed all day with your computer, in pajamas, surrounded by popcorn and candy wrappers (not that I've done that). Or a great excuse to spend excessive amounts of time on social media instead of fulfilling your responsibilities (not that I've done that either . . . I'm just trying to learn, okay?). Being able to analyze all the aspects that this genre can offer by looking at its conventions and characteristics has helped me to develop a deeper appreciation for the good social media can be used for (but still not my boring Snapchat story, you can't win everything!).

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