Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling

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The overlap between fan studies and Star Wars in all its multimedia incarnations seems to encourage academics to indulge in an autobiographical approach to the franchise. After all, George Lucas’s narrative universe evokes a range of emotions and personal reflections, from nostalgic memories of playing with action figures as a child to anger about the prequels and ongoing editorial changes Lucas has made to the original trilogy over the past decades. Like Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills, and Colin Harvey, I too cannot avoid the autobiographical impulse as a form of introduction—like the Death Star’s tractor beam, it just sucks me in—so allow me to be brief. In the summer of 1998, when I was fifteen years old, my appendix broke. I was misdiagnosed and went two weeks with a broken appendix before the doctors figured out what was wrong with me. Because of the misdiagnosis, I spent a month in the hospital having what I have since described as my “Martin Scorsese summer.” I went through the American Film Institute’s Top 100 Films from the comfort of my hospital bed and used the money from all the get-well cards to upgrade my computer so I could play X-Wing Alliance (1999).

Part of the game’s appeal was its status as one of the first Star Wars flight simulators with photorealistic 3D graphics that allowed players to pilot the Millennium Falcon. I remember hovering over the monitor with my friends as we watched from the crusty old ship cockpit as it went into hyperspace. It was as thrilling as the first time we played Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II (1997), a first-person shooter that allowed players to use a lightsaber and Force powers in such iconic settings as the carbonite freezing chamber from The Empire Strikes Back. I mention this because there is a tendency in studies of transmedia properties to emphasize narrative over play. Yet, to many video gamers, play is much more important than story.

I noticed this disjunction between media studies scholars and gamers when I was finishing my book on style as having transmedia properties.¹

Specifically, if we look back at the seminal transmedia case study of The Matrix franchise and the Enter the Matrix video game, we can see a pragmatic gulf in how academics, gamers, and critics engaged with the game. While Henry Jenkins uses the franchise persuasively to build upon Marsha Kinder’s work towards his theory of transmedia storytelling—the conception that integral narrative elements of a fictional world are dispersed systematically across multiple media platforms—gamers and popular critics focused on the gameplay. As one reviewer noted, “it’s a little disappointing that the game does not allow you to play as the three coolest members of the Matrix universe [...] It would have been cool to take off through the city as Neo, or shoot it out with agents as Trinity.” Similarly, Stephen Poole at PC Gamer asked, “But what’s with all the story? While some gamers will love to learn of Ghost’s existentialist leanings or his unique stance on celibacy, most would trade this knowledge for some kickass action—and this is where Enter the Matrix truly disappoints.

In both reviews, the critics voice a fairly common refrain that those familiar with video games based on film or television licenses can trace back to Atari’s historic E.T. debacle. Even when they are based on film properties, games are firstly meant to be playable. Narrative preoccupations aside, the quality of that gameplay and its reflection of the visceral spirit of the source text matters most. As Carle notes, his disappointment stems from not getting to experience the iconic “bullet time” of The Matrix from the perspective of one of the film’s main characters. Everything else—the story, the philosophy lessons, the characterization—is secondary. The purpose of this article is therefore to begin to formulate a theoretical and methodological approach to transmedia as play and apply the concept to Star Wars video games, specifically the space simulation/combat games that tend to return to the Death Star trench run, in the same way that fan studies scholars yield to their autobiographical impulses.

In order to take these initial steps, let us begin with the definition and usage of the term “transmedia play” up to this point. While Jenkins broadly alludes to the category in his 2011 blog post “Transmedia 202:
Further Reflections,” the term nevertheless remains elusive. Colin Harvey’s 2015 monograph Fantastic Transmedia traces the term back to 2008—to the work of game designer and theorist Stephen Dinehart. However, Dinehart’s theorization merely states that the player transforms the story via his or her own natural cognitive psychological abilities, and enables the Artwork to surpass medium. It is in transmedial play that the ultimate story agency, and decentralized authorship can be realized [...] The Artist authored transmedia elements act [as] a story guide for the inherently narratological nature of the human mind to become thought, both conscious and subconscious.

