Dr Matthew Freeman is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication based in the College of Liberal Arts at Bath Spa University in the UK, where he is also a Director of the Media Convergence Research Centre. His research concentrates on cultures of production across the borders of media and history, writing extensively on the industrial history of transmedia storytelling. He has also published on such topics as media branding, convergence cultures, and methodological approaches to media industry studies. Matthew is the co-author (with Carlos A. Scolari and Paolo Bertetti) of *Transmedia Archaeology: Storytelling in the Borderlines of Science Fiction, Comics and Pulp Magazines* (Palgrave Pivot, 2014). This year his guidebook on teaching and researching media industries *Industrial Approaches to Media: A Methodological Gateway to Industry Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan) was published, as was his monograph *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling: Early Twentieth-Century Transmedia Story Worlds* (Routledge). At the end of April he lectured on these topics at the Department of Film and Audiovisual Culture at Masaryk University in Brno.

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Šárka Gmíterková (ŠG): Historical takes on transmedia is your main input to the field of film studies. One of your key contributions to our knowledge is the claim that during World War II certain government policies and propaganda were intensified with the aid of transmedia strategies. Contrary to the past, transmedia currently seem to shift more towards narration, advertising and commercial sphere. Would you agree with such a view or are transmedia strategies still socially aware and/or tied to certain political strategies?

MF: Let’s say there are certain phases throughout time where transmedia has been more commercial than in others. There are always examples where it is not so much a commercial practice, but a more political or social one. For example in the UK you can look at Red Nose Day, a charity campaign raising money for children and Africa. It uses media in order to motivate people to donate money and in recent years they started to utilize transmedia storytelling. Not in a fictional sense, but either social media, digital plat-
forms or more commercial offsprings such as the book or the annual have the same objective. The organizers want to persuade, inform and educate the crowd; in short to raise people’s awareness on the issue and to donate their money to these causes. This is where transmedia is really useful, because it spreads the message far wider than just through television on Saturday night. It reinforces that message through repeating it on various media platforms. It makes it harder for audiences to ignore it, because it is pervading their lives through social media such as Facebook. These strategies also have a stronger political or social impact, which in this particular case means donating money to a charity. The degree of these impacts varies depending on the country or the objective, but in my opinion there is always enough non-commercial examples that sit alongside more commercial instances.

Ondřej Pavlík (OP): Can we really talk about storytelling when there is no fiction?

MF: That is a very good question. I think this is one of the reasons why transmedia is increasingly used as an adjective rather than as a noun — transmedia something. Actually, because of the non-fiction, political and social side of the phenomenon we are increasingly dealing with transmedia branding; the concept even documentary filmmakers are using when talking about their projects. It is the same common ground as fictional storytelling but in a more general sense — spreading the message, meaning or an image across various media platforms. Typically, with non-fiction examples, it is more about expanding themes across platforms, rather than characters or plots.

ŠG: As I mentioned in my first question, you historicized the topic. According to your research, transmedia storytelling emerged in three phases. First there was industrialization, then came licensing and standardization and finally governmental cultural policies. However, these stages are based on the case of American cinema. Can such a widened perspective be applied not only horizontally in terms of going backwards but vertically as well? Do local specifics exist outside blockbusters and global contexts and can small cultural industries go their own way?

MF: That is exactly what I am hoping to achieve next, because I don’t think my conclusions are globally applicable. What I realized is that when you look at transmedia from the present perspective compared to the past and even if it is in the same country, it is totally different. For example the governmental aspects emerged only throughout Word War II and it cannot be possibly employed today. In my opinion it is more useful to think about context specificity — different things at different moments in different cultures for various different reasons seem to inform transmediality. Therefore it would be very dangerous to say that all of these ideas that I’ve said work in America can be used to explain transmedia in other countries. It is much more accurate to start again, to look at the country, its cultures, industries, society and types of media that is made to understand — is transmedia happening in here? And if so, what are the different mechanisms that might be informing it? A perfect example would be Colombia, where I’ve started researching this area. Colombians very passionately reject the idea that transmedia is commercial. They actively oppose this concept that it is about Hollywood, that it is about blockbusters and making money. In their opinion transmedia is a fantastic social tool, a way to unite dispersed Co-
OP: The case of Colombia triggers my next question. Netflix released a widely successful show Narcos last year, which deals with war on drugs in 1980s and employs crucial Colombian public figures and groups — Pablo Escobar, Luis Carlos Galán, the Medellín cartel... One of the strategies this company used for promoting the show was transmedia — for example a website called “Cocainomics” featuring videos from Medellín about culture and people being transformed by this violent period. Netflix is a global television based in USA; this kind of initiative exemplified by the website is primarily a form of advertisement yet at the same time spreading awareness about drug business. Do you think that the Colombian take on transmedia can spread and influence American or global perspective on the phenomenon?

