

# TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING, ADAPTATION AND THE CULT CULTURE

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses some of the most popular theories about adaptation and transmedia storytelling and argues that the two terms have come very close to meaning the same thing in the contemporary era of fiction and filmmaking. This relation becomes especially significant at a moment in time when arts require to be perceived from a hybrid perspective. They interact with one another through the adaptation of the same text in different media. The main ideas stated in the paper contradict the false perception of many critics that have analyzed adaptations strictly in relation to their original source and that have theorized that adaptations should remain the same in all types of media in which they are adapted.

At the same time, the essay is also focused on the implication of this hybridity upon the cultification of specific cultural materials or objects such as films, books, manga or video games – depending on the socio-cultural context of the audience. By using specific examples both contemporary and from the past, it becomes easier to support the theory that there is indeed a tight relation between the notion of a “cult classic” and those of transmedia storytelling and adaptation.

**Keywords:** transmedia storytelling, new media, adaptation, hybridity, cult film, cult fiction.

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### ***Introduction***

When cinema was just starting “to become a thing”, people had already rejected it due to the fear of the unknown and the fear of what they considered to be more important – that is literature, to die. As we approached the 2000s, it seemed like the development of technology did not pose a threat on the expression of art anymore, but rather helped it even more by giving it a new space for expression. It also began to shape a form of hybridity between arts, instead of keeping them divided like they used to be in the past.

Nowadays, we realize cult culture embraces so many other branches than films and books and so many types of media. We have cult TV shows, cult video games, cult comic books and manga. Almost every form of expression can become cultified, along with its creators.

One of the reasons behind the cultification of specific adapted texts, films or other materials may be “blamed” on the fact that the public has come to realize that a so called “original” material like a novel or a short story is not necessarily superior to its adapted form of cultural expression. This idea can be found in Hutcheon’s first chapter called “Preface” in her own *Theory of Adaptation*, where she states that: “(...) to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative.” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 13) She even challenges the notion of originality by denying the term “source” text and by simply calling it the “adapted text”. This way, Hutcheon makes the adapted text and the adaptation equal and erases the necessity of relying mainly on the problem of fidelity. “Multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically.” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 13)

What I am interested in is observing the hybridity that lies at the base of the relationship between the process of adaptation and transmedia storytelling

and researching the effect of the cult culture on adapted texts. For this, I shall be going through some reference texts that theorize and define these concepts: adaptation, transmedia and cult fiction. I will also be taking a closer look at specific cult films, TV series and texts to support the discussed theories that argue that adaptation and transmedia storytelling are becoming more similar as we approach the 2020s. These fictional materials have been chosen not on personal preference, but based on their relevance as adapted cult pieces in the context in which they have appeared.

The reader should keep in mind that my interest lies solemnly in adaptation experienced through fiction. Although there has been substantial research on how this phenomenon takes place in non-fiction texts and types of media, I will not be focusing on that, as I am not interested in observing if there is such thing as a non-fiction cult text or film. I will also not be doing case studies, since there are already a large number of pieces written on the subject. I will use, however, relevant examples of texts, films, video games, etc. to identify (or not) specific traits of the discussed processes.

### ***Transmedia Storytelling and the Process of Adaptation***

Although there are definitions for both phenomena and researchers have tried to understand the two – adaptation and transmedia storytelling – as much as possible, the definitions are in continuous change. That is because as society evolves and technology evolves along with it, what we understand through media and new media changes and thus, the definitions for these two phenomena change along with it. New types of media have also appeared, so transmedia storytelling keeps remodeling itself after each material it encounters. Defining new media – in general, has come to be so hard because critics perceive differently what new media is. The same goes for the process of adaptation.

For some commentators, it's a new phenomenon: one that's particular to the digital age, its creation and dissemination rendered possible by the Internet, mobile technologies and social media. For other commentators, it's the continuation of an existing mode of storytelling: the logical extension of the licensed media that's long been derived from other media forms, such as comic books, videogames and novels. (Harvey, 2015, p. 16)

The apparition of new media art seems to actually be the troubling problem for most researchers. With so many forms of expressions derived from previous artistic forms such as those mentioned by Harvey, it becomes harder and harder to make a distinction between what is truly new and what is actually just another form of adaptation.

