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Transmedial Playthings: Games, Toys and Playful Engagement in Storyworlds

Summary

This chapter discusses transmediality from the perspective of play. Building bridges between studies of games, media, toys and literature, we argue that it is important to understand transmediality from a wide interdisciplinary perspective, that takes into account the design and operations of multiple commercially available playthings. Play, as an active creative practice, can bring things to life and instil our complex and extensive storyworlds with meaning. In practical terms, such meaning-making practices can mean engagement with and combining multiple material and immaterial elements that can be adopted from games, toys, movies, comics or novels alike. With case studies focusing on the Angry Birds and LEGO Lord of the Rings games, this chapter illustrates the richness and complexity of contemporary, commercially produced "transmedial playthings", but finally concludes that aside from user's narrative, material and technological innovations, it is even more important to recognize the key role of the users' creative energy and curiosity. Transmediality, from our perspective, does not mean just the narrative elements like characters or plotlines that cross media boundaries, but rather something that is rooted in our creative impulses, and in the playful energy and activities of people who feel inspired to engage in creative, transmedial play.

The Background of Transmedial Play Studies

The research fields of stories, (trans)media, games, as well as play and toys, have usually been considered separately in scholarship. However, the reality of transmedial production, including franchising strategies and the emergence of "playable media", has developed into an increasingly interwoven network of phenomena.

As consumers and citizens of a "ludic society",¹ we are continually confronted by cultural productions that are designed to rely on narrative links, shared marketing strategies, and interconnected reading, watching and physical, as well as digital play practices. In this chapter we call such manifestations 'transmedial playthings' and analyse some prominent examples in order to suggest directions for further study in this field.

Our background in this area dates to the early 1990s, when Frans Mäyrä published his first works on the polyphony of cultural texts and 'textual selves'. The focus in this area has been on conflicting, divided, hybrid and transformative cultural elements, and has included studies on several seemingly separate, yet functionally connected topics: demons of popular fiction, religion and folk horror culture, *daimon* as the voice from within (e.g. the Daimon of Socrates; the daimons/demons of classic tragedy), and werewolves and vampires (as man+animal or human+corpse hybrids). Such classic hybrid elements serve to highlight the long history and the ambiguous temptations and terrors of borderline 'otherness' that mixed and hybrid elements serve in culture more generally. More recent research has turned to the roles of cyborgs and computers as man+machine or material+immaterial hybrids, again embodying a borderline 'otherness' in an increasingly technology-saturated reality. In disciplinary terms, part of this work has been situated within literary studies, in particular the research line that deals with intertextuality and hybrid texts, and which studies them as polyphonic texts that are possessed by 'other texts'. Our other lines of research have oriented towards media studies and game studies, considering playful media and games as the 'borderline others' of mainstream media and (linear) textuality. Meaningful borderlines capture elements of culturally significant divisions or tensions; moreover, they highlight notions of (human or textual) Self and its Other, which we have analysed in terms of play vs. reading, game vs. media, and most recently, in studies of digital-physical hybridity.²

Stories and Worlds

Fundamental questions that deal with physicality or immateriality in culture relate to the ontological status of the subject matter. In particular, within traditions of fantasy and science fiction there appears to be a strong link between 'worldliness'

¹ See, e.g. Jaakko Stenros, Markus Montola, and Frans Mäyrä, "Pervasive Games in Ludic Society", *Proceedings of the 2007 Conference on Future Play* (Toronto, Canada: ACM, 2007), pp. 30-37; Eric Zimmerman, "Manifesto for a Ludic Century", in Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding, ed., *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), pp. 19-22.

