HOW TO RIDE A LION
A Call for a Higher Transmedia Criticism

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Executive Summary

As we move past the "Transmedia 101" stage of definitions and early experiments, the next stage of development for transmedia experiences is the creation of transmedia criticism.

Such a move is not without its challenges. Some troubles facing this evolution include how transmedia criticism is inherently difficult (Should transmedia criticism only focus on transmedia's unique characteristics? Should it evaluate how well each individual component performs as an example of its medium? Must a transmedia critic be ‘fluent’ in every medium in a franchise?), and how unleashing a horde of vicious critics on a medium still in its infancy could be horrifically damaging. Finally, there’s the question of where such criticism might ideally begin, as such criticism is likely to evolve in three distinct directions - first in an industry-educating role like that of E.W. Sargent in the early days of cinema, second in an "educate the public sphere" role like that of early literary criticism in 18th-century England, and third in the lonelier role of isolated education to which literary criticism eventually found itself exiled.

Despite these issues, the development of a robust system of transmedia criticism will be well worth the difficulty. As the future of entertainment becomes increasingly dominated by transmedia experiences, the entertainment industry will require both more informed practitioners (who will need both insights into leading transmedia experiences and a shared language of transmedia akin to the language of cinema) and a broader audience for transmedia as a medium (who will ways to find out about new transmedia experiences and to determine which such experiences are worth their time). All of these breakthroughs can be attained through a robust transmedia criticism.
1. Introduction

Good.

I've been thinking a lot lately about this one weird word. ‘Good’ is a horrible word, really, because it's not only wholly subjective, it's also inherently subjective, fleeting, and hyperlocalized. What I think is good might be garbage to you, what was good yesterday isn't good today or what's good today may be passé tomorrow, and what's good in Los Angeles may be worthless in Tokyo or even in the next building over.

Yet 'good' is also an intensely powerful word. Almost half a decade ago I wrote a white paper for the Convergence Culture Consortium (C3) in which I half-jokingly declared that Rule One for creating anything is "Don't Suck." The awkward truth at the heart of that joke is that in order for a work to succeed it must first be good. Which brings us back to the subjective, fleeting, hyperlocalized nature of 'good', and round and round we go.

And yet, as maddening as the pursuit of good can inherently be, this is where both transmedia production and transmedia studies must go next. The majority of the papers written and talks given about transmedia to date have focused on defining the terminology or recounting early experiments: "this is what we think transmedia is, and this is how we're tinkering with it". A lot of this is Transmedia 101, or, when we're lucky, Transmedia 201. What we need now is Transmedia 701, 801 and 901, to tell us how to create good transmedia experiences, how to succeed at transmedia as a medium in and of itself.

Measuring transmedia success objectively will require some form of transmedia metrics, to tell us which transmedia experiences are gathering audiences, retaining audience attention, converting new audiences in one medium into fans that pursue the experience into additional media, and so on. Alas, we’re not there yet. For now, we must satisfy ourselves with subjective forms of success, observing tactics adopted by various transmedia experiences and evaluating how well they appear to function in the
service of the whole. We can also attempt to evaluate how well a particular transmedia experience succeeds as a transmedia experience by setting a number of tightly-defined criteria for evaluation, and then determining how closely the subject under examination adheres to those criteria - but attempting to do so for any medium, much less one as early in its infancy as transmedia, may be a fool's errand. The edges of any medium (and, arguably, any definition) will always remain what Samuel R. Delaney calls a ‘fuzzy set’, and so a fixed definition of ‘transmedia’ will always be as elusive as a fixed definition of ‘film’ or ‘comics’.

This isn't to say that pushing and pulling at the boundaries of a definition isn't a worthwhile pursuit - such experimentation is what leads to the expansion of any enterprise, and often leads to the creation of wholly new types of things. Some folks will happily bicker for years over whether a truly transmedia experience has to have community involvement, whether all ARGs are transmedia experiences, if it's really transmedia if it's just a jump from a digital version of a comic to a print version of a comic, _ad infinitum_ and _ad nauseum_.

Yet there is now a sufficient number of us playing in this particular sandbox that we can move on to more advanced debates. We can stop pointing to examples of what transmedia storytelling is or is not, and start creating some in-depth, insightful criticism of what we consider to be good or bad examples of what we call transmedia, why we consider them to be so, and what they did that appears to have worked. In his _Cute Manifesto_, comics artist and theorist James Kochalka states:

> Art is not a way of conveying information, it's a way of _understanding_ information. That is, creating a work of art is a means we have of making sense of the world, focusing to make it clearer, not a way of

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1 For an example of what a nightmare this is, see the ongoing debate over Scott McCloud’s famous definition of ‘comics’.
2 We should let them do so. For many of them, tenure depends on it.
communicating some understanding of the world that we already hold.

(Kochalka 2005)

This is similar to the role that transmedia criticism can play in our understanding of this emerging medium. Kochalka's comment could easily be remixed into the following:

Transmedia criticism is not a way of conveying knowledge about transmedia, it's a way of understanding transmedia. That is, transmedia criticism is a means we have of making sense of this new medium, focusing to make it clearer, not a way of communicating some understanding of transmedia that we already hold.

Simply put, we don't yet know enough about transmedia to communicate firm, definitive truths about it that we already hold. However, this demonstrates the value of engaging in such analysis now, while general understanding of – and the creative practices in – transmedia is still relatively malleable. We should engage in earnest transmedia criticism now to gain a clearer focus, a better understanding, and ideally both a broader audience for transmedia and deeper, richer, more engaging, more profitable, and generally better transmedia experiences overall.

This explorative tactic is my chosen approach for this extended essay. The pages that follow include a few examples of what transmedia criticism already exists and draw on a history of criticism and examinations of criticism in other media (particularly comics and film) to lend them some context. By the end, this essay will have sketched out who's calling for such transmedia criticism, what role transmedia criticism might play and why it's important, where such criticism might be found, who might do it, and where might be a good place to start.

Some of us - especially those of us familiar with C3's work - are starting already, groping around in this dark direction. While I wouldn't call the recently-published doctoral theses of either Derek Johnson or Christy Dena transmedia criticism per se, both documents made me long to read what kind of criticism Johnson and Dena would write given the chance. Therein lies the problem - some of this work exists, but we need more of it – a lot more – and we need it quickly and broadly disseminated. This essay is designed as a resource for those of us already thinking about transmedia criticism, to help us step up and write that criticism and get it out there where it can start to do some real good.
At the end of the day, all of this Transmedia 101-level "This is what transmedia is, and this is how we're experimenting with it" panels and papers feel an awful lot like "There's this thing called a lion, and this is how we poked it with a stick." The challenge is to go further: not just "this is how to tame a lion" further, not just "this is how to ride a lion" further, but "this is how to ride a lion well". We have proven the existence of lions. There are plenty of people out there who are not only starting to ride lions, but are getting really good at riding lions. It's time we point out who's riding their lions through fire - and to tell the world why that's so awesome.
2. Who’s Calling for Transmedia Criticism?

I recently had a conversation with a high-ranking executive who was a transmedia skeptic. I was describing how important this notion of transmedia was becoming to the future of experiences, and eventually he cut me off with a wave of his hand. "If it's so important," he said, "why aren't I hearing people calling for it?"