To which natural cognitive psychological abilities is Dinehart alluding? How might the conclusions of a cognitive approach to video games or transmedia play differ from the work of other cognitivist scholars like David Bordwell and Edward Branigan? Dinehart never tells us (the above quotation is actually the bulk of the blog post). How does transmedial play differ from transmedia storytelling? Both provide narrative worlds for the types of community-based behaviors—“decentralized authorship”—that Jenkins already theorized. Needless to say, Dinehart’s work does not carry the scholarly conversation very far due to its preference for unsubstantiated generalizations.

Additional scholarly work on the relationship between transmedia and play has been produced by Becky Herr-Stephenson, Meryl Alper, and Erin Reilly at the Annenberg Innovation Lab (in collaboration with Jenkins). But the research team’s study is focused on how it can be utilized to enrich connected learning in children. The research team defines transmedia play as the exploration, enjoyment, and remixing of “elements from diverse media [...] This ‘creative reworking’ (in Jenkins’ terms) allows children to tell new stories, work through problems, and share with others.” This conception provides a useful springboard that need not be specifically limited to children.

Think, for a moment, of Star Wars cosplay or a historical reenactment of a Civil War scene, two activities that tend to be prohibitive to children due to the cost of the costumes and props and the use of weaponry. Both, undoubtedly, are activities that rely on other media forms to create a narrative experience that is shared with others. Moreover, they are both social activities that are often performed in public venues, ranging from conventions to tourist locations. Sometimes those narrative experiences are new. When I encounter one of a handful of Darth Vader cosplayers at San Diego Comic-Con every year, the actors are not recreating scenes from the films, novels, or comics. While there may be performative punchlines like “The Force is strong with this one,” the bulk of the interactions are based around the cosplayer interacting with me as they assume Darth Vader would. Historical reenactment may differ in this regard based on the genre of practice: a reenactment of the battle of Gettysburg may not create a new narrative, while a living history might. In any case, we can see that, while the Annenberg scholars chose to focus on children, their theorization might also be useful for developing a theory of transmedia play on a broader scale.

So far, we can see that the Annenberg team’s conceptualization of transmedia play squares with Marsha Kinder and Jenkins’s work on transmedia as an experience that migrates across media platforms. But is it compatible with theories of play, specifically in relation to video games? According to Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (who utilize an interdisciplinary toolbox in their foundational work in video game studies), the most fundamental elements of the video game are an algorithm, player activity, interface, and graphics. Essentially, video games are a visual display of pixels (graphics) that respond to the player’s input (player activity) at the junction point between input and output (interface). Moreover, video games are defined by a set of procedures that are responsible for the game’s representations, responses to input, rules, and randomness (the algorithm).

For Wolf and Perron, “player activity is arguably the heart of the video game experience [...] without player activity, there would be no game.” This player activity takes place in a game world that presents itself as wholly separate from the real world. For game theorists like Roger Caillois and Johan Huizinga, the game world is a “second reality” that serves as

8 Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, introduction to The Video Game Theory Reader (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15.
9 Wolf and Perron, introduction to Video Game Theory, 16.
10 Wolf and Perron, introduction to Video Game Theory, 15.
the venue for player action.11 Furthermore, for Wolf, Perron, and theorist Alexander Galloway, there is a separation between the activities a player performs within the game (diegetic activity) and the physical actions performed outside the game, such as pressing a button, that are necessary to perform those diegetic activities (extradiegetic activity).12 To illustrate, there is both an overlap and disjunction between actions taken in the real world (extradiegetic space) and the game world (diegetic space). A player performing a dance sequence in Dance Dance Revolution (1998) or piloting an X-Wing in the Star Wars arcade game performs abridged physical actions in comparison to their digital avatars.

