Transmedia storytelling with apps could expand but also exploit children's stories

September 18 2014, by Natalia Kucirkova

Storytelling has come on a long way. Credit: John Everett Millais/Tate

The app market is estimated to generate US$77 billion (£47.2 billion) in revenue each year – and the segment of children's apps has grown particularly strongly. However, given that developing an app costs

between $10,000-70,000 and each only sells for usually around a dollar, an app needs thousands of downloads to ensure a return on investment. Children's app producers find it hard to survive and are desperately searching for a sound business model.

Children's app business models

After Apple had to refund £19.9m and Google £11.6m to settle formal complaints over unauthorised in-app purchases by children, few would argue that in-app-purchases and in-app advertising models are appropriate for children's software.

They also don't work well in schools, a market many app-producers want to expand into. Adding app-related products such as worksheets, downloadable activities, and a bank of curriculum-related ideas may persuade the school headteacher, although whether or not the children will go for them is a different matter.

No wonder then that many developers of children's apps are calling on psychologists and educators to help them understand a child's psyche, in an effort to find the element that might spark an explosion of interest and make the app "go viral".

Others try to establish a bigger customer base by introducing international versions of the same app and by ensuring it runs on both Apple's iOS and Android platforms. One business strategy which could ensure a better return on investment and introduce more innovation into the entire children's app ecosystem is the idea of transmedia.

Making more of a story idea

Transmedia refers to extending a story across various other types

of media, and is often defined as simply [storytelling](). The emphasis is on enriching the story, not replicating it in each different medium, so that the centre of experience is the story rather than the format in which it is delivered.
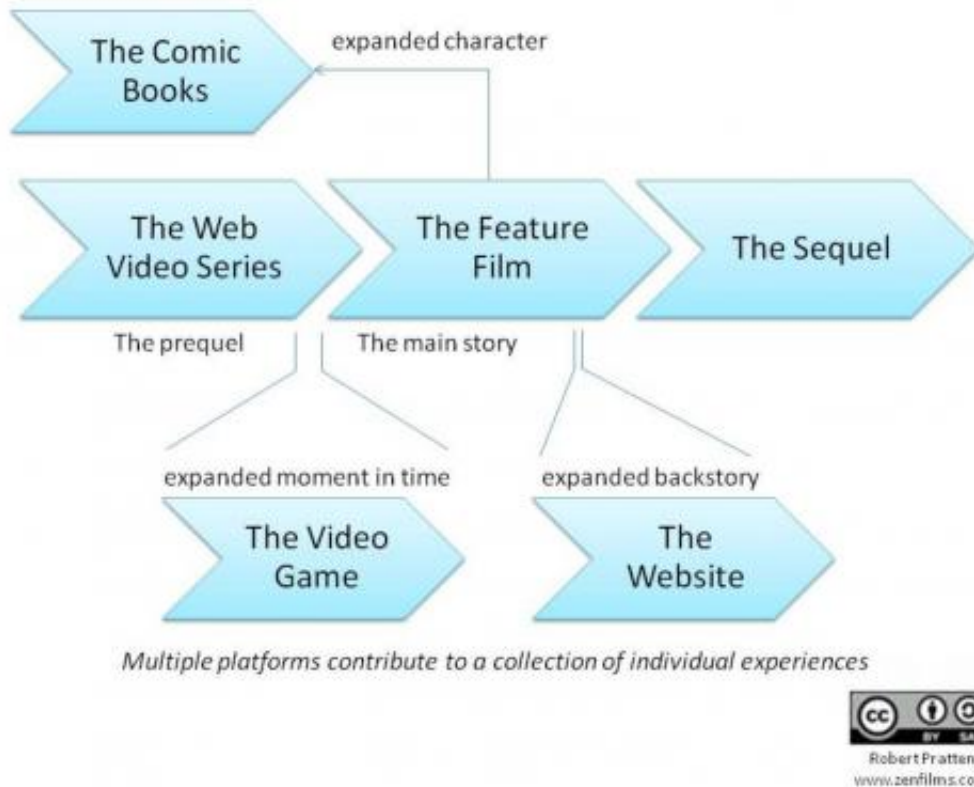
Different stories in a fictional world stretched across different media. Credit: zenfilms, CC BY-SA

Think of transmedia working as a rich story experience in which a specific app is just one part. With apps connected to wider stories, the story experience can be connected across various channels including books, toys, cartoons or films.

Traditionally this might be seen as cultivating a franchise and its merchandising opportunities. For example the Harry Potter

franchise includes a series of Harry Potter apps for fans to download in addition to reading the Harry Potter books (or listening to the audio-books), watching the films, playing with the toys, computer games, or Lego construction kits.

But apps could be used to provide more interesting and more absorbing transmedia experiences. For example, apps can provide different entry points to the story world, focusing on different characters, different points in the plot timeline, or from different perspectives. The interactivity and touch-sensitivity possible with phones and tablets provide potential for treatments unavailable in books or films. For example, through the story of Cinderella as revealed through a book, young children can share reading with their parents and enjoy the illustrations. With Cinderella apps, they can make the story characters move, choose the colours of Cinderella's dress, record their own voices to tell the story and share it remotely with their [friends](#).