Some of the most reliable information about transmedia comes from Henry Jenkins, who has heavily theorized about transmedia storytelling and who defines it as:

(..) a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins 2007)

This contradicts the false perception of many critics that have analyzed adaptations for so many years in relation to the adapted texts and that have theorized that adaptations should remain the same in all the other types of media. While this may have been true for older adaptations, when the public was much more focused on fidelity between two materials, such notions cannot be applied to contemporary works. That is why this process has come to be so similar to that of transmedia storytelling. The public's need has changed along with the apparition of so many adaptations and of so many types of media. If there is a text that has already been adapted before and that will continue to be adapted in the future, it most certainly needs to differentiate itself not only from the text it was adapted after, but also from all the other adaptations that exist after the same source in order to stay relevant.

Jenkins' principle explains specifically this need to go beyond fidelity when moving an artistic object from text to screen or on any other media. While he emphasizes worldbuilding and media specific stories, he agrees that adaptations do not exist in parallel, but rather simultaneously, each part contributing on its own to the whole meaning of a story.

My own and many other definitions of transmedia emphasize the idea that each platform makes a "unique contribution," a definition that often serves to somewhat unfairly distinguish transmedia extensions from more traditional adaptations, and the result is "additive comprehension," new insights form at the intersection between different media extensions. (Jenkins 2017)

It is true that the process of adaptation meant in the past merely taking a text and adapting it into a different media: film, opera or theater play. Moreover, given that the notion of transmedia storytelling did not really exist far in the past because of the lack of technological creative means, people resorted to the process of adaptation for all sorts of purposes such as fans and filmmakers wanting to see their favorite texts come to life, or the absence of sufficient original screenplays especially in the early days of cinema. The artistic and creative skills that the creators behind these adaptations have developed were different than those of nowadays' creators, as Colin Harvey says.

With at least one notable exception, most transmedia commentators agree, however, that retelling a story in a different medium involves a distinct set of

creative and consumptive processes which are different from telling a new story set in a consistent storyworld but utilising a different medium. (Harvey, 2015, p. 64)

Henry Jenkins draws comparisons between transmedia and the process of adaptation, criticizing this notion of fidelity. He takes as an example a new approach, an action figure, which may not have been previously perceived as a form of adaptation. “Like an adaptation, the action figure is judged in terms of its fidelity (Is it accurate? Does it look right?) but also for how it helps us to see the original in a new light.” (Jenkins 2017) The problem comes from the multitude of media available at our disposal and thus, the fast adaptation of a story from one medium to another.

Julie Grossman, another scholar that has theorized about adaptation, states that daring adaptations “also train our critical eye on cultural progeny rather than on origins” (Grossman, 3), so we are becoming more open-minded towards this new media and the adaptations that happen across channels, on the hybrid nature of both literature and cinematography, rather than on where they come from. While not being necessarily interested in the specific types of adaptation that exist out there, her main focus is the power of this process to change our viewpoint on the adapted texts. (Grossman, 2015, 3) This change in our perception that occurs might also be responsible for why we cultify some adaptations and not others.

As Hutcheon and Grossman suggest, intertextuality is present between all these types of media: screenplays, novels, films, TV Series, board games, opera, theater plays, etc. They are interconnected both through the process of adaptation and that of transmedia storytelling: “written and visual texts, as well as other media and cultural matter, are always conversing, and, ideally, listening well to one another.” (Grossman, 2015, p. 7)

The difference between the two processes may be more prominent for adaptations that happen in the same medium: one book that is adapted in two or three different films. Take *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, for example. The multitude of film adaptations that exist out there do not necessarily bring something different to the overall perception of the story, but rather reinterpret it by taking the same events and characters from the adapted text. In this case, adaptation is a different phenomenon than that of transmedia storytelling because although we are talking about two different mediums, the story does not bring any “unique contribution”. (Jenkins 2017) Jenkins agrees that however, more recent adaptations go beyond the original perception of this process and they really do contribute with something different, altering plots and characters. Going back to the *Dracula* example, we have the 2017 animation series *Castlevania*, based on the ‘80s videogame series with the same name, adapted after Bram Stoker’s novel.

In practice, the difference may be only a matter of degree-adding and subtracting scenes and characters in the case of a faithful adaptation, adding entire stories or corners of the universe in the case of a transmedia extension. (Jenkins 2017)

Although this difference might have divided adaptation theorists from transmedia theorists in the past, arguing which process was the best and why, more recent approaches might have requested that the two types of theorists joined hands to better understand and relate to each other's side. (Jenkins 2017)

We could draw comparisons between Linda Hutcheon's approach on theme parks and virtual reality and Henry Jenkins' discussion about action figures. What she proposes in her theory is a phenomenon rather closer to transmedia storytelling (although the notion was not existent at that time) than to that of adaptation, all through a journalistic approach that enables the audience to understand the "intrinsic motivation" of these processes. (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 11)

