Transmedia storytelling and museums

SAIC WORKSHOP

APRIL 24, 2017
In the beginning was storytelling...

We are all “storytelling animals” and are, as a species, addicted to stories: story touches nearly every aspect of our lives.

We tell stories to others (social and communicational functions) and to ourselves (psychological function).

Storytelling is mother of media: we create and craft media in order to tell stories. In return, media influence and condition how these stories are told.

The evolution of media can be seen as a way to perfect storytelling techniques.

In many ways, museum exhibits can be seen as media to tell particular stories: stories about the past, about the things we care for and want to pass on.
The “Storytelling revival”

From the art of telling stories to the art of selling stories: the “storytelling revival” of the 1990s sees the adoption of storytelling techniques by different people and industries with different means and purposes.

In a harsh competition for consumers, companies began searching for ways to differentiate themselves through narratives rather than objective criteria.

Marketers and business executives embedded their products in narratives that had often little to do with the products themselves: tales of innovation, of change, of creativity, of empowerment.

More and more, marketers explored sophisticated storytelling techniques as a way to avoid competition based on products.

Still, many different kinds of storytelling coexist in our media landscape.
Storytelling in the age of media convergence

Cultural industries (edition, press, radio, television, cinema, video games, etc.) are at the crossroads of storytelling and marketing due to their histories and evolutions.

At the end of the 1990s, these industries began to merge to form media conglomerates: Time Warner (HBO, Warner Bros, CNN, TNT, Cartoon Network, etc.), Comcast (NBC Universal, DreamWorks, Xfinity, etc.) or the Walt Disney Company (ABC, Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm, etc.).

This new synergistic and marketing approach influenced how storytelling was used by these new mastodons: create narratives that take advantage of this concentration of media industries.
Transmedia storytelling was first defined in 2003 by Pr. Henry Jenkins from MIT.

To define what is transmedia storytelling, Jenkins took the example of *The Matrix* (1999-2005).

The Matrix is a complex storyworld that spans across multiple media and industries:
- 3 video games: *Enter the Matrix* (May 2003), *Path of Neo* and *The Matrix Online* (2005)
- 3 series of comics (web and print) released between 1999 and 2003

The Matrix storyworld offers many different points of entry (“rabbit holes”) into the fictional world.
Transmedia storytelling

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media with each text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.

Example: In the first Animatrix animated short film (The Flight of the Osiris), the viewers see a member of the Osiris’ crew posting a high importance letter attended to Neo. In the video game (Enter the Matrix), the player’s first mission is to retrieve that letter at the post office and give it to Neo. In the first scene of The Matrix Reloaded, Neo is given a letter by the same character as the video game who says that it came from the Osiris.

For the people watching the movie without knowing that the animated shorts and the video game even existed, hearing Neo talking about the Osiris is just a detail. But for the hardcore fans, they know who the Osiris crew members are and they are the ones who helped bring the letter to Neo.

That is the animated shorts’ and video game’s distinctive and valuable contributions to the Matrix storyworld as a whole.
Transmedia storytelling

Transmedia is the art of world building. The narrative storytellers create is so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium (movie, video game, television series, book, etc.)

For transmedia designers, consumers are like hunters and gatherers chasing fragments of the story across multiple media, making transmedia stories quite demanding on their consumers.

Any given product or media becomes an entry point (“rabbit hole”) into the storyworld and offers new levels of insight and experience.

Transmedia stories provide gaps and openings for the many different communities to interact and participate: fans can contribute (and are asked to do so) to the storyworld.

To recognize at a glance that the texts belong to the same storyworld, transmedia storytellers and designers create recurring motifs.
How is transmedia storytelling relevant for museums?

In a lot of ways, transmedia designers and exhibition designers have a lot in common

◦ They master the art of world building
◦ They attract different kinds of people and communities by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media
◦ They offer different points of entry into the storyworld and ask their consumers/visitors to track down and explore fragments of content across multiple media
◦ They see each medium as a way to offer new levels of insight and experience
◦ They create recurring motifs from one medium to the other so that their consumers/visitors recognize at a glance that the content belong to the same storyworld
◦ They see engagement and loyalty as new economic imperatives
Van Gogh’s Bedrooms

Art Institute of Chicago: Feb 14, 2016 to May 10, 2016

3 paintings of Van Gogh’s bedroom in his beloved “yellow house” in Arles (France)

The first version of the painting is in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. The second, at the Art Institute of Chicago. The third, at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris.

Between 1888 and 1889, Van Gogh lived in a bedroom that he rented in a house in Arles. He painted a first version of his room and, after a flood that damaged the first version, painted another one. He painted a third version for his mother and sister as a gift the same year.

The exhibition displayed the three paintings as well as thirty other paintings that explore the notion of home in Van Gogh’s very nomadic life.

In the exhibition space, there is also an immersive reproduction of the bedroom and a touch table to explore the scientific work behind the scenes.

The AIC also developed a dedicated web site and partnered with Airbnb as well as with Michigan Avenue Magazine to recreate Van Gogh’s room.
Dear Vincent:

I wrote to you previously with a broken heart. And while I'm still working through some issues, I took your advice and decided to get back out in the field. I joined Tinder and had a very promising first date last night. I will keep you posted on what happens...

Signed,
Not Quite as Despondent.

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Dear Not Quite as Despondent:

It's gratifying, isn't it, when there's a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel. (March 3, 1883)
THIS CHAIR KNEW HIS SECRETS.

AMSTERDAM

CHICAGO

PARIS

THE FLOOR

AMSTERDAM

CHICAGO

PARIS

THIS BED IS TRYING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING.

AMSTERDAM

CHICAGO

PARIS

THE PORTRAITS

AMSTERDAM

CHICAGO

PARIS

THIS WINDOW SAW THE TRUTH.

AMSTERDAM

CHICAGO

PARIS
Van Gogh’s Bedrooms

The AIC provided its different publics with multiple entry points in the story of Van Gogh’s bedrooms: printed catalogue, social networks, partnership with Airbnb and Michigan Avenue Magazine, web site, signage, etc.

The paintings and the key hole play the roles of recurring motifs so that the visitors (both actual and potential) recognize at a glance the exhibition’s storyworld

Inside and outside of the museum space, visitors are encouraged to track down content spread across multiple media: the whole is worth more than the sum of the parts

The museum uses contextualizing tools, typical of transmedia stories: timelines, family trees, maps, etc.

Like many transmedia stories, the exhibition plays with a sense of mystery, enigma and secret that surround the three paintings and that tormented period of Van Gogh’s life

The AIC tried to immerse visitors as deeply as possible in the atmosphere of the paintings
What can cultural industries and museums learn from each other?