² Mäyrä, Frans Ilkka, *Demonic Texts and Textual Demons: The Demonic Tradition, the Self, and Popular Fiction* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 1999); Mäyrä, Frans, *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture* (London & New York: Sage Publications, 2008).

and narrative fiction. Rather than "reading for the plot" (following Peter Brooks),³ texts are primarily "reading for the world", or as articulated by Brian McHale, governed by an "ontological dominant".⁴ In experiential reality, however, the separation between narrative-oriented or world-oriented reader and action-oriented player positions cannot be maintained. From personal experience (that we believe follows rather a common pattern), we can bear witness as to how an interest in fantasy and science fiction moves from one text or media form to another. An enthusiast can first start by reading 'everything by Tolkien', just to spend more time in Middle Earth, the fictional storyworld created by the Oxford don. Their next step may be taking up the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game and immersing themselves in its "Forgotten Realms" franchise, which exists both as a D&D campaign setting world (originally created by Ed Greenwood), and as a series of popular fantasy novels. This, by its turn can be an introduction to computer role-playing games that are based on the geography, peoples, histories and mythic dimensions that have been created, and which constitute "Forgotten Realms".⁵ In the context of transmedialisation, the destinies of characters based on role-playing games function as tools for exploring vast worlds. As an example, in the original Forgotten Realms, the campaign setting, adventure modules and novels are all constituted by and contribute to the fictional continent of *Faerûn*. As such, areas as Cormyr, Sword Coast, or Icewind Dale soon become familiar to those who play games in this world, or read the novels associated with this setting. While the narrative and plot remain central for many readers, game players are drawn to dimensions such as world-exploration, game system experimentation, socialisation and achievement, all of which relate to important ludic challenges.⁶

As a specific form of intertextuality, transmediality is something that permeates the life of everyone in media-saturated, late-modern societies; but transmedial phenomena are felt particularly acutely by those who are dedicated to such ontologically dominated forms of culture and creativity. The transfer of characters, plot lines and fictional worlds that takes place between movies, games, television series, comics, web content and mobile applications has accelerated, especially

³ Brooks, Peter, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

⁴ McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 9-10; 59.

⁵ The original boxed *Forgotten Realms Campaign Set* was published by TSR, Inc in 1987, the first Forgotten Realms novels were published soon after, such as the popular work by R. A. Salvatore, starting with the first Icewind Dale series novel, *The Crystal Shard* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR, Inc., 1988).

⁶ Cf. Richard A. Bartle, "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs", *The Journal of Virtual Environments* 1 (1996), <<http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm>> (accessed 16 November 2011); Nicholas Yee, "Motivations for Play in Online Games", *Cyber Psychology and Behavior* 9 (2007), pp. 772-775; Peter Vorderer and Jennings Bryant, ed., *Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses, and Consequences* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006).

when seen in contrast to the previous era dominated by more traditional forms of print publishing. The flexibility with which characters from popular culture shift from one media to another also illustrates the underlying mechanisms, which suggests that, in essence, all media is transmedial. Some communication scholars would claim that there can be no understanding of communicative forms without some form of systemic framing that makes individual utterances intelligible. This issue is, for example, at the heart of "animal languages" controversies, and some studies suggest that even birds have an understanding of 'grammar', organising their communicative signals.⁷ However, as Stuart Hall noted, in critical practice, structuralism needs to be balanced by what he calls 'culturalism', and by the associated understanding situated in our lived experiences.⁸ Other authors have emphasised that we should be careful to differentiate between *intermediality*, *intramediality* and *transmediality*: while intermedial phenomena take place between media, an intramedial perspective focuses on analyses within a certain medium, and transmedial analyses identify the operation of certain motifs, aesthetics or discourses that appear (relatively independently) across a variety of media.⁹ Our interest is in following the expansion of games, media and literature into this wider network of transmedial connections, and providing a Game Studies informed perspective into the discussion of transmediality.

While analysing commercial and popular forms of transmedial and hybrid products and phenomena, it is also useful to remember that we live in a reality that is mixed by definition, and in our lived experience, material, semiotic and ludic realities continuously overlap and interplay with one another. A book can be used as a toy, and performances with non-narrative games can inspire storytelling. The immaterial rules of games as well as the worlds, characters and events in fiction are inseparably embedded into the physical media that carries them, while also emerging as ontologically distinct elements. A recent trend in research focuses on the increasingly active modes of audience participation, and their productive and playful engagement with commercial entertainment, as well as with participatory and performance-oriented forms of art. The most significant threads of discussion include debates around the *ludification* of culture,¹⁰ the active

⁷ See e.g. Abe, Kentaro, and Dai Watanabe, "Songbirds Possess the Spontaneous Ability to Discriminate Syntactic Rules" *Nature Neuroscience* 14 (2011): 1067–74. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nn.2869>.