Mary H. Snyder, in *Analyzing Literature-to-Film Adaptations*, talked in the beginning of her book about the connection between books and films, comparing it to a "marriage of media". That is because just as it happens in a marriage, there are two entities involved but they form a single unit. They help and complete each other but they still have to remain and to be seen as separate entities. (Snyder, 2011, p. 143) Later on, she takes a more common metaphor in the world of cinema, that of a parent and a child. "A child must move beyond its parent, grow out of and possibly even subvert its parent. Yet it is without a doubt that the child has as its source that parent. A child is based on the parent." (Snyder, 2011, p. 150)

Jenkins mentions in his essay the term "archontic principle", theorized by Abigail Derecho and inspired by Jacques Derrida, "to describe a range of textual practices – from fan fiction to literary texts such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The Wind Done Gone*, or *Ahab's Wife* – which self-consciously build upon but also re-center existing texts." (Jenkins 2017) There are so many more examples that could enter this category such as *The Eyre Affair* by Jasper Fforde or even James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In fact, this archontic principle is very similar to that of fanfiction.

Henry Jenkins also poses the problem of convergence culture in which these new types of media appear such as the Internet or streaming services where everything is available to anyone and made for anyone.

### ***Transmedia Storytelling, Cult Culture and the Fantasy and SF Genres***

Umberto Eco provides a very useful analysis of the cult phenomenon by analyzing the cult classic, *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942). He explains what he believes

to be the most important element of the phenomenon: the public, the fanbase. Certainly not every film that is loved becomes cultified. However, they do have the potential to become as such if the worlds inside these stories captivate the public long enough. The perfect example for this is the *Harry Potter* series. As Eco states, cult materials offer the possibility to the public to be a part of their own world.

It must provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own, a world about which one can play puzzle games and trivia contests, and whose adepts recognize each other through a common competence. (Eco, 1985, p. 11)

Other notable traits mentioned in his essay are the ability of a film to be “unhinged”: broken into specific parts and still retaining meaning, displaying many ideas instead of focusing on one final moral, containing cinematic intertextuality, being so bad that they become masterpieces.

While Eco’s theory is certainly important for defining the phenomena, more modern approaches, such as I.Q Hunter’s should also be taken into consideration. For Hunter one of the most important elements of cult films is how transgressive they are, how much controversy they stir. (Hunter, 2016, p. 2) Such adaptations as *Trainspotting* or *A Clockwork Orange* certainly rely on this trait.

Hunter’s suggestion that the cultification of some of these films happens because they speak to specific groups or subcultures may be true, but not entirely. Cult enthusiasts, especially among younger generations such as Millennials or Generation Z, watch films and later on criticize those films based on their cinematography, aesthetics, and their cinematic value. That is why films that may be considered really bad and of poor value – such as *Twilight* (2009) is, have been “re-born” or revived in the 2020 by their 2008 fans who long for that feeling of nostalgia and have become cultified. It is also to be noted that cult film does not equal good film. On the contrary, most cult films were considered really bad for the time they appeared in and were only later on revisited and cultified by the audience: “films become rather than are born cult.” (Hunter, 2016, p. 3)

Harold and Maude, *Blade Runner* and *Streets on Fire* (1984), for instance, were commercial and critical failures on first release and only later became ‘cult classics’, eventually repackaged as such on video and DVD, classed as cult on Netflix, rereleased to cinemas on the basis of their acquired cult reputation. (Hunter, 2016, p. 3)

Going back to transmedia and the hybridity that unites different forms of representation, as Colin B. Harvey notices, it has been dominated by the fantasy and science-fiction genres. With cinematic universes such as *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Game of Thrones*, etc., it is no wonder that people have come to develop

a taste for epic stories that do not seem to have an ending in sight. (Harvey, 2015, p. 14)

As Jenkins has researched extensively, these types of worlds are so complex and built across so many different media channels that fans are eager to come up with their own conspiracy theories. It also allows them to create even more narratives starting from the adapted language, characters or situations.

Of course, this also has a lot of financial implications. The success of a series means that series will probably not end in the near future. After *Harry Potter* has ended, fans demanded more, so *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* was born along with the *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* play, financially benefiting both the crew behind the stories and the writer.

We have a very contemporary example of a fantasy story that has been adapted into different media and, one that has already acquired the cult title. *The Witcher* Polish book series, written by Andrzej Sapkowski has been adapted into *The Witcher* video game and now into *The Witcher* TV series. It also gave birth to a board game called *The Witcher Adventure Game*, which has been digitized.