The first response that sprang to mind was Henry Ford's famous quote about how if Ford had only listened to what people were asking for, he would have built a faster horse. My second, more measured candidate was that people are calling for it - but then I realized that these people calling for transmedia experiences are themselves already converts, and are in fact calling for more advanced transmedia experiences. The third response, the one I chose to voice (again, considering the executive's position of power) is that those people who are familiar with transmedia experiences are calling for more, and those who aren't just haven't been properly introduced to good transmedia experiences yet.

Not unsurprisingly, we're seeing the same thing in transmedia criticism. In a recap of the March 2010 Transmedia Hollywood event, journalist David Bloom wrote:

Fans are eating up all the cryptic, dystopian alternate-reality game experiences and spinoff comic books and book-length novelizations, participants said. But just as importantly, what once were just marketing-driven afterthoughts now often are aesthetic achievements that stand on their own. The only questions, and they're big ones, are deciding what counts as a success, based on what criteria, and judged by whom.

...One audience member tartly observed that, "Anything that is concerned with ROI (return on investment) isn’t art." Yes, he clearly hadn’t talked to a studio executive in a long time (despite saying he was in the middle of post-production on a science-fiction film). But his point went to a core question of the day, one panelists didn’t really answer: how do you evaluate a transmedia project’s success? Is it artistic/aesthetic? If so, is it judged on its own merits, or just on how it connects and fleshes out the connected “mothership” project, typically a
film or book? Should it be judged on financial terms, like a stand-alone book or movie or videogame? If it is financial, is that based only on what the project cost? Or do you have to figure out how to measure what it did for the mothership? How do you value a transmedia project that keeps fans engaged in a major franchise during the lulls between new mothership arrivals? What Hollywood suit is equipped to pencil this one out? And, in the wake of widespread layoffs by print publications of their film, music, TV and theater critics, who’s qualified to make any judgments on aesthetic or financial grounds (ahem, Variety, we’re looking at you, again)? If, as with some recent projects, it’s an elaborate creation that ties together multiple web sites, phone numbers, video material, documents, puzzles and more, who’s going to work through all that, and decide how it rates?³

Transmedia designer Brooke Thompson voiced similar concerns in a June 1, 2010 blog post called "A Criticism on the Lack of Criticism":

It strikes me that one of the biggest problems hindering the growth of transmedia (and all the various things that fall under it, such as ARGs) is the absolute lack of critical looks at projects. That’s not to say that criticism doesn’t exist – it does, but it’s scattered in conversations and hidden in forum posts or mailing lists. And it is, usually, not about a project as a whole and, instead, focuses on a single issue or is a broad look at the field.

Thompson is referring to the nascent form of transmedia criticism on the message boards of sites like Unfiction or ARGNet (both of which specialize in alternate reality games) and in the blog posts of individuals like Andrea Philips (another transmedia artist) and Christy Dena (a prominent transmedia scholar). More on their attempts to address this need appear in sections V and VI of this paper, but the main point is that calls for criticism are being issued by fans, practitioners and scholars.

Such calls for criticism have been issued in other media before. In fact, the subtitle of this extended essay pays homage to an article called "A Call for Higher Criticism" published in October of 1979 in *The Comics Journal* #50. In it, the author pleads:

First, let me make it clear that I'm not trying to promote a standard for "fan" criticism or "professional" efforts. I write this in the hope that I might make discoveries when I read criticism of comics art, and not merely read opinions of an issue, a story, or a creator. What criticism of our medium needs is a frame of reference, and a sustained level of introspection.

The author was a young comics writer and DC editorial staff member named Paul Levitz - who would go on to serve as the President of DC Comics from 2002 until 2009. Levitz was calling for a comics criticism that transcended mere reviews of individual stories and included more insightful examinations into the context in which those stories existed. As Levitz concludes his piece:

Many professional comics writers and artists, for whatever reasons, think no further about their work than the job they're currently finishing. Many others, of course, give deep and intense thought to the medium they use. Many critics of comics criticize issues or stories as the be-all and end-all. Few take the time to consider the bigger picture, and to make criticisms that can give both readers and professionals lasting insight into what they do. It's this lasting insight that is a critic's opportunity to make changes in a field - changes great enough to last beyond his lifetime.

... look back over the numberless thousands of comics you've read when next you criticize a single one. Consider the context, not as an excuse, but as explanation - or at least as the raw data of which an explanation can be made. Communicate your likes and dislikes not on the level of "loved panel seven of page eight," but on a level of theory that may revolutionize the thinking of someone who reads your criticism. That's your golden opportunity to use your critic's throne to change the future, because all you have to do is communicate
one ever-so-special thought to the right person at the right time, and you might help genius reach fulfillment. And wouldn't that be a nice change?

A number of established critics stepped up to answer that question, and The Comics Journal published their responses to Levitz' article in the very next issue. The tone of these replies was predictably mixed. Pierce Askegren, for example, noted that "Levitz should bear in mind the comparative youth of comics, comics fandom and comics fans; maturity comes to institutions more slowly than it does to individuals." It's Bill Sherman's response, though, that bears the most relevance to our current purposes:

We should make a distinction here between reviewing and criticizing. Reviews ask - and, one hopes, answers - the simple question: "Is this piece of art worth my time?" In a review the writer acts as an educated consumer, giving a context for his opinion (which may involve history as well as some critical comments) and then telling readers his answer to that question. Most reviewing is by nature ephemeral, though if a writer is consistent and works long enough without taking the easy way out (overusing the cursory cop-outs Levitz mentions, for example), he will produce criticism of a general sort. An example of this happening might be James Agee's series of movie reviews in the '40s: collected, they provide an excellent critical overview of the period.

Criticism speaks to a larger audience: both consumers and those artists willing to look and think about what they and their cohorts are or have been doing. It's analytical, tries to figure out how a piece of art works in relation to other pieces of art, and to a degree it ignores the question of "Is this worth my time?" "Of course it is," criticism says, although that answer may not imply the work being criticized is any good in the critic's eyes, only important. Criticism is lengthier and usually takes a degree of distancing... It takes time for critical vision to develop, which is why so many highly touted favorites have been known to lose their sheen after several years' perspective. For all its analytical value, criticism frequently lacks a journalistic sense of what's happening now.
Where does this leave us? With the need for both good criticism and good reviewing, with the need for reviewers with enough critical/historical insight to produce writing that - while short of Levitz's ideal - carries thought behind it, with the need for creators who aren't afraid to have their work looked at from a consumer's point of view and who aren't lackadaisical about the critical process. Levitz's call is just, but there's need for good thoughtful writing on all levels of analysis.

Sherman is absolutely right. The type of criticism Levitz calls for--the deep, insightful examination of how a piece of work is built and the context in which it was made--is intensely useful to practitioners, but it might be overkill for general audiences curious to know whether something is worth their time - and this question takes on even more importance when dealing with transmedia franchises that represent massive time investments in order to consume the whole thing.\(^4\)

This suggests a necessary bifurcation of transmedia criticism into two categories – developing a richer, deeper understanding of transmedia among academics and professionals requires an equally rich, deep form of transmedia criticism, whereas broadening the audience for transmedia experiences requires transmedia reviews. There's clearly a place for both, and the combination of the two will result in both better transmedia (through criticism aimed towards educating the industry) and a broader audience (through reviews aimed towards educating the public).\(^5\)

The task at hand, then, is to sketch out not just a form of transmedia criticism, but an ecosystem of transmedia criticism, one that's broad enough to include both criticism targeted at educating the industry and reviews broadening the public. This combination will finally provide

\(^4\) More on this in section V.