Does the video game’s algorithm therefore inhibit the exploration or remixing of media elements? To a certain extent, at least, it does. Most video games have spatial boundaries that confine player activity to a specific venue. For instance, you cannot go “outside” the maps of Battlefront (2015), nor can you pick Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker as your avatar (they only exist in the game as special power-ups that you can receive). Video games, like most new media, provide an illusion of choice based on a preexisting database of information that can be accessed via predetermined commands. However, boundaries and limitations tend to be inherent in the rules of any game—video or analog. Do video games allow players to work through problems? Absolutely. Most games are based around objectives from “get the most kills” to “navigate this space and avoid obstacles,” and almost any multiplayer game, Battlefront included, relies on a social dimension (sharing with others) to achieve those predetermined goals. Moreover, players of Battlefront can explore the game’s spaces and partake in such iconic events as the Battle of Hoth, the Battle of Endor, and the destruction of the first Death Star. Thus, Herr-Stephenson, Alper, and Reilly’s conception of transmedia play can be extended to account for both a larger audience and play in the context of a video game.

The authors further note that transmedia play has five characteristics: mobility (movement of stories across platforms creates new meanings), accessibility (each world has a variety of starting points), replayability (large-scale experiences create high potential for multiple iterations), resourcefulness (encourages creative thinking about challenging situations or problems), and social interaction (play occurs in conversation with others).13 I have

12 Wolf and Perron, introduction to Video Game Theory, 15. See also Galloway, Gaming, 7.
13 Galloway, Gaming, 27.
already engaged some of these points directly and indirectly. Transcribing
the Death Star trench run from *A New Hope* to one of the many video games
it appears in changes its meaning: the importance of the event is gleaned
from one’s knowledge of the film, while the immediacy of the first-person
experience magnifies that importance. Yet, the opposite sequence of events
could easily occur if a consumer played the video game before watching
the film. I have already discussed how such games—particularly of the
multiplayer variety—showcase both the resourceful and the social aspects
that Herr-Stephenson, Alper, and Reilly describe. Moreover, a game need
not be strictly multiplayer to encourage social behaviors. Arcade culture
nurtured a certain type of public performance and tips, cheats, and exploits
still migrate amongst the players of single-player games.

What I would like to focus on for the remainder of this brief essay is re-
playability—the idea that transmedia play utilizes large-scale experiences
to nurture the potential for multiple interactions. Transmedia storytelling
is dependent upon the consumer’s constant return to a narrative universe
through its overlapping texts; consumers need to do homework and stay
on top of story developments, which, in turn, enriches their understanding
of the previously established texts and encourages re-consumption (think
about how knowledge of *Shadows of the Empire* changes the establishing
shots of Mos Eisley in the special edition of *A New Hope* when we see
Dash Rendar’s ship fly across the sky). Enjoyment arises in consumers
when they can make these textual linkages, which goes back to Jenkins’s
theorization of transmedia storytelling as having a dimension of “additive
comprehension.”14 For Jenkins, one of the narrative goals of transmedia sto-
rytelling is that creators can re-consume texts while adding newly acquired
knowledge to “shift your perception.”15 To phrase it another way, transmedia
play can shift the consumer’s perception towards visceral pleasures. So what
is it about the Death Star trench run that keeps players coming back? The
iconic sequence that serves as the proving ground for the climax of *A New
Hope* has been remediated and recreated in video games ranging from the
1983 Atari arcade game to the 1993 desktop titles *Rebel Assault* and *X-Wing*,
and more recently in the 2009 iOS and Unity title *Trench Run* and 2015’s
*Star Wars Battlefront*.16 If the Force is a constant of the Star Wars universe,

14 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old Media and New Media Collide* (New York:
NYU Press, 2006), 123.
15 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 123.
16 For clarity and concision, I will now refer to this title as “the 2015 *Battlefront.*”
the trench run seems to be the equivalent for Star Wars video games,\textsuperscript{17} thus making it a prime example of replayability.

Jenkins provides a useful lens for contemplating the joys of replayability in his article “Games, the New Lively Art.” The article advocates the embrace of critic Gilbert Seldes’s distinction between “great arts,” which “seek to express universal and timeless values,” and “lively arts,” which “seek to give shape and form to immediate experiences and impressions. [Seldes] values affect over intellect, immediate impact over long-term consequences, the spontaneous impulse over the calculated effect.”\textsuperscript{18} Thus, Jenkins largely avoids the foundational theoretical skirmishes around ludic or narrative approaches to video games in order to advocate for the investigation of the pleasurable, the emotional, and the subjective. For instance, Seldes describes what Jenkins terms and describes as “memorable moments”:

\begin{quote}
the pleasures of finding peak experiences within otherwise banal works. [They] don’t simply depend on spectacle. After all, spectacle refers to something that stops you dead in your tracks, forces you to stand and look. Game play becomes memorable when it creates the opposite effect—when it makes you want to move, when it convinces you that you really are in charge of what’s happening in the game.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