The fan base of each of these adaptations is very different in terms of socio-cultural context. The books were meant for a Polish audience and they became cult fiction specifically for the Polish audience. The book was not popular among the readers back in 1980 when Sapkowski began to publish the story in the Polish *Fantastyka* magazine.

Polish readers, accustomed to two models of fantasy, could not get their heads around the idea that an evident piece of light entertainment could force its way into a magazine that should either publish hard sci-fi with philosophical ambitions (in the style of early Stanisław Lem) or political parables masked as dystopia (in the spirit of Janusz A. Zajdel). (Majkowski, 2021)

It was not until 1992 when the author began to publish his work in book form that the public truly acknowledged him as a skillful Polish fantasy writer. “Sapkowski was no longer a cult author, but a mainstream, celebrated and much discussed one, awarded the Paszport Polityki – a major cultural prize – in 1997.” (Majkowski, 2021)

Unlike the latest TV series and game adaptations that have become a massive success, the first film and video game that appeared in Poland were disasters. “There was no money, and the numerous decision-makers (including the infamous TV and film producer Lew Rywin) could not treat fantasy literature seriously.” (Majkowski, 2021) The cultification of the 2007 video game happened not because of the Polish audience, but because of the international public, already familiar with the fantasy genre. After that, the video game series became more and more international, appealing to gamers from all over the world. His novels were

translated and thus brought to the English-speaking public. Comparisons between Sapkowski's universe and that of other cult fiction such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* were drawn.

Some of the fans who have read the books claim that the TV series does not do justice to Sapkowski's original epic story, while others who have only played the game, state the same when they compare the game to the TV series. Polish fans expected the story to revolve around the world they know - Slavic folklore and people, and the changes in casting (with elves or witches of color) were not received as well by them as it was by the international audience. (Majkowski, 2021)

It all comes down to what Hutcheon was referring in her book: "we may actually read or see that so-called original after we have experienced the adaptation, thereby challenging the authority of any notion of priority." (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 13)

Each of these types of media has appeal to a different type of audience. Not everybody enjoys playing video games, but most people enjoy watching films or TV series. (Jenkins 2003) That is why both transmedia storytelling and the process of adaptations give each person the opportunity to find their favorite story in their favorite type of media, without necessarily having to experience other types they might not be comfortable with.

You can understand a lot about a specific universe just by reading the books or by playing the video games. They have been designed in such way that the audience can enjoy them without needing to have prior knowledge of the universe. As Henry Jenkins suggested, one of the main characteristics of transmedia storytelling is that it is "self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa." (Jenkins 2003) It works the same for this new type of loose film adaptations that have been developed these past years. However, it remains true that you can never fully understand the whole story without having experienced each type of media it has been adapted into.

Netflix's *The Witcher* takes place before the events that transpire in the games, so for someone like me whose only exposure to this world is said games and not the books, it's a whole bunch of fresh new stories that I either didn't know or only heard references about. (Beck 2019)

There are, as I have mentioned before, larger (financial) interests involved in the process. "Redundancy between media burns up fan interest and causes franchises to fail. Offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty." (Jenkins 2003) But that leads to another problem posed by Jenkins, that of licensing and competition. Instead of working

together to create new material for different media, the creators and producers compete with each other, not understanding exactly the other part's creative needs when adapting a material.

At the same time, film producers don't know the game market very well or respect those genre elements which made something like *Tomb Raider* successful. We need a new model for co-creation-rather than adaptation-of content that crosses media. The current licensing system typically generates works that are redundant (allowing no new character background or plot development) (...). (Jenkins 2003)

That is why not all adaptations become cultified. IF they are redundant, they get lost in the crowd. Jenkins considers that tie-in media cannot be considered transmedia storytelling specifically due to this redundancy. Fans accept an adapted story as long as it gives them the familiarity they expect and at the same time it challenges their views on the adapted text. If that adapted story exists in the same narrative format across multiple channels, it does not intrigue the audience anymore, making it redundant. The material also needs to be adapted according to the audience's cultural and social context – *The Witcher* has been accepted as a worldwide cult book series and film because it has been changed to fit the international public, but otherwise it would have been known as a cult book series only by the Polish public.