⁸ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", *Media, Culture and Society* 2:1 (1980), pp. 57-72.

⁹ See Irina O. Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality", *Intermédialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques* 6 (2005), pp. 43-64. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7202/1005505ar>>.

¹⁰ Joost Raessens, "Playful Identities, or the Ludification of Culture", *Games and Culture* 1:1 (2006), 52-57, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281779>>.

convergence within culture,¹¹ and the *pervasive* character of games, playful simulations and other ludic forms as they are adopted in new fields of culture.¹² Recently, Colin Harvey has argued for highlighting the role of *cultural memory* in comprehending the ways in which various transmedial articulations of distributed storyworlds – such as *Dr. Who* – are "allowed to remember, misremember, forget and even 'non-remember' diegetic elements from elsewhere in a specific trans-media network".¹³

(Transmedial) Narrativity as (Extended) Virtual Reality?

An important precursor for any study that aims to comprehend the relations between digitally created worlds, games, storytelling and narrative studies, is Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (2001). The questions she puts forward remain relevant: "Is there a significant difference in attitude between immersion in a game and immersion in a movie or novel? What are the new possibilities for representation offered by the emerging technology of virtual reality?"¹⁴ Our gameplay experience studies suggest that significant differences do in fact exist. However, there are also significant continuities and overlaps between the experiences of enjoying, for example, a novel, a movie or a virtual-world computer game. We have produced a model based on game-player interview studies and surveys, which reveals three key dimensions to immersive experiences related to sensory immersion, imaginative immersion, and challenge-based immersion. The model provides a three-fold perspective on game players' experiences, and helps to see continuities and differences in experiencing linear narrative media and gameplay. The overall meaning of such sensory and other experiences, does however rely on the interpretation of the experience, which can be affected for example by a narrative that a player retroactively constructs from the nonlinear, trial-and-error style of progressing while playing a game.¹⁵

¹¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York UP, 2006).

¹² Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern, *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2009).

¹³ Colin B. Harvey, *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

¹⁴ Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001; quotes from the back-cover summary).

¹⁵ Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion", in Susanne de Castell and Jennifer Jenson, ed., *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on Digital Games Research* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 37-54.

The early stages of contemporary Game Studies involved tensions between two schools of thought that were dubbed as 'ludology' and 'narratology', although the narratology-trained scholars were mostly representatives of the 'ludology' school. Based on genuine disagreements on the direction that game scholarship should take, along with some general misunderstandings, at its core the debate related to different researchers' interests in different kinds of games, and the different dimensions of game design. For example, when introducing the term 'ludology', Gonzalo Frasca (1999) wrote that while video games may share characters and settings with narratives, it is important to study them "as games", that is, as ludic activities based on rules and simulation.¹⁶ In contrast, Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* emphasises games' potential as interactive, participatory drama, and she sees narrative potential even in seemingly non-narrative, abstract games such as *Tetris*.¹⁷ Markku Eskelinen has attacked Murray's allegorical reading of this Soviet interactive puzzle game as being a "perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans" as "interpretative violence", which teaches us nothing about "Tetris as a game".¹⁸ The entire debate serves as a cautionary example: there are dangers of overtly emphasising the storytelling potential of games, but neither should they be overlooked.