\(^5\) Over a quarter-century later, a new generation of comics scholar-critics have emerged to answer Levitz’ call. One such critic is Douglas Wolk, who has written comics criticism for The New York Times, The Washington Post, Salon and Rolling Stone. In his 2007 book Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean, Wolk writes, "...It’s my responsibility as a critic to be harsh and demanding and to subject unambitious or botched work to public scorn, because I want more good comics: more cartoonists who challenge themselves to do better, and more readers who insist on the same" (Wolk 22).
the ideal answer to the question posed by the executive at the beginning of this section: to hear more people calling for transmedia, first you have to produce something worth wanting, and then show them why they want it.
3. What Role Might Transmedia Criticism and Reviews Play?

If, as suggested in the last section, what is needed is an ecosystem that includes both transmedia criticism and transmedia reviews, then we need to explore both halves. First, what value can transmedia criticism and transmedia critics provide to the industry? Second, what value can transmedia reviews and reviewers provide to the public?

3.1 Educating the Industry: Transmedia Criticism and Critics

As Bloom suggested in his 2010 Transmedia/Hollywood recap, transmedia criticism could provide some answers to the very real concerns of the entertainment industry - not just "What is transmedia?" or "Why should I invest in a transmedia project?", but "What does real, measurable success for a transmedia project look like?" Transmedia criticism may not have all the answers – as noted, we desperately need better systems for transmedia ‘ratings’ and other metrics - but it may provide a jumping-off point for some qualitative analyses while we're waiting for the quantitative ones to catch up. Most beneficial, perhaps, is the role that such criticism can play in the shaping of a language of transmedia experiences, through the discovery of a set of standard best practices. By understanding these best practices – by speaking the language – creators and their sponsors can improve their chances of creating successful transmedia experiences. The next step can prove even more profitable: strategic differentiation from those practices to create new, proprietary and patentable best practices.

In their seminal text *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson describe the importance of standardization in the very early years of the cinema. Rather than reinventing the wheel with every film, Hollywood began to adopt standard techniques, formats, and practices that could be reused effectively in each production – which in turn led to a set of norms against which excellence could be judged:

Industrial standardization included uniformity in nomenclature and dimensions, simplification in types, sizes and grades, and safety provisions and rules of practice. Such standardization facilitated mass production. Standardization also included specifications, methods of testing quality, and ratings under specific
conditions. The latter set of elements in standardization have another connotation: a criterion, norm, degree or level of excellence. Both the movement toward uniformity and attainment of excellence coexisted in the trend. The standardization process must be thought of not as an inevitable progression towards dull, mediocre products (although many may be that for reasons of aesthetic differences or economy in materials and workmanship), but instead, particularly in competitive cases, as an attempt to achieve a precision-tooled, quality object. Once established, the standard becomes a goal to be attained.6

Such desirable characteristics included “narrative dominance and clarity, verisimilitude, continuity, stars and spectacle”. Those of us in the transmedia space should be feeling a slight tingling of recognition at this point. Such a key set of standard, recurring elements in transmedia is already beginning to emerge, as outlined in Henry Jenkins’ keynote talk at C3’s Futures of Entertainment 4 conference, “Revenge of the Origami Unicorn”. Jenkins outlined seven principles of transmedia storytelling: spreadability vs. drillability, continuity vs. multiplicity, immersion vs. extractability, worldbuilding, seriality, subjectivity, and performance. Jenkins’ observed principles emerged from his close analysis of multiple transmedia experiences, including The Matrix, the Studio Ghibli Museum in Tokyo, Tori Amos’ Comic Book Tattoo project, the success of Susan Boyle, American Idol and so on. Such close readings provide the raw fodder for his high-level observations, which are then shared with the public and the industry alike through books, articles, lectures or blog posts. The same kind of standards-from-observation practices from theorists and critics like Jenkins was at play during the early days of cinema. Again, Bordwell et.al.:

Mechanisms for standardization included ones somewhat connected to the industry – trade publications and critics and ‘how-to’ books – and ones external to the industry – college courses, newspaper reviewing, theoretical writing, and museum exhibitions. Undoubtedly there are others, but these will suggest how

6 Bordwell et al. 96.
standards were available to influence the company’s and worker’s conception of how the motion picture ought to look and sound. While these mechanisms presented themselves as educational and informative, they were also prescriptive. A how-to-write-a-movie-script book advised not only how it was done but how it ought to be done to insure a sale. In the case of reviewers or theorists, the references to established standards in other arts (theater, literature, painting, design, music, still photography) perpetuated ideological/signifying practices – although, of course, in mediated form.  

Bordwell points out that trade papers in the entertainment field (such as the New York Dramatic Mirror, Show World, the New York Clipper, Moving Picture World, Motion Picture News, The Nickelodeon and, of course, Variety) served as an important channel for these theorists and critics to influence their audiences. One such important influential was Epes Winthrop Sargent, a columnist for Moving Picture World:

Sargent began as a critic for music, theater and vaudeville in the 1890s and had been a scenario editor and press agent for Lubin before he arrived at the Moving Picture World in 1911. At that point he began a series of columns, the “Technique of the photoplay,” which included formats of scenarios and film production information primarily aimed at the freelance writer and the manufacturers’ scenario departments. Those columns appeared in book form in 1912 and in an extensively revised edition in 1913. Although other handbooks of film practice preceded his, Sargent’s work became a classic in a field that from that point on rapidly expanded.  

Bordwell goes on to quote an article of Sargent’s from December of 1909 as a sample of such prescriptive writing, generated from Sargent’s observation of emerging best practices in the form and, amusingly, what sounds an awful lot like comparative media studies:

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8 Bordwell et al, 106.
9 Bordwell et al 106.
The stories must have situations plainly visible, a clearly drafted story, and, with it, an opportunity for artistic interpretation. Dramatically, a motion picture story must be more intense in its situations than the spoken drama. It is often dragged into inconsistency but this is pardonable if the story is sufficiently strong to warrant it. The point of situation cannot be too strongly emphasized.

... We are told by our masters in short story writing and in drama writing that we must have one theme and one theme only. Too many characters will spoil the spell that grips us when we have but two or three people to watch. We are told to avoid rambling into green hedges off the roadside and to grip the attention of the audience from the very start. The complications should start immediately and the developments come with the proper regard for sequence.

... The period of action in a motion picture play is not restricted although it is best to follow the arrangement as depicted in the vaudeville drama. A single episode or incident which might occur within the length of time it takes to run the film is better than dragging the tale through twenty or thirty years. Too many notes and subtitles interrupt the story and detract from the interest.