In other words, memorable moments are illustrated by the times you played the 2015 \textit{Battlefront} and, tricked into seeing and feeling past the interface as a bridge between extradiegetic space and the \textit{Millennium Falcon}, started rocking your body in sync with each turn and swerve of the ship. As Jenkins later notes, the phenomenological closure created by good game design, a functional interface, and an adept player prompts many players to conflate the two spaces as being one and the same. He writes that we act as if we have “unmediated access to the fictional space. We refer to our game characters in the first person and act as if their experiences” are our own.\textsuperscript{20} Of course, the lynchpin in this relationship is game design that aids the player in making that conflation. Gamers can become more adept as they play a game (the progression system embedded in most games demands that they do) and broken controllers can be fixed, but poor game design was a

\textsuperscript{17} For a contextual media-industrial history of Star Wars video games and LucasArts, see Stefan Hall’s chapter in this volume.
\textsuperscript{19} Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art.”
\textsuperscript{20} Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art.”
relative constant in games made before the 2000s (2003 saw the launch of the first console patch). So how do game designers assist in the process of making us feel like we’re fighting like Luke Skywalker, like we’re piloting the Millennium Falcon as Han Solo?

In the case of the Death Star downloadable content (DLC) for Star Wars Battlefront, it does so predominantly through a staged progression that combines a variety of gameplay modes with an epic scope. The centerpiece of the DLC is a game mode entitled “Battle Station” that involves three stages, culminating—once again—in the trench run. The first stage pits Rebel and Imperial star fleets against one another as the former attempt to blow up the latter’s Star Destroyers. The mode allows for either first-person or third-person camera placement, while players can temporarily take control of unique bonuses like Boba Fett’s Slave I or the Millennium Falcon in order to give their teams an advantage. If the Rebels’ assault succeeds, the mode progresses to the second stage: the rescue. Unlike the first stage, the second takes the guise of a first-person shooter in which the Rebels must escort R2-D2 from the depths of the Death Star’s corridors to a docking bay so the droid can be rescued. Like the first stage, the second allows players to briefly take on such familiar characters as Bossk, Chewbacca, and the Emperor (complete with Force powers and unique abilities) to sway the battle in their favor. If R2-D2 is rescued, the final stage—the trench run—is triggered, and three Rebel players are randomly selected to make the attempted run while the others protect them and act as a diversion. Like the first stage, the player can choose a first- or third-person camera and can take part in the battle as Luke, Han, or Darth Vader.

Obviously, this transposition of A New Hope’s most iconic sequence differs from the canonized narrative. The Star Destroyer attack stage owes more to the finale of Return of the Jedi, while the R2-D2 docking bay rescue seems cribbed from the beginning of Revenge of the Sith. But the alternation between flight simulator attack-and-defense stages and a first-person shooter stage provides the DLC with a sense of dramatic stakes and scale. Part of this stems from the temporal investment players must make while playing the mode. Altogether, the mode can take up to half an hour to complete (much longer than the usual six- to ten-minute round of team deathmatch). Thus, if the Rebels fail in the second stage, they have to repeat the first all over again. If they run out of time during the trench run, they also lose. Another difference between the game design and the film, of course, is that these stages do not take place simultaneously. In A New Hope, the cross-cutting between the Rebel base on Yavin, Grand Moff Tarkin targeting the Rebel base on the Death Star, Luke Skywalker’s X-Wing attack, and Vader’s pursuit
created both dramatic stakes and suspense. However, the implementation of such precise coordination would undoubtedly make for an extremely complicated gameplay experience.