Transmedia and Storyworlds

For the purposes of this analysis, a transmedial storyworld can be seen as an assemblage of characters, storylines and milieu that extends beyond the boundaries of a single medium, and is developed in unique, medium-specific forms within them. The concept of transmedia was introduced into contemporary scholarship by Marsha Kinder in her book *Playing with Power* (1993), particularly associating it with a "dual form spectatorship" which is illustrated, for example, by the child audiences of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, who are positioned both in active and passive modes. According to Kinder, contemporary, commercially produced transmedia is linked to particularly ambiguous "consumerist interactivity", which

¹⁶ Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (Video)games and Narrative", *Ludology.org* (2003), <<http://www.ludology.org/articles/ludology.htm>>. (Originally published as: "Ludologia kohtaa narratologian", *Parnasso* 3 (1999), pp. 365-71.)

¹⁷ Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997), pp. 143-44.

¹⁸ Markku Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation", *Game Studies* 1 (2001), <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>> (accessed 1 May 2015).

has activating, empowering, as well as passive and even potentially exploitative aspects.¹⁹

With a slightly different emphasis, Henry Jenkins has heralded the fragmentary and dispersed character of transmedia storytelling as intellectually stimulating and inherently social. As key events in transmedial storyworlds and the lives of fictional characters appear scattered across multiple forms of media, the ensuing "jigsaw puzzle" can operate as a stimulant for "collective intelligence" practices to emerge among the related fandom and their internet fora.²⁰ Moreover, the piecemeal publication of storyworld elements across multiple product lines also makes commercial sense, as it operates as an effective franchising and marketing strategy.

Case Study 1: Rovio and the Angry Birds

While the physical and material roots of entertainment and storytelling can be traced to pre-literate cultures, within contemporary digital and game cultures and the associated field of scholarship, the "material turn" is a rather recent phenomenon.²¹ This is partly due to the new technological systems that tie material and immaterial dimensions together in novel ways: for example, the Wiimote controller of Nintendo's Wii gaming console aims at linking and translating naturalistic hand or body movements directly into their digital counterparts in the virtual domain of the game play. Similar techniques have been introduced by other manufacturers, and the use of "augmented reality" in next-generation gaming interfaces attempts to create an illusion of virtual and material realities, combining seamlessly in the player experience. Gaming tokens (like pieces in board games) are now being embedded with RFID chips, and physical toys are tracked with cameras or various other sensors, and when converted by program code into events that affect the digital world and the virtual versions of physical toy characters; in technical terms, "touching the digital" is becoming possible. Within scholarship, these developments are mirrored by a certain "return of the repressed", as new ethnographic interests in materialism, Marxist political economy, or actor-network studies are being (re)introduced into the study of games and play.

For several years, the Finnish game company Rovio has been at the forefront of transmedial publication strategies with their hugely popular "action-puzzle" game *Angry Birds* (2009), and also with its sequels and expansions. By 2015, the total number of downloads of *Angry Birds* in multiple gaming platforms has been

¹⁹ Marsha Kinder, *Playing With Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), pp. 1-5.

²⁰ Jenkins, *ibid.* p. 95.

²¹ Thomas Apperley and Darshana Jayemane, "Game Studies' Material Turn", *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9 (2012), pp. 7-25.

culture, the colourful, humorous and aggressive birds and pigs have become rather well-known, as have their particular characteristics and functions in games. For example, the birds have appeared on the Conan O'Brien show, where Conan used a physical, giant-sized sling to take down the pigs.

The history, range and function of *Angry Birds*-themed merchandise – including figurines, plush toys, outdoor games, soda drinks, candy, shower gel, coffee and backpacks – have been analysed in detail by Heikki Tyni and Olli Sotamaa.²⁴ Expansionist in their transmedial strategy, Rovio has not only moved aggressively into creating traditional forms of licensed merchandise, but has also advanced into the sphere of physical-play products. In addition to physical board games and yard game kits, *Angry Birds* has also launched various 'hybrid' initiatives. In 2012, Rovio collaborated with Mattel in launching an *Angry Birds* 'Appitivity' toy for an *Angry Birds* tablet game. By placing the toy on the tablet screen when *Angry Birds* is on, the toy allows the player to open up new game modes. The toy is a typical 'appcessory', which takes the form of a novel play product that utilises various smart device features and affordances such as cameras, image recognition, capacitive ink and gyroscopic sensors to facilitate play with physical pieces, on and around the touch screen device.²⁵