... A motion picture play should be consistent and the nearer to real life we get the more is the picture appreciated. Complications which are too easily cleared up make the story unsatisfying, smacking of unreality, thus destroying the illusion that, as the producer faithfully endeavors to portray, the scene is not one of acting, but that we have an inside view of the comedy or tragedy of a real life. Let your stories, though they be strong in plot, be convincing, the situations not merely possible but probable. The producer will then have no trouble in making his actors appear to be real.10

If Jenkins chose to do so, he could easily write a trade column or a book specifically on how to apply his seven principles to transmedia storytelling, replicating the role of Sargent to this newly-emerging field. Close reading and analysis reveals learnable lessons, as any artist will

10 Quoted in Bordwell et al, 107.
attest; all authors, filmmakers, video game designers and other creative professionals spend years soaking up as much high-quality work in their medium as possible and tearing it apart to see what makes it tick. What theorists and critics do is then write up their analyses and share it with others. In doing so, they begin to create a shared language with which to discuss these emerging best practices, which then becomes a linguistic shorthand for particular approaches and tactics, which then in turn becomes a shared lens for understanding how these things work. This is where terms like *first person point of view*, *suspension of disbelief*, *unreliable narrator* and so on come from – and, once those observations and tactics are internalized, they become accepted as tools by a wider creative audience. Once these concepts become tools, they become more commonly used in the creation of future experiences, thus reinforcing the acceptance of the concepts. Criticism becomes influential through dispersion, acceptance and implementation. Jenkins’ ideas are already becoming widely accepted in the industry and his terms are becoming the terminology for this emerging space. Increase the number of really insightful, clearly-spoken and practically-minded theorist-critics and we accelerate the rate at which we come to understand what transmedia is really capable of. Again, to paraphrase Kochalka, “Transmedia criticism is a means we have of making sense of this new medium, focusing to make it clearer.”

The value in adopting the best practices that emerge through such transmedia criticism in order to increase a transmedia experience’s chances for success is apparent. However, there’s another key reason why an ecosystem of transmedia criticism would be incredibly useful to practitioners: the creation of *strategic differentiation*. In other words, to see where to zig when everyone else has chosen to zag. As Bordwell writes:

The emphasis on uniformity does not mean that a standard will not change in small ways. New technology, new products and new models are continually put forth as alternative standards for the field. One analyst of standardization wrote: ‘An innovation is successful only when it has become a new standard.’ That process is dynamic, with multiple practices creating the change. In fact, for the film industry, changing its product was an economic necessity. In the entertainment field, innovations in standards are also prized qualities. The economic reason is that the promotion of the difference between products is a competitive method and encourages repeated consumption. The phrase
*differentiation of the product* is used to describe the practice in which the firm stresses how its goods or services differ from other ones.\(^{11}\)

The same thing can be said for observing best practices in transmedia storytelling. By observing what seems to be becoming accepted as the norms for the medium, particularly adventuresome, innovative storytellers can choose to do things differently in hopes of achieving strategic differentiation. Revisit Jenkins’ list of principles and imagine how they might be flipped on their heads in a narrative experience, resulting in a new and engaging type of transmedia story. As more transmedia criticism emerges, more crazy “what-if” ideas will be sparked, and even more experimental experiences will appear on the market. Those that work spectacularly well – think 3-D in James Cameron’s *Avatar* – will become more broadly adopted, pushing the cycle of significant differentiation into another iteration, and the medium will continue to grow as a result.

Between a shared language for transmedia experience design, a collection of best practices that will increase a transmedia experience’s chances of success, and a seedbed for accelerated strategic differentiation, the value of transmedia criticism to practitioners seems clear. However, transmedia experiences without audiences remain difficult to justify. This is where the transmedia reviews comes into play.

### 3.2 Educating the Public: Transmedia Reviews and Reviewers

...The way I experience and think about comics has a lot to do with the fact that I really enjoy them. I like figuring out how that pleasure works and describing it to other people so that they can enjoy them too, or at least enjoy them more fully than they would otherwise. And what I like (and want to pass along) about a particular comic can be the pleasure of pure spectacle, or of ingenious design, or of kinetic flow, or of characters’ psychological depth, or of a story that's funny or engaging, or any number of other things. (Wolk 21-22)

\(^{11}\) Bordwell et al 97.
Massive entertainment franchises - think long-running soap operas or comic books - frequently get a bad rap for being huge, intimidating monsters. Try picking up a random issue of *X-Men* or turning on a random episode of *As The World Turns* and figure out what's going on. It's important not to ignore the word 'complex' in 'complex narratives' or 'complex entertainment', and even more important to remember that transmedia entertainment serves as a multiplier to that complexity. Yes, a transmedia franchise that spans comics, television, films and games can have each of its components serve as a gateway into the entire franchise for "native" fans of those particular media, but an Everest like *Star Wars* or *Halo* is a massive undertaking looming on a newcomer's horizon. Such franchises aren't just increasingly complex, they're also increasingly time-consuming and increasingly expensive. You think it's difficult deciding which movie is worth your twenty bucks and two hours on Friday night? As of this writing, buying the canonical Buffyverse on Amazon will set you back over $400, and take weeks to consume. One can only imagine what it would cost in both time and money to experience every film, book, comic, video game, TV show and piece of ancillary merchandise that makes up *Star Wars*.

This is where a transmedia critic can play sherpa: a really good (there's that word again) transmedia critic can give an interested fan-in-the-making maps to these daunting territories, even suggesting which paths they should take depending on their personal interests. Are they fans of Luke Skywalker? Watch the original movies, read these books, play those games. Fans of space battles? Watch these TV episodes, read these different books, play these other games. A single transmedia critic can't create personalized recommendations for everybody, but that's why we need an entire thriving community of transmedia critics sharing their opinions and providing maps like these. The people who currently play these roles are the die-hard fans on fan websites, the people who live and breathe these franchises. Unfortunately, they're frequently not the best ambassadors to the series. We need the John Clutes, the Pauline Kaels, the Siskels and Eberts, the people who can analyze and report back on multiple franchises to convince hesitant audiences that these heights really are navigable, that the best experiences really are worth the labor, and that, alas, some of the peaks are actually best avoided. Having multiple transmedia critics, and having those critics establish themselves as experts with distinct tastes across franchises instead of fanboys for particular franchises, will help make such massive, complex entertainments less intimidating - and thus more enticing to mass audiences.
And if we’re serious about moving transmedia entertainment more and more towards the mainstream, this has got to happen.

Unfortunately, the viability of transmedia reviews – and, for that matter, transmedia criticism – suffers from the same Everest-level challenge. In a June 1, 2010 post to her blog called "A Criticism on the Lack of Criticism", transmedia designer Brooke Thompson puts her finger on one of the biggest problems facing transmedia criticism - scale:

There are a number of challenges to writing critiques on projects, not the least of which is their complexity and length. It’s difficult to be critical once you’ve invested so much time and energy into a project – whether you’ve designed it or experienced it. Being critical seems harsh and, well, it might make you wonder if you’ve wasted a bunch of your time and who wants to think that? This is one reason why we may never have a Roger Ebert or Ben Croshaw – the commitment required to fully experience a transmedia project, especially one as complex as an ARG, is far greater than the commitment required for films and video games (or books or music or or or). To make transmedia critique a commitment on that level is difficult and, well, would require far more time than would be profitable. Which makes it a pursuit of passion or, perhaps, an academic exercise. Yet both of these color the criticism, that’s not necessarily bad, but in collaborative transmedia that ignores the “other side of the curtain.”

In the *Comics Journal* article "A Call for Higher Criticism" I cited earlier, Paul Levitz suggests that comics critics consider each issue in the context of the larger body of work, that "the time and effort we now devote to carving up a story should be devoted to carving up the universe in which the story exists" (44). This resonates with transmedia reviews, because, as Thompson points out, current reviews of transmedia franchises are usually limited to individual components - so a review of the latest *Star Wars* video game, instead of a review of *Star Wars* as an entire franchise.