MF: There are two sides to this. On the one hand, what we are really talking about here is Americanization, which is far bigger than transmedia. Netflix is a global media platform, using influential practices successful in America and effective in the UK. We may trace connections between Colombian television programs and these strategies. But on the other hand, the idea of localization also seems to be important. Maybe Colombian culture is adopting some of the dominant strategies, but that doesn't mean applying them in the same way. This is a different context, targeting a distinct audience, even though globally falling under Netflix. You said it — it raises awareness in a way that a blockbuster would not be interested in doing. If Netflix is successful in drawing attention to a particular problem worldwide, other countries start to hear about these issues and policies. Certain strategies might then migrate across the Netflix platform into more local context. Again, it is more likely that they would be localized in order to enlighten the crowd about something important in other particular countries — and the process is not going to be the same. So I think there is always going to be a certain degree of negotiation between this grand idea of transmedia and its grand strategies and then contrasting, more localized ways that might actually manifest.

ŠG: At Bath Spa University you lecture primarily on media and communications, but you are also the Director of Media Convergence Research Center. One of your currently developed projects is the Transmedia Earth Conference, in which you investigate the workings of transmedia within and across national production cultures around the world. The case of Colombia and its different approach towards transmedia seems to be crucial here. Are there hints of any other local specificities appearing in the research so far — for example underestimating online platforms in favor of more traditional media or unusual content delivered in transmedia fashion such as documentaries or art cinema production?

MF: Admittedly, Transmedia Earth is a strand of research that is very much in its infancy for me. We are planning an annual conference and a forthcoming edited collection
based on globalizing the study of transmedia, but already discussions with participants and contributors are highlighting plenty of local examples of transmedia. For example, work by Carlos Scolari, Mar Guerrero-Pico and María-Josefa Establés-Heras points to the limitations of transmedia in the current climate of Spanish media production, mainly due to crowdfunding. Melanie Bourdaa argues that transmedia occupies a role of cultural heritage in France, while Indrek Ibrus and Maarja Ojamaa consider the dual role of transmedia in Estonia as both a mechanism for supporting cultural heterogeneity and for enforcing coherence and stability in culture via maintaining the relevance of historical media texts. Perhaps most interestingly, Marie-Eve Carignan is doing research that analyses the media coverage of terrorist attacks in Canada to show the role of transmedia in the radicalisation of that country. Documentary unites each of these examples, partly because as a form it is not specific to one particular media and can exist across film, television, the Web, and so on.

ŠG: You concluded your research in the 1960s. Your endpoint corresponds with closing down of the first phase of the transmedia development. In the 1980s this phenomenon resurfaced again. Is there any explanation for this gap of twenty years, other than breaking down and then re-establishing of the studio system?

MF: The falling down of the studio era did have an impact in a way. It is not a coincidence that the emergence occurred in the era of industrialization and then again in the 1980s — the era of media conglomerates. However, in those two decades between 1960s and 1980s transmedia was still happening though not so visibly. It seemed to have been very much driven by licensing and the ability to merchandise toys around particular products. But you should also remember that 1970s is the New Hollywood era in America. Film budgets decreased and movies became more adult oriented; the rise of directors like Martin Scorsese and independent filmmakers such as George Lucas resulted in the ethos of artistry, supported by more mature and sophisticated titles. Such an attitude toward filmmaking did not warrant sequels or merchandise, precisely because of content, subject matter or targeted audience. All of these facets opposed the idea of transmedia, which does have, in a very general sense, a commercial, mass market objective at its heart. It just didn’t seem to fit with the culture in the 1970s — and that is the main reason behind its decline in these two decades.

ŠG: You have just mentioned that transmedia perspective invites concepts pertaining to consumer culture, exemplified by blockbusters, technology and media convergence. Are there any areas in transmedia research, which should be addressed by further academic inquiry — for example performance, the importance of the look of the products, formal strategies of the movies in question or a more nuanced take on the audience response?

MF: Two areas immediately spring to my mind. The first has to do with different media. When talking about transmedia, especially about media and convergence (and I am guilty as well) there can be a tendency for assuming that all of them are somehow the same. All is just ‘content’ and media are ‘platforms’, where parts of the story can be told. And I think the danger of this approach is that we have stopped talking about what these transmedia platforms actually do and how they differ from one another. When dealing
with film, obvious points enter the frame — it is a visual, spectatorial and quite passive medium. Gaming on the other hand, still being a visual platform, is quite participatory, because we are actively playing as the characters instead of just merely watching them. Instead of relying on these basic assumptions we should analyze various media platforms in terms of transmedia storytelling, why are certain platforms used and what it allows regarding characters, stories, worlds and themes being told, constructed and articulated. Even though this is an era of convergence, media always have been, are and will be diverse. Remembering and analyzing these differences can be very important.