As another example of producing transmedial playthings, in 2013 Rovio partnered with Hasbro in creating "Telepods". Available for the tablet version of the game, Telepods are physical *Angry Birds* character toys. When running one of the supported games, the smart device recognizes the toy via an embedded QR code and opens up a virtual version of the corresponding character for the play. The logic of Telepods can be seen as following in the footsteps of other appcessory games and also the extremely successful toy-game hybrid franchise *Skylanders* (Activision, 2011), which popularised a similar transport mechanism with its ever-expanding roster of toy characters. Telepod toys open up new stages for play, and act as a physical correspondent for downloading digital add-on content.²⁶

Interviews that our researchers carried out with Rovio indicated that the question for them is also what the "right kind" of hybridity is, and how the longevity of the hybrid experience could be maximized. Some researchers like Van

(2016). <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_302.pdf> (accessed 22 March, 2018.)

²⁴ Heikki Tyni and Olli Sotamaa, "Material Culture and Angry Birds", in *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic* (presented at the DiGRA Nordic 2014, Gotland: DiGRA, 2014), <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/nordicdigra2014_submission_4.pdf>.

²⁵ Tyni and Sotamaa, *ibid.*

²⁶ Tyni and Sotamaa, *ibid.*

Campenhout et al.²⁷ have even argued for stepping back from the excessive dematerialization of objects and services, and looking instead for a middle way of incorporating the best of both worlds into design strategies. They see flexibility and availability as being the best features of the digital world, whereas material objects are acknowledged for their "rich interaction", namely through the possibility of physical manipulation and the cognitive clarity they offer.

The diversity of Rovio's operations effectively contests any simple view of a modern game studio as a mere software developer. The marketing logic of tying physical toys into the larger ecosystem of hybrid media, composed of equally important physical and digital elements, is the focal point of both the hybrid *Angry Birds* toys and the multimodal *Angry Birds* phenomenon as a whole. Discussions with Rovio employees confirm this: the company sees digital games, animation and physical merchandising as the three equally important cornerstones of its enterprise. With *The Angry Birds Movie* (2016), a large-scale Hollywood feature animation, the company has undeniably completed a circle. What started out as a small mobile game has completed its slow climb to the most visible pedestal of the entertainment world, the silver screen – a sharp contrast to most hit franchises that typically start their journey from, and subsequently revolve around, the success (or failure) of a major feature film as the urtext of a transmedial storyworld. In this case, the game and its franchise products have served as the fertile breeding ground for the feature film, which in turn can act as a further stimulus for further rounds of games and franchise products. For a company such as Rovio, a multi-directional strategy of transmedial publication helps to bring sustainability and predictability, as the business is not at the mercy of the fluctuating economic situation of a single entertainment sector.²⁸

There are distinctive benefits to promoting digital games with material franchising products. Material play elements that are connected with a digital game can help to producing a certain 'stickiness' to the game. With both the Telepods and games like *Skylanders*, even when the game is not running, the toys remain visible in the room, reminding the user of the game and perhaps evoking an impulse to engage in transmedial play.²⁹ Clearly the experiences of *Angry Birds* function and are indeed designed to operate on multiple levels, and the significance of transmedial products can be distinctively different for children and adults. As such, there is a great need for a better understanding of the principles of designing, producing and marketing digital information in a transmedial era, and

²⁷ Lukas Van Campenhout, Joep Frens, Kees Overbeeke, Achiel Standaert and Herbert Peremans, "Physical Interaction in A Dematerialized World", *International Journal of Design* 7:1 (2013), pp. 1-18.

²⁸ Tyni and Sotamaa, *ibid.*

²⁹ Heikki Tyni and Annakaisa Kultima, "The Emergence of Industry of Playful Hybrids – Developer's Perspective", in *Proceedings of the 20th International Academic Mindtrek Conference* (NY: ACM, 2016), pp. 413–421 <<https://doi.org/10.1145/2994310.2994358>>.

this increasingly includes taking into consideration how transmedial worlds operate when interactive behaviours are reproduced in tactile, play-inviting forms.