Thompson hits the nail on the head when she writes "the commitment required to fully experience a transmedia project... makes it a pursuit of passion or, perhaps, an academic exercise." Being able to review *Star Wars, Star Trek, Halo,* or any of these other transmedia super-franchises at the franchise level requires thousands of hours to consume it, let alone
analyze it and write intelligently about one's findings. In a way, each of these super-franchises is in effect a lifestyle brand - and therein lies both a primary trouble with transmedia reviews, and why they're so important. Imagine you're trying to decide whether to engage with the Star Wars franchise for the first time. The sheer size of the franchise at this point is epic and must loom large in the eye of the potential audience member - an Everest on the horizon. It's the same reason Marvel keeps launching new X-Men titles and revisions, attempting to give people an "accessible" version of the X-Men franchise, because the size of the sucker is so damn daunting. As Sam Ford writes frequently on the challenges facing new audiences to soap operas, longevity and drillability can be simultaneously a franchise's greatest strength and greatest liability.

Further, there's a chicken-and-egg issue at hand with massive franchises and geekiness: are geeky people attracted to excessively drillable subjects, or does excessive drilling make one geeky? It's just as easy to become a sports geek as it is to become a comic book geek. The catch is that sometimes those people who are the most familiar with the topic, the ones who have done the most drilling, are also those who are the least valuable as the topic's advocates.

From the outside looking in, there must clearly something interesting about Star Wars, soap operas, the Chicago Cubs, quantum physics, the Civil War, and so on, because so many people are so passionately interested in them. An outsider may want to engage with the complex topic enough to enjoy it without becoming "that guy", at least until their interest reaches a sufficient level to make mastership of the topic become acutely desirable. In a way, transmedia reviews, or transmedia criticism for the masses (I'm resisting 'transmedia advocacy' because that term should be reserved for advocacy done across media) is the equivalent of a 101-level course - sufficient to introduce a lay audience to the highlights of a topic, loaded with directions on where to go next for further drilling, and so on. The trouble is that what we need, as Thompson points out, is a Roger Ebert of transmedia reviews providing a reliable viewpoint to bear on a new franchise every week, which is the equivalent of a rockstar professor teaching an entire Philosophy 101 course one week, a Political Science 101 course the next week, and a History 101 course the week after that.

As Jenkins has pondered for years, there's a strange line to consider between fandom and scholarship - one needs a certain amount of fandom to motivate the epic amount of drilling required to become an expert in a subject, yet one must also remain sufficiently detached to retain an objective perspective. A Roger Ebert who gave a huge thumbs-up to everything he
reviewed wouldn't be a very good critic, he'd just be a guy who never shut up about all the things of which he was a fan. A truly valuable transmedia reviewer/critic must be able to engage with multiple massive transmedia franchises and have enough dedication to consume, analyze and report on each of them on a regular basis, even those of which he or she isn't a fan. That's a mammoth job description, and that isn't even what we really need, because even if a person could pull off such a Herculean stunt, that's only one point of view. What we really need is a whole ecosystem of such souls, providing multiple points of view from which each audience member could pick and choose their favorite. Don't like the Roger Ebert of transmedia criticism? Try its Pauline Kael, its Jonathan Rosenbaum, or even its Harry Knowles. That's what we need for mass audiences to start experimenting with transmedia franchises - but it may be way too tall an order.

Of all the responses to Paul Levitz' call for higher criticism published by The Comics Journal, my favorite is one by Richard Howell and Carol Kalish. Their response contains a brilliant concise definition of what comics criticism should be, which can easily be applied to transmedia criticism as well:

We feel, however, that comic books share their major objectives with other mass media, [and] can and should be judged by similar standards. To wit: Capability – a familiarity with, and craftsmanshiplike utilization of, the medium's techniques, be they visual or verbal elements; Communication – a conscious and responsible manipulation of these technical elements in such a way as to transmit at least the bare storytelling elements (plot, characterization, and theme) to a responsive reader; and Commitment – the perception required to invest the product with a moral focus which can both enlighten and entertain and the dedication needed to broaden the craft repertoire of the medium.

Comic book critics must be prepared to both refine these standards to make them more appropriate measures of comic book products and to apply these rigorous, objective standards with perception and understanding to the industry. Only then can comics criticism assume its rightful position as both guide and guardian of the continual evolution of the comics medium. (33)
This quote points to something further complicating matters: the issue of what is actually being criticized in transmedia criticism. If one believes that what is to be criticized is that which makes the franchise transmedia - the unique affordances and characteristics of transmedia as a medium, its aesthetics and mechanics - then a familiarity with just transmedia is clearly sufficient. However, an oddly both more idealistic and darker approach (darker because down this path lies madness) suggests that to be a true transmedia critic, one must be able to truly and knowledgably criticize each component of the franchise as an example of its own medium. This is the same challenge as being a transmedia artist, and illustrates the same daunting truth: something as complex as a piece of transmedia storytelling or transmedia criticism is only as strong as its weakest link. Any time you have a combination of disciplines brought together into an art form, every element has to succeed for the work as a whole to function properly. A comic book that has beautiful art but is poorly written will be marked down for its lousy story; a TV show that is brilliantly written but horribly acted will be less enjoyable. Clearly some particularly brilliant elements can make up for some weaker ones - the cinematography in *The Last Samurai* helps make up for Tom Cruise being, well, Tom Cruise - but overall it's how the entire thing hangs together that determines the overall valuation of the whole.

Under this logic, an ideal transmedia critic must be able to criticize the film component of *Star Wars* as a film critic, *The Clone Wars* as a TV critic, the Timothy Zahn *Heir to the Empire* novels as a book critic, the *Force Unleashed* games as a game critic, Dark Horse's *Star Wars: Legacy* comics as a comic critic, and so on. This may seem harsh, but it's important to remember that just as each component of a transmedia franchise serves as an entry point into the franchise as a whole, it must also serve as an ambassador to the "natives" in that medium it's trying to attract - a *Star Wars* comic must be good enough as a comic to bring comic book fans into the franchise as a whole. If the *Star Wars* comic is a crappy comic, said fans will assume that this quality is indicative of a crappy franchise, and will assume that the games are crappy, the TV shows are crappy, the film is crappy, and so on.\(^\text{12}\)

I have seen some astonishingly lousy transmedia extensions that were clearly approved by people unfamiliar with that extension's medium - countless tie-in games, comics and novels spring to mind - and/or by people who assume that the value of the franchise's license is

\(^{12}\) Again, Rule One.
sufficient to overcome a lousy experience. This isn't the case, and this is why video games based on film licenses are widely derided in the games industry: a video game based on a film is assumed to have blown most of its budget obtaining the license, was rushed to market to make a "day and date" simultaneous release with the film (and had its production started much, much later than that of the film, despite the fact that video games can sometimes take even longer than films to produce), was creatively crippled by strict oversight by the licensor, and so on - all factors that, by and large, result in crappy games.

So here's the problem: a transmedia author needs to be well-versed in each medium he or she is deploying in the creation of their franchise, so they know when something is sub-par and can fix that weakest link. A transmedia critic needs to be able to evaluate each component of the franchise so if there is a weakest link, they can point it out. A transmedia audience needs transmedia critics/reviewers to tell them when a weakest link is worth being overcome or avoided altogether - but the rest of the franchise shouldn't be missed.