The second stage of the DLC therefore focuses on creating a sense of scale, in particular making the Death Star *feel* real by making the iconic space explorable and by giving it a tangible quality. One corridor, for example, leads to the trash compactor that almost killed our heroes, while another leads to the shield generators that Obi-Wan Kenobi deactivated. By the time the third stage inevitably comes around, the Death Star has a physical volume and depth for both teams of players. As *Forbes* contributor Todd Kenreck writes, the end result is “that you feel like you are in the movies” when you see dozens of stormtroopers go into battle against the Rebels.21 Fittingly, Kenreck also focuses on the experiential pleasures of the DLC, writing: “[i]t is definitely a wish fulfillment piece of DLC. Being able to fly down the trenches of the Death Star as Darth Vader is pretty much a dream come true.”22 As in the gameplay of *Enter the Matrix*, the story is secondary whereas the transmedia play, the experience of being Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker, is everything.

My analysis of the dimensional, transmedial space of the Death Star and how it creates enhanced dramatic significance in the 2015 *Battlefront* dovetails with another concept by Jenkins that proves useful for examining transmedia play—games as evocative spaces. In “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” Jenkins encourages a compromise between the dueling camps of ludologists and narratologists that examines “games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility.”23 A productive route for reaching this middle ground is by analyzing video games as “evocative spaces,” similar to that of theme park attractions that “build upon stories or genre traditions already well known to visitors, allowing them to enter physically into spaces they have visited many times before in their fantasies.”24 Fittingly, Jenkins cites game scholar and ludologist Jesper Juul, who argues that “you clearly can’t deduct the story of *Star Wars* from *Star

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22 Kenreck, “Death Star DLC.”
24 Jenkins, “Game Design,” 677.
For Jenkins, who was on the cusp of his pioneering work on transmedia storytelling, this is too restrictive a conception of narrative (he was writing this in 2005). The gift of Star Wars video games is the fact that the player comes into them with a previously established understanding of the narrative and that they enrich our engagement with a larger universe by giving “concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the storyworld, creating an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with.” In short, gamers unfamiliar with the films or Star Wars universe may not engage in transmedia play when encountering an evocative space like the carbonite chamber or the Death Star for the first time. They may get enjoyment from the games—similar to that of a person who is first introduced to Star Wars via an ancillary offshoot—but I would guess that the “wish fulfillment” aspect would be lost on these gamers to a great degree (depending on their familiarity with the franchise and its world via other intertextual and paratextual sources).

While we’ve analyzed a contemporary Star Wars game in relation to the concepts of memorable moments and—indirectly—evocative spaces, let us now return to the origin of our case study: the 1983 Atari arcade game designed by Mike Hally. The Atari game was composed of 3D color vector graphics and featured what were cutting-edge digital sound cues at the time. We hear a lo-res rendition of John Williams’s iconic score. We can hear samples of the voices of Alec Guinness, James Earl Jones, Harrison Ford, and the growls of Chewbacca and beeps of R2-D2. The elaborately decorated cockpit cabinet for the interface features stickers and faux computer screens to give the player the impression that they are piloting an X-Wing on the way to save Yavin 4 from certain destruction. In short, the physical interface itself—not just the game— aids substantially in the creation of an evocative space. Fittingly, Jenkins quotes Don Carson, a senior show designer for Walt Disney Imagineering, who writes that “every sound you play, every turn in the road should reinforce the concept” and the “physical space […] does much of the work.” Thus, the various aesthetic embellishments on the interface itself, the music, and the sound effects go a long way in sowing the seeds of illusion and creating that “second reality” that game theorists describe. But how do we, as players, overcome one of the biggest perceived obstacles on our path toward complete immersion: the lack of photorealistic

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26 Jenkins, “Game Design,” 678.
27 Jenkins, “Game Design,” 676.
graphics? How do we align ourselves with Luke Skywalker if TIE fighters look like rudimentary sketches?