Going back to cult adaptations, franchises with superheroes, for example, are becoming more and more mainstream (original understanding of a cult classic required the adapted material specifically to appeal only to a specific public) due to the commercial success that they have. Everybody has access to them and everybody loves them. The reason behind making these all-American films has remained simply a commercial one. "Franchise products are governed too much by economic logic and not enough by artistic vision." (Jenkins 2003)

As Carlos A. Scolari, Paolo Bertetti and Matthew Freeman mention when analyzing the phenomenon in the introduction to their *Transmedia Archeology* book, "in many cases the consumers (readers, viewers, users) consider that the extension of a narrative world is not enough so they ask for more." (Scolari, Bertetti and, Freeman, 2014, p. 2) Thus, the point of transmedia is not to simply move the same material from one medium to another, but to alter it and to give it new meanings so it can gain new meanings. The process of adaptation has also opened itself to this approach mostly by remodeling the adapted texts to match the audience background or cultural context. In Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011), Heathcliff is a man of colour. In Dan Zeff's *Lost in Austen* (2008), we discover that Caroline Bingley is actually gay. Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019) gives Jo March a powerful feminist voice.

By expanding the fantastical universe in which a story has been created, another important element – as I have previously mentioned when talking about Eco – become essential, as Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman also discuss and that is the audience. “The second feature of transmedia storytelling is the participation of users in the extension of the narrative worlds.” (Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman, 2014, p. 2) The user is also one of the most important elements when addressing cult culture.

It could be argued then, taken into consideration the previous passage, that the existence of cult classics in the contemporary world is also very much defined by the levels of engagement of the users. If the era of technology has brought so many different means of expression such as blogs, vlogs, drawing websites, websites dedicated to fan art and fan fiction, and if the process of adaptation has changed so much throughout time, then that means that we also need to reevaluate our understanding of cult culture and to redefine it, just like Henry Jenkins’ convergence culture suggests.

The process of adaptation and transmedia storytelling both rely on the element of fandom to survive and it is only through fandom that any form of artistic expression can achieve the cult classics status. “The standard definition of transmedia storytelling thus could be represented by the following formula: Media Industry (canon) + Collaborative Culture (fandom) = Transmedia Storytelling.” (Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman, 2014, p. 3)

Another distinction Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman make in the introduction is that between “*media expansions* and *narrative expansions*” (Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman, p. 3). One refers to a cultural object being expanded into multiple forms of media and the other one refers to the cultural object appearing in the same types of media, but incorporating “new characters and/or narrative events”. (Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman, 2014, p. 3) The first could refer to transmedia storytelling, while the last could define adaptations. However, taken into consideration the multitude of theories in this essay that talk about the similarities between transmedia and adaptation especially in contemporaneity, media expansions and narrative expansions could easily be important equal parts of both transmedia and adaptation. “Many strategies that allow stories to cross multiple texts in the same medium quite often also work to allow stories to cross multiple media (i.e. seriality, cliffhangers, etc.).” (Scolari, Bertetti, Freeman, 2014, p. 4)

For the first one there are multiple examples such as the *Assassin’s Creed* video games that were expanded into the novels and later on into the film. For the second case, we can think of the *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) mini-series based on Jane Austen’s novel that has also been re-thought into the *Lost in Austen* (2008)

mini-series. The mini-series kept the initial characters, but introduced a new, contemporary one, thing which led to changing many events from the adapted text.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, transmedia storytelling and the process of adaptation cannot be clearly distinguished one from another and the line keeps getting blurrier as our technology evolves. It is possible that there will come a moment when the two notions will be used interchangeably. As these different media: literature, film, theater, visual arts interact more and more with each other under a hybrid form of transgression, critics, theorists and cinephiles alike need to analyze cross-media narratives keeping a few things in mind. They should certainly take into consideration the multitude of genres that exist, the parties involved in the making of these materials and the audience to better understand the two phenomena, while relinquishing any preconceptions of fidelity or terms such as “original source”.

It is necessary that we consider both points of view – that of the process of adaptation and that of transmedia storytelling and we do not exclude one or the other even if we are particularly interested in only one of the processes. The notion of hybridity ultimately incorporates both methods of passing one material through different media. This is especially important when looking at contemporary cultural creations – books, films, TV series, manga, etc.

Cult culture is thus related to the hybridity of the arts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through both adaptation and transmedia storytelling and it is responsible for the birth of dozens of contemporary adaptations (and not only) in both cinema and other types of media. It would be easy and helpful to have an exhausting list of traits of cult fiction, but realistically speaking that could not be possible. That is because the traits of cult classics change along with the development of technology and along with the needs of the society. It becomes harder and harder to distinguish between “cult and cool”, between iconic/ time lasting and truly cult fiction. What remains to be discussed is how many of those old traits are still valid today and what cult fiction and cult adaptation means for the contemporary age that relies on the Internet and streaming platforms for accessing fiction and for a public that keeps coming up with new types of forms of expression.

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