For example, one of the best exceptions to the "lousy film tie-in" rule is The Chronicles of Riddick. Both Pitch Black and The Chronicles of Riddick are Vin Diesel sci-fi movies with abysmal scores on Metacritic, but the tie-in game Escape from Butcher Bay has fantastic scores on Metacritic because the game developers nailed what the filmmakers couldn't quite pull off. A transmedia critic looking at the franchise as a whole must be well-versed enough to be able to say what the films did poorly, what the game did well, what the connections are between the films and the game and how well those connections are crafted, and whether or not an audience must suffer through the films in order to enjoy the game. There's enough of a Venn diagram overlap between gamers and sci-fi nerds for game critics to be able to report that the game is better than the movies because they probably saw the movies, but it'd be almost unthinkable for film critics to say, "The films are awful, but the game is excellent - skip the films and play the game." And yet that's what a transmedia critic would be expected to do.

Being well-versed in just one medium does not qualify you to criticize another, for the same reason that gamers find Roger Ebert writing criticisms of video games ludicrous. A transmedia critic must have a rich, nuanced understanding of multiple media in order to speak authoritatively to audiences across media - to be respected by film buffs when reporting on film components, by comic fans when reporting on comic books, by the literati when reporting on films and by foodies when reporting on food. In a way, the ideal transmedia critic is a return to the Renaissance Man style of critic that drove the first waves of literary criticism in 18th-century
England. The question is whether or not such breadth is even remotely feasible on the 21st-century Internet.

4. Conclusions and Next Steps

By now, the value proposition for transmedia criticism should be clear, even if the challenges involved in developing it are daunting. Even if one believes (as I do) that the rewards do outweigh the labor, the question remains of where such criticism will be found. Who will these transmedia critics be, and where will they publish their work?

It’s easier to imagine a home for transmedia criticism than one for transmedia reviews. Academically speaking, an easy place to begin would be a Journal of Transmedia Studies, but so far that has yet to come into existence. As more conferences and academic programs begin to appear with transmedia as their focus, more critical thinking about transmedia projects will continue to be produced as a result, and will likely be released either as conference proceedings or on blogs dedicated to particular courses or research projects (not unlike the C3 blog in its heyday). Programs to keep an eye on for such resources include the MIT Comparative Media Studies program, the IMAP program at USC, the Center for Future Storytelling at the MIT Media Lab, and the nascent interactive narrative lab at the University of Washington.

To date, many discussions of transmedia projects at levels that begin to approach true transmedia criticism are to be found in elements developed to support the burgeoning alternate reality game sub-industry, such as ARGNet, the mailing list for the IGDA ARG SIG (or the International Game Developers' Association Alternate Reality Game Special Interest Group, for the uninitiated) or the blogs of ARG authors like Andrea Phillips, whose April 6, 2010 post analyzing the Why So Serious ARG campaign for The Dark Knight explained what that campaign did exceptionally well and, in so doing, showed why the first Twilight book is so poorly designed for transmedia extension. Philips:

One: Experiences like Why So Serious have come under criticism because they arguably don’t create audiences where none were before. At the end of the day, the people who were really involved in Why So Serious were all people who were going to see the movie anyway, right? It’s uncomfortable to admit it in public like this, but... yeah, it’s probably true.
Two: The most successful transmedia experiences are the ones where there is space for the player to live in the world. Harry Potter, Star Wars, Lord of the Rings; these are all worlds that are very much bigger than the action on the main stage. And that's what we do in the ARG space; we provide walk-on roles that let people live in our worlds, while not requiring them to step onto the main stage themselves.

That's why the first Twilight book is poorly suited to transmedia; there isn't much of a world there outside of the couple in love. But the subsequent books increase the scope of the world more and more, incorporating group dynamics and government structures that add up to a world bigger than just Bella and Edward and their true, sparkly love.

So why was Why So Serious such a big deal? It's because it took a world that did not have space for an audience to live inside it -- Gotham -- and created canon spaces where players could dwell, for the first time. They became voters and accomplices. It turned a property that was previously not very well suited to a transmedia experience and created one that suddenly is. It's not just Batman and his allies and enemies anymore.

And while the people participating in that world are probably the ones who loved the property before, all of that energy and excitement brings more people in. The person with the joker mask was already going to see the movie, but maybe their roommate wasn't going to, or their cousin, or the person they enthuse about the film to at work or at the coffee shop or on the bus.

I know I started reading Harry Potter because of all of the fan energy around it; that's also why I read Twilight. Giving your audience the freedom and an outlet for their passion for your work leads to them converting peripheral audience members into fans, and people who were never a part of the core audience into peripheral audience members. Participation is the engine that drives fandom, and fandom drives success.

So there you have it, one of the most important keys to making a great transmedia world: Scope. Make it roomy enough for your audience to play in your world. They'll love you for it, and their love brings rewards.13

I read that post and heaved a sigh of contented relief, as if I'd just been given a tubful of water after marching across the Sahara. It's not long, but it's insightful, and is an excellent example of how some sample transmedia criticism might work: pick a transmedia project to criticize, break it apart to determine what worked and what didn't, bubble up the learnable

observations, and draw connections from that observation to other examples to give it context (and your argument more weight). To my mind, this was a brilliant example of nascent transmedia criticism, and I constantly go back to Philips’ site in hopes of finding more.

Another up-and-coming source for transmedia criticism is Christy Dena’s cheekily-named You Suck at Transmedia (http://www.yousuckattransmedia.com), which includes comments from C3 alum Ilya Vedrashko and friend of C3 Jeff Watson. Although the site is relatively sparse (24 posts over six months), many of the articles to be found there are really interesting. Here’s an excerpt from Dena’s opening post:

You Suck at Transmedia!!

Yes, this is something many of us have been wanting to say for a while…to others (mostly) and to ourselves (sometimes).

But don’t worry, this site isn’t about trashing specific people or projects. I’m a practitioner too, and so I know how even though we learn quickly, we cringe at old mistakes. But importantly, I also know how bad design is often the result of processes and people you don’t have control over. You know it sucks but nobody listened, or believed you, or worse still…you didn’t tell them. This site is part of that conversation. Encouraging us all to feel confident about what we know (and find out) sucks.

... How do you/we/us stop sucking at transmedia? Well, this site is a step in that direction. This site welcomes contributions that really do aim to progress the state of the art. Here we can discuss the consequences of transmedia design, production and execution decisions.

In short, this site will cover transmedia decisions that never, sometimes, and always work.14

As of this writing, Dena’s posts have titles like “YSA Directing Meaning Across Media,” “YSA Being an Artist”, “YSA Being Human,” and “YSA Sucking”.15 So far most of Dena’s posts haven’t been critical evaluations of particular transmedia experiences so much as reflections on the trials and tribulations of life as a transmedia experience designer, including videos of Quentin Tarantino talking about being an artist and a critique of the National Theatre’s recent mishandling of a Twitter snafu, but the site has a great deal of promise.

14 http://www.yousuckattransmedia.com/2010/06/hello-world/
15 The YSA stands for “You Suck At,” naturally.
A third newly-released resource for transmedia criticism is *The Pixel Report*, from Power to the Pixel’s Liz Rosenthal and Tishna Molla. *TPR* declares itself to be “devoted to showcasing new forms of storytelling, film-making and cross-media business development that is in tune with an audience-centred digital era. It is an essential tool for content creators, a vital resource for policy-makers & funding bodies and a unique guide for anyone interested in the future of film and the media.”