The second area is partly concerned with performance. Thinking about stardom, celebrities and actors have always been transmedia related, because no famous person ever exists on one platform. So thinking about them in terms of storytelling might be a good challenge — how do popular faces move across platforms and how do audiences understand this flow? How is it not confusing, that you see an actor in a film and then in a very different context on social media? How do we know that there is some connection, whether it is on a fictional level or not? In my opinion those two things have been neglected — remembering the specificities of different media and also thinking about actors, performance and the way that people actually always move around platforms.

ŠG: In one of your lectures here in Brno you wondered whether it is still necessary to keep the divisions between various areas of media research — are we film scholars, media scholars, researchers on television? Isn’t your call for our attention towards media specificity a bit conflicting to those statements? And how do you consider yourself, are you media theorist, film historian or cultural studies lecturer?

MF: I am aware of sounding contradictory. Partly I do believe that having distinct subject areas opposes the whole idea of digital media, which doesn't care about media specificity. We consume everything through the same screen and in the same way. So you could argue that because of complex technology it is difficult to justify having very clear boundaries; audiences don’t consider these issues as a problem in a way that academics have always done. However, I do agree that in order to understand any transmedia, you have to know the differences in terms of various media, contexts and / or eras. One possible solution is to perceive digital media as a subject area, which has distinct pathways, modules and fields of study and we can discover the connections within.

As for myself — I started as a film student, then I slowly grew into film and television and eventually I lectured on media and communications and cultural studies as well. As a student I have had a very broad focus in terms of what I’ve learnt. Maybe here lies the reason why I am so drawn to the idea of transmedia, because I always had to study diverse things and look outside of particular subjects. That is very useful because then you can see the connections you would otherwise miss. Educated in film studies, I understand its value and its areas of inquiry, which I can contextualize through cultural studies. I consider myself as just media now, simply because it is such a broad concept, allowing me to move into multiple areas. My object of study is film, television, but also marketing and advertising, combining business issues with cultural studies approach. For me these fields are not necessarily opposing, but rather enhancing one another.
ŠG: Another take on transmedia sees behind its pervasiveness and visibility a very simple reason — it works. With the industry, audiences and also academia fondly embracing the phenomenon, one must wonder, if there are any risks to transmedia storytelling. Can it go wrong and if so, how?

MF: Yes, it can and it does. There are examples when audiences actively rebel against the idea of transmedia. Especially film fans tend to see their favorite movies as a masterpiece, and as such it shouldn’t be touched, developed or continued in any new way. In certain cases audiences say — no, we don’t want to see any expansions, we want to stop the story at the end of the film. A sense of fatigue might emerge when fans have to keep up with too many different stories. Such participation can also be very expensive; plus it can get quite confusing when transmedia storytelling is not produced in a clear way — for example when it is not immediately apparent what the game might contribute to the overall narrative. If this fails, fans just think of it as a money grabbing enterprise. Especially in the 1990s, it was very common to have spin off video games just accompanying the released title. Such strategy can have an opposite effect, because it can anger audiences rather than encourage them to move across media. It is crucial to know where and when to stop with additional stories, even though behind partial narratives a much bigger idea is waiting to be told. Keeping a balance between increasing demands on fans and telling yet another story is very important.

OP: Going into the future, do you see any tendencies, technologies or strategies in media industries enabling smoother movement of content and consumers across platforms?

MF: One thing I’ve noticed seems to be happening with DVDs and BluRays. When you are watching a particular film, halfway through a small icon will pop up in the corner of the screen. You can click on the picture and it will allow you to follow another story through what is seen as different media. Take Inception for example. When you are watching this film on BluRay, at crucial points of the story you can click on the interactive comic book and follow the prequel narrative. I think, these kinds of examples are ironic, because audiences aren’t moving anywhere at all. If this strategy succeeds, we will buy just one product, in this case DVD, and we will get the film and the comic book, maybe also a web series, a game, or a link to the web… Such packaging opposes Henry Jenkins’ idea about migratory audiences, moving from the cinema through the game shop into the digital platform. Having everything on a single product is surely convenient and might be the main reason for such strategy. Although we cannot talk about it as the next big thing in transmedia yet, there goes another case indicating further blurring of the media together.

OP: It seems that video games are becoming more cinematic, so why movies wouldn’t be more interactive — at least on BluRays. Do you think films and games are getting so close that they can be on the verge of merging together? In some aspects, at least — through cinematic quality of the video games and heightened interactivity of the movies?

MF: To some extent this is unavoidable. As soon as something becomes digital or digitized, the sense of participation seems to increase. Clicking on something or adding comments is so simple. If you believe the academics, the reason for this is audience demand. I am not sure about the amount of research such claims are based on, but for example
Henry Jenkins says audiences don’t want to be passive. Participation is what they want; being engaged, having a role to play, being able, to some extent, to shape the narrative or at least being given the choice as how to consume it and what part of the narrative to consume at what point. To me, here lies the connection — the digitization is a way to bring more participation, a huge attraction for audiences.