It is the potential of apps to bring the story experience closer to the child that makes transmedia an exciting educational opportunity. It has the potential to make learning more relevant for children, link it to their skills and interests and, as the authors of [T is for Transmedia](#) write, empower them to develop "multiple literacies and multiple intelligences."

Making commercial successes

There are various transmedia strategies and it's important to be aware of the commercial motives behind many of those designed for [young children](#). Despite JK Rowling's explicit wish not to over-commercialise the story, Harry Potter has become [over-merchandised](#). Similarly, the children's cartoon character Dora The Explorer recently received mixed reviews about her potential to

encourage bilingual education, dragged down by endless merchandising, from toys to Dora-emblazoned children's pyjamas.

The difficulty of transmedia is that it is caught between two worlds: that of sound learning models accompanied by almost philosophical academic rhetoric, and that of a tool to structure a business model.
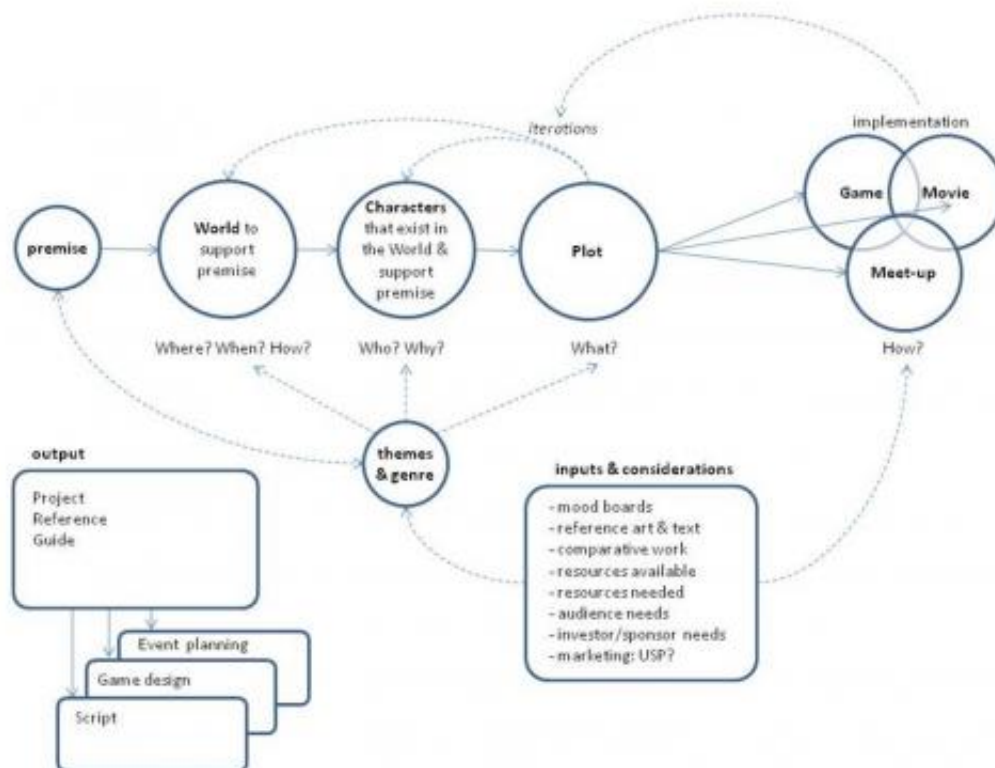
Transmedia products require planning and forethought to bring the threads together. Credit: zenfilms, CC BY-SA

Benefits and concerns

For app producers, producing transmedia apps represents an opportunity for better and more pervasive business intelligence: if apps become regular parts of children's transmedia experiences, they become another

aspect of the user's data trial that can provide business opportunities. But this leads to concerns and criticisms.

First, that these strategies contribute to the increased [commercialisation of childhood,](#) especially if transmedia are linked to advertising and marketing. Because transmedia capture children at various story stages, they offer the potential to grow together with the child and thus provide a convenient pathway for sustained customer engagement. This may contribute to conceptualising children as future clients rather than future readers and informed citizens.

Second, one should bear in mind that information privacy and security laws are often incomplete, with parents or schools having little say in what information is collected by apps. This may [soon change in some US school settings](#), but we run the danger of handing transmedia companies not just fragments of data but entire patterns of engagement, with which they could establish considerable influence on children's lives.

Third but no less important, app developers need to think about the developmental stage children are at when engaging with various parts or extensions to the story. A [recent paper](#) summarises how the failure to take into account children's abilities at certain ages means that they may enjoy, but not fully understand, the story. Worse, some content may be inappropriate, or simply poor quality, giving [children](#) repeat visits to something which may limit their imaginative play.

Transmedia may become a sound business model in addition to a noble cause, but it needs to [place the child at the centre](#), follow the [general principles of good transmedia storytelling](#) and not fall into being just a marketing tool. In the relatively unregulated and rapidly changing [Digital Wild West](#) of apps, this may prove easier said than done.

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