Unfortunately, the site seems to be a thinly-veiled set of hooks to draw people to the Power to the Pixel conference or order the proceeds from the conference. Although the site ostensibly includes case studies of such projects as beActive Entertainment’s *Final Punishment*, Tommy Palotta’s *Collapsus*, and the National Film Board of Canada’s *Waterlife*, the site’s pages for these case studies amount to little more than an overview of each project, video clips of people discussing these projects from the previous conference, and a big button encouraging people to order the case studies. This feels less like transmedia criticism and more like advertising for Power to the Pixel and their consulting services. It’s not a bad thing to charge for one’s insights, of course, but the way in which it’s done here feels confusing and misleading.

Finding a home for transmedia reviews are much more challenging. Let us for a moment ignore the (very real) possibility that the entire print magazine world is going belly-up. So far most articles on transmedia have been either mile-high “What is Transmedia?” articles in publications like *Wired* or slightly deeper and more directed pieces in publications dedicated solely to one medium, such as those found in *Filmmaker Magazine*. Although book reviews, film reviews, music reviews, video game reviews and even technology reviews are commonplace in mainstream publications, is it realistic to expect the *New York Times* to employ a transmedia critic alongside their film and book critics? How likely is a *New York Review of Transmedia*, or an *On the Transmedia* show on NPR?

It’s possible that the very structure of transmedia experiences, where ideally each extension in each medium is of sufficient quality and modularity to serve as an ambassador for the rest of the franchise to the ‘native’ fans of that medium, also extends to critics. If *Escape from Butcher Bay* is good enough to garner a high score on Metacritic, perhaps it’s good enough to be reviewed by video game critics who will serve as multipliers (to steal a term from Grant McCracken) and advocates for the rest of the franchise to their audience. However, this still

16 http://thepixelreport.org/
leaves us wanting for those critics who will advocate for transmedia experiences that do transmedia well, evaluating and recommending the “greater than the sum of its parts” super-experience of the franchise as a whole. It’s possible that such reviews will be relegated to the review sections for the medium in which each franchise has its mothership – so reviews of the transmedia franchise surrounding The Matrix will be found in the film section, reviews of the transmedia franchise for Assassin’s Creed will be in the video game section, and so on – but as transmedia experiences continue to evolve into massive things that touch on every part of our lives, will the notion of “mothership” continue to be relevant? Only time will tell – but it seems likely that, if such a scenario comes to pass, by that time our reviews systems will have evolved to accommodate such vast experiences as well.

Finally, returning to the notion that newspapers, magazines and other print-centric media structures might be dead anyway, it’s possible that the very notion of curated collections of reviews will dissipate as well. We already have big blogs dedicated to particular audience demographics, like Engadget or io9 or Blastr, that, like special-interest basic cable channels, cover everything that might be of interest to that particular demographic.17 This suggests that students interested in becoming transmedia critics might first attempt to become staff writers for such blogs – and supplement their writings there with a constant stream of insights posted to their own blogs (a tactic similar to that of Andrea Philips and Christy Dena).

As transmedia continues to trend towards mainstream acceptance and continues to gather mass as a key area of development in the entertainment industry, all of these options are likely to flourish. It’s only a matter of time before a Journal of Transmedia Studies appears to support the research coming out of these new academic programs, only a matter of time before sites like io9 have to figure out how to review projects like those coming out of Guillermo Del Toro’s new dedicated transmedia development shop Mirada, and only a matter of time before more rich resources begin to appear online that cater specifically to producers and fans of transmedia experiences.

Our next steps now are for more of us to start engaging in close analyses of transmedia experiences, to start breaking them down and figuring out why they work or why they fail. More of this exploration must be done in order to help us understand how to really leverage the unique affordances of transmedia experience design as its own particular art, both individually and as a whole. Tearing into these new transmedia experiences to figure out what makes them

17 Unsurprisingly, Blastr.com is operated by genre cable channel Syfy.
tick, sharing those insights with one another and then using those lessons to create more astonishingly fantastic transmedia experiences, teaching each other how to ride these lions, is how we will push the medium forward. Writing more transmedia reviews to spread the word about those experiences to a broader audience is how we will ensure that we will all keep riding lions for a long time to come.
Bibliography


Appendix I: Brooke Thompson, “A Criticism on the Lack of Criticism”

Posted to GiantMice.com June 1, 2010

What follows is a blog post from ARG designer/theorist Brooke Thompson, quoted in its entirety, as one of the clearest extant calls for transmedia criticism to date. -GL

It strikes me that one of the biggest problems hindering the growth of transmedia (and all the various things that fall under it, such as ARGs) is the absolute lack of critical looks at projects. That’s not to say that criticism doesn’t exist – it does, but it’s scattered in conversations and hidden in forum posts or mailing lists. And it is, usually, not about a project as a whole and, instead, focuses on a single issue or is a broad look at the field.

There are a number of challenges to writing critiques on projects, not the least of which is their complexity and length. It’s difficult to be critical once you’ve invested so much time and energy into a project – whether you’ve designed it or experienced it. Being critical seems harsh and, well, it might make you wonder if you’ve wasted a bunch of your time and who wants to think that? This is one reason why we may never have a Roger Ebert or Ben Croshaw – the commitment required to fully experience a transmedia project, especially one as complex as an ARG, is far greater than the commitment required for films and video games (or books or music or or or). To make transmedia critique a commitment on that level is difficult and, well, would require far more time than would be profitable. Which makes it a pursuit of passion or, perhaps, an academic exercise. Yet both of these color the criticism, that’s not necessarily bad, but in collaborative transmedia that ignores the “other side of the curtain.”

Which brings me to postmortems. We don’t have any publicly available – well, a few. But they are the exception and not the rule. And most aren’t extensive enough to be of much use. And, no, that pretty case study you made to show off at conferences or submit for awards does not count. In fact, I’d argue they’re part of the problem. I understand their necessity and utility, but in making and presenting them you’re looking at everything through rose colored glasses. Essentially, you’re blowing smoke up your own a... I challenge every one of you to put half the
effort into creating a postmortem that you do into the case study for your next project. My bet is that you’ll see a far greater return on your investment.

Another consideration is that we’re still a small enough community that there’s an awkwardness about saying anything that might be construed as negative... whether it’s that you don’t want to hurt your friends' feelings or you hope to work with them at some point. Both of these things have stopped me on a number of occasions, I’ll admit it. I wrote an outstanding critique, I think, of the cake event for Why So Serious but I didn’t publish because I didn’t want to hurt a friend’s feelings and what if I went on to work for 42 Entertainment? Which I wound up doing and happened to help out on that same campaign... if that critique had been published? Awkward!

This reluctance isn’t doing anyone any favors. I have seen the same mistakes over and over again and I have to wonder if part of that reason is our hesitation for a bit of brutal honesty and constructive criticism. I’m not saying that we should rush out to rip projects apart, but we really should do something. We need to start having honest discussions about projects, about design decisions & implications, about the state of the industry. And we can’t be afraid to have these conversations publicly. I understand NDAs and frieNDAs – they’re important, and they shouldn’t be broken. But there is still plenty to be talked about and plenty that we can use to learn from and inform each other.
Appendix II: A Brief History of Pretentious Jerks

One of the earliest criticisms lobbed against this essay was the suggestion that an ecosystem of criticism introduced too early into the development stages of a newborn medium could smother it in its crib. This appendix addresses the question: would transmedia critics necessarily be a bunch of pretentious jerks? How is it that criticism came to have such a horrible reputation?