I should note that I do not personally ascribe to this popular assumption of video-game play. Of course, I have felt shock and awe in moments of realistic beauty in video games—for example, the exit from the vault in *Fallout 3* (2008); the experiences of roaming the Wild West in *Red Dead Redemption* (2010); or the uncanny sensation of driving around a spatially abridged version of my LA neighborhood in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). However, I still find playing *Super Mario Bros.* (1983) engaging despite the fact that two-dimensional platform games do not offer the same kind of visual realism. That being said, the evolution of graphics-generating hardware towards greater visual realism has driven both the aesthetic norms of game design and gamer expectations. But realism is, as always, contingent upon historical context. For instance, the photorealistic computer-generated imagery of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) today tends to be met by my students with laughter. I say this because while Atari's *Star Wars* may not look “real” to us in 2016, it certainly was good enough for gamers in the early 1980s. As Dan Plotkin writes in a *Compute!* review of the game, the 3D wire diagrams give “such an excellent illusion of depth,” while the “digitized sound” and controls make the Death Star sequence “breathtaking.” In other words, rudimentary wire graphics served their immersive purpose at the time. But I would like to add one more aesthetic piece to this puzzle.

Consider the Death Star trench run in its original cinematic context. As I have described, George Lucas cross-cuts between multiple points of view. We watch as the Rebel attack squadron dispatches TIE fighters during their approach to the trench. Similarly, we watch as the Rebel military leaders monitor the alignment of the Death Star's destructive laser beam from their own location on Yavin 4. One of the main tools in all of these settings is a computer: the Rebel leaders trace the trajectory of the laser with a gigantic, computerized war-room table, while the rival forces dogfight with the aid of targeting computers. The targeting computers in both the X-wings and TIE fighters are lo-res representations constructed out of rudimentary 3D vector graphics.

In both instances, we see the Death Star trench represented by lo-res vector graphics and a z-axis vanishing point. To borrow from the work of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, the film remediates the computer in order to give players the sensation that they are in the position of Luke Skywalker;

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the arcade game does the inverse. It remediates the graphics of the targeting computer to give us a similar illusion.\textsuperscript{29} However, this admittedly simplistic analysis overlooks one key difference between the two representations. For, when we see the targeting computer in \textit{A New Hope}, it is in the context of one of the film’s many point-of-view shots. Luke looks into his eyepiece while flying and sees the digitized representation as being outside the confines of the ship, ahead of the X-Wing. The Atari game, on the other hand, gives us a point-of-view shot from the cockpit. In other words, the film separates the view from the ship and the view from the targeting computer while the Atari game equates them. Nevertheless, both representations of the trench run—the cinematic and the vector graphic—utilize a subjective, computer-mediated point of view. The latter, when paired with the ornate cabinet of the arcade game, creates an evocative space that, to return to Jenkins, conveys “new narrative experiences through its creative manipulation of environmental details.”\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Coda}

In this chapter, I have begun to explore the concept of transmedia play as initially outlined by Becky Herr-Stephenson, Meryl Alper, and Erin Reilly as the exploration, enjoyment, and remixing of “elements from diverse media. [...] This ‘creative reworking’ (in Jenkins’s terms) allows children to tell new stories, work through problems, and share with others.”\textsuperscript{31} In so doing, I have broadened their conception of transmedia play beyond children and connected learning to consumers of all ages and to the context of Star Wars video games in particular. Specifically, I have argued that replayability—one of Herr-Stephenson, Alper, and Reilly’s qualities of transmedia play—can be nurtured and magnified by Henry Jenkins’s conceptions of video games as providing “memorable moments” and “evocative spaces” with regard to the Death Star trench run in both the 2015 \textit{Battlefront} and the 1983 Atari game. As an initial step in conceiving transmedia as having a playful quality, I have attempted to use Jenkins’s own work on video games to elaborate on his tangentially associated theories of transmedia storytelling out of a desire to acknowledge the long shadow of his influence.

\textsuperscript{30} Jenkins, “Game Design,” 678.
\textsuperscript{31} Herr-Stephenson, Alper, and Reilly, \textit{T is for Transmedia}, 10.
However, my account and methodological toolbox should not be interpreted as being the only lens for such an analysis. As Obi-Wan once said, “What I told you was true ... from a certain point of view.” I eagerly look forward to evolution in this area of inquiry and would suggest that scholarship based on cultural memory, performance studies, and reenactment may provide a fruitful supplement to the larger projects of media franchising, transmedia world-building, and cultural studies.