Case study 2: *LEGO The Lord of the Rings*

Almost everyone is familiar with LEGO bricks as the classic, open-ended construction toy. Produced since 1949, the interlocking bricks have become symbols for creative play, and have spawned entire subcultures dedicated to collecting, building and sharing the hobby in various ways. During the 1990s, the LEGO Group started producing narrativised, transmedial LEGO products that were cross-branded with *Star Wars*, Disney, or *Harry Potter* characters, storylines and settings. At the same time, the focus of the designed play activity started to move away from construction, and towards pretence play.³⁰ Less positively, some scholars have interpreted LEGO as having moved away from creative play towards a more commercially motivated, pre-scripted re-enactment of scenarios that serve as marketing for other products and media within the same transmedial franchise.³¹ The "designed play" in these products does not, however, necessarily coincide with the actual play, as practiced by children, and also by AFOLs (Adult Fan of LEGO). Moreover, even in previous decades, when playing with traditional LEGO bricks, children took inspiration from media, popular culture and more generally their surrounding society. A child's creation of various kinds of toy gun out of any available materials, or their engagement in violently themed war play or playing "cops & robbers" have long been features of such play, even while educators' and researchers' attitudes towards such practices have diverged.³²

According to Lori Landay, the focus in enacting the transmedial LEGO world is often on the action rather than the narrative, with emphasis lying on the exciting character actions in the narrative, and exploring what the playsets afford.³³ In a sense, narrativised LEGO bricks have the media narrative "built-in[to]" the toy itself, but there is also room for playful improvisation and modification.

³⁰ Lori Landay, "Myth blocks: The Ninjago and Chima themes", in Mark J. P. Wolf, ed., *Lego Studies* (New York & London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 55-80.

³¹ Maaïke Lauwaert, *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009), p. 59.

³² See, e.g. Jeffrey Goldstein, "Immortal Kombat: War Toys and Violent Video Games", in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), pp. 53-68; Penny Holland, *We Don't Play with Guns Here* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill International, 2003).

³³ Landay, p. 62.

In the multiple functions of LEGO, the immaterial and material aspects are inseparably intertwined. As Stig Hjarvard has written:

The physical bricks have been circumscribed by the imaginary world of the media industry and the physical bricks of today's LEGO are only one manifestation of the brick icon that circulates on all sorts of media platforms in all kinds of imaginary worlds and narratives.³⁴

The multiple links and layers of transmedial phenomena can be highlighted with the example of the *LEGO The Lord of the Rings* game (*LEGO LoTR*; Traveller's Tales, 2012). Not only is the game directly and indirectly based on the translation of Tolkien's novel into a movie, but also on translations or transfers of those media texts into the cross-branded LEGO toys, which, in their turn, are coupled with a video game translation of both the play behaviours of LEGO bricks, and the *Lord of the Rings* movie visuals and narratives.

As transmedial connections operate in multiple, mutually complementary, but not necessarily identical or functionally corresponding ways, it makes sense to talk about transmedial phenomena in terms of *translation*. Analogous to translations between different sign systems, as for example translating a spoken language into sign language, the translation of the novel *The Lord of the Rings* into a character- and action-focused movie narrative involves substantial alterations and adaptations, and the translation of the same material into a video game involves even more substantial changes. The key transformations relate to the ways in which the focus of experience moves away from narrative continuity and emotional drama, and towards overcoming a series of individual gameplay challenges. For example, overcoming the cave troll or Balrog in the game version might involve repeated attempts, careful pre-planning, learning from mistakes and skill development.³⁵ Rather than being addressed primarily as a member of a narrative audience, or being imaginatively or emotionally engrossed, the game player of *LEGO LoTR* is mostly involved in a manner similar to an athlete, where he or she is participating in a training ground, and every now and then receiving narrative cut-scenes as rewards for overcoming challenges.