In our culture, criticism gets something of a bad rap. The role of the critic is stereotypically portrayed by someone similar to the nasty Mr. Ego in Disney/Pixar’s Ratatouille: a joyless, bilious snob who makes their living by looking down their noses at everyone and delighting in pointing out their insufficiencies. Unleashing a horde of these vile creatures on transmedia in its infancy seems like the worst possible thing we could do – but is that really the role of criticism in our society? Are all critics inherently pretentious jerks?

The answer to both questions is, obviously, of course not. To understand why, however, first we need a brief history of criticism.

In his book The Function of Criticism, literary scholar Terry Eagleton writes that modern European literary criticism began as a distinctly non-elitist practice concerned more with politics than art, entertainment or commerce. In fact, literary criticism started out as a reaction by the public against the absolutist state:

Within that repressive regime, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the European bourgeoisie begins to carve out for itself a distinct discursive space, one of rational judgment and enlightened critique rather than of the brutal ukases of an authoritarian politics. Poised between state and civil society, this bourgeois "public sphere", as Jürgen Habermas has termed it, comprises a realm of social institutions - clubs, journals, coffee houses, periodicals - in which private individuals assemble for the free equal interchange of reasonable discourse, thus welding themselves into a relatively cohesive body whose deliberations may assume the form of a powerful political force.
True, admission to the "public sphere" wasn't for everybody - this first version was populated almost exclusively by the 'polite classes', educated land-owning men, what we might consider today to be the upper middle class, if not the upper class. And yet this was still a massive step up for mass culture from previous eras, when such debate was constricted to the aristocracy. The 'body' of the public had a chance to think for itself, to explore - and early criticism served as a means of providing guidance to that body.

Further, being born out of a people's movement found these first critics more amiable and "clubable". The leading sources of criticism in those days, the daily or thrice-weekly journals Richard Steele's Tatler and Joseph Addison's Spectator, took an attitude that was accessible by design. To their minds, their role was not to lecture or police but to serve as friendly guides making recommendations, to amiably educate the masses in hopes of creating a better general society.

It was only later, once the economics of writing shifted from patronage to more pure capitalism, that the motivations for critics shifted away from public influence and towards selling more copies. Much like modern muckrakers and scandalists, critics like Samuel Johnson adopted deliberate divisiveness as a sales tactic, eschewing the ideal of the "public sphere" and aggressively promoting themselves as authoritative celebrities. The most popular publications began to adopt contrary political stances and started to engage in vicious intellectual wars, discovering that a great deal of attention could be garnered (and, thus, money could be made) through these conflicts. Condescension and contention became viable business models.

As the economics of writing, publishing, and politics continued to shift, critics found themselves being forced further and further into obscurity, all the while attempting to balance populism and elitism. In the nineteenth century the "man of letters", the critic attempting to guide public opinion, found his role being played more and more by the market itself - what sold - while the "sage", or the critic writing for an idealized educated future audience, found himself becoming increasingly irrelevant. In response, some publications gave up on the idea of addressing the public entirely, wholeheartedly embracing the condescension that has come to be associated with the stereotypical critic. This might have added to our stereotype a disconnection from public taste and, thus, a disconnection from relevance. Eagleton:

\[18\] This is where our stereotype of the critic as a pretentious blowhard might have been born.
Another attempt at 'disinterestedness' arrived with the establishment of the *Saturday Review*, in which criticism strove to sever itself once and for all from the public realm. Run as a hobby by its editor Beresford Hope, the *Saturday* was an organ of Oxford high culture, given to snobbish contempt for such popular authors as Dickens. Its contributors, in the words of its historian, 'assumed a pose of lofty condescension and infallibility which gave their utterances an oracular rather than argumentative tone'. Characterized by a 'dry and ungenerous negativism', the *Saturday* poured scorn upon popular taste and the mass literary market; it reverted to an 'eighteenth-century aristocratic attitude towards literary men', regretting the growth of a professional layer of writers with no significant role in the sphere of public affairs. It was a prime example of that 'higher journalism' which, as Christopher Kent has argued, provided 'an ideal medium of cultural authority ready to serve the newly awakened ambitions of the universities'... What [the universities] told the nation, however, was for the most part insolently reproving; in this sense the pulling of some periodical journalism into the orbit of an aloof, socially alienated academia represents another stage in the dissolution of the classical public sphere. The 'higher journalism' signifies less a renewal of that sphere, than a partial annexation of it by a sullenly anti-social criticism.19 (Eagleton 59-60)

There's much more history to be traced, but what this brief study shows is that critics aren't inherently pretentious jerks - but market forces prodded them into becoming so. It's not that dissimilar from contemporary professional blowhards like Howard Stern, Glenn Beck or Keith Olbermann: they holler outrageous things so people will pay attention to them, and if they're ignored - as Samuel Johnson's generation of critics began to be - they scream more loudly and more outrageously.

But do market forces render all critics raging balls of sound and fury? If this were truly so, critics would be as scarce as horseless carriage repairmen - and this is clearly not the case. Criticism has evolved into a kind of wild and widely-ranging ecosystem. The "Culture Police" types of critics are still to be found, but the Cambrian explosion of cheap publishing tools in the

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19 Academics in the audience take note: this is why artists hate us.
late 20th century (both in desktop publishing and, later, the rise of the Internet) have allowed scores of newcomers to add their voices. Professional critics feel threatened by these "unwashed masses" because when anyone can publish their opinions online for free and not expect payment, it devalues their own work. Ironically this can be seen as a return to the original "public sphere" model of criticism, but Steele and Addison themselves would likely be flummoxed, and perhaps horrified, by the speed and sheer democracy of criticism online.

True, a great many things are chucked out the window in contemporary Internet criticism - fact-checking and openness about conflicts of interest among them - but "new critics" emerge online by having clear opinions, communicating those opinions clearly and reliably, and frequently engaging in an ongoing dialogue with their audiences. The audiences for such individual critics may be smaller than for superstar critics like Siskel and Ebert, but that's fine - new critics will emerge to cover so-called "long tail", "micromedia" niche media, but will also appear to provide niche interpretations of blockbuster mass media.

This, then, is the potential value of the transmedia critic. Yes, critics can be self-important blowhards, but critics also ideally provide points of reference, models of thought, and beacons by which the public can navigate and better understand the world around them. While it's difficult to swallow the "my way or the highway" elitism of some of these characters, they still serve as engines for discourse - and to my mind, the beauty of criticism, of critical dialogues, is that there is frequently no one right answer. Just like mere mortals, critics differ on their criteria for what makes something good, and that's fantastic - down that road lies passionate, wonderful discourse, which, like as with Steele and Addison, become a form of public education on the topic. This in turn sparks the creation of not only better recommendations for curious would-be audiences, but different, more unique, and sometimes just plain better transmedia experiences.

At the end of the day, the key to successful transmedia criticism is to provide useful analysis and insight, preferably in an approachable, non-asinine fashion. In other words, for would-be transmedia critics the secret is the same as that for would-be transmedia storytellers: *Don't Suck.*