Taking a closer look, we can trace the multiple transformations from the source text of Tolkien's books to the *LEGO Lord of the Rings* video game. Tolkien's books are first transformed into the stylised movies produced by Peter Jackson. The movies are then transformed into humorous 'Legofied' versions of themselves in the animation sections of *LEGO LoTR* that are in some ways truncated,

³⁴ Stig Hjarvard, "From bricks to bytes: The mediatization of a global toy industry", in Ib Bondebjerg and Peter Golding, ed., *European Culture and the Media* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2004), pp. 43-63, p. 59.

³⁵ Kristian Kiili, "Digital Game-Based Learning: Towards an Experiential Gaming Model", *The Internet and Higher Education* 8 (2005), 13-24; <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.12.001>>.

expanded or altered versions of the earlier texts. The experiences of 'Legofied' animations then transform further, as the user moves into gameplay sections in the same game, where she, as the player, now has greater freedom to examine the 'Legofied' surroundings of the key scenes from the books and movies.

In scenes of conflict, such as the fight in the Chamber of Mazarbul, players guiding the heroes might have the chance to try and fare better than their movie counterparts, so utilising their knowledge of the coming events to their advantage. While the game uses these assumptions to surprise the player in amusing or unexpected ways, eventually players who have played the levels many times come to master them and subsequently have more time and freedom to explore the parts of the familiar story world that have been modelled in the game. The organisation and representation of the interactive spaces of the LoTR storyworld can grow into multilinear and rather complex forms in games. For example, in the *LEGO LoTR* game there are some scenes where the fellowship is split and there is synchronous action on multiple fronts, such as when Gandalf falls from the Bridge of Khazad-dûm and has a fight with the Balrog, while the rest of the fellowship flees from orcs' arrows. At this point, the game allows two players to play out these scenes simultaneously in a split-screen view.

Finally, the virtual 'Legofied' gameplay can also transform into toy play with *The Lord of the Rings LEGO* sets and characters that look and move very much like their counterparts in the game. Within this toy play, the players have the greatest freedom. Among other things, they can remediate scenes from the game, expand them into scenes that appear only in the books, venture into territory that is only known in the LoTR Appendices or *Silmarillion*, alter the stories, or enter into a completely transmedial territory by expanding their play-world with LEGO bricks from other sets or entirely different kinds of toys and household items. The actual use of LEGO toys by children can even be rather anarchistic. For example, the YouTube videos uploaded by children recording their LEGO play regularly venture beyond the canonical storyworld materials, and engage in (splatter) humour, liberally mixing ketchup blood, plastic toys and multiple, even conflicting cinematic and popular cultural references.³⁶

In multiple ways, LEGO toys, coupled with games and transmedial storyworlds, can be seen to offer much potential and expressive flexibility for those users who are inspired by the transmedial play impulse. As a classic franchising example is the *Star Wars* franchise, which showcases the world building

³⁶ See Frans Mäyrä, "Little Evils: Subversive Uses of Children's Games", in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderöth, and Ashley ML Brown, ed., *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (Routledge Advances in Game Studies 4; New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 82-99.

functionality of the toys. Robert Buerkle³⁷ has argued that almost more than anything else, the continued fan engagement with *Star Wars* during the late 1970s and early 1980s relied on the *Star Wars* toys. At that time, the only way to see the movie(s) was at the cinema, and the home video version of the first movie came out as late as 1984. Thus, the primary way to remain in the *Star Wars* storyworld during those early years was through the toys and play. In addition to the heroes of the movie(s), there were *Star Wars* toys made out of many of the minor characters – some of whom only appeared in the background of the movie itself. It was precisely because of these toys that many of these minor characters received names and backstories.³⁸ As such, the *Star Wars* toys allowed fans not only to enact the story of *Star Wars*, but also to continue the story in unlimited directions, creating histories, destinies, home-worlds and so forth for the various characters, while they eagerly awaited the next film.³⁹ As such, the toys offered an easily accessible tool for world-building.

Following the success of the *Star Wars* toys, many of the most popular toy lines that followed such as *He-Man* and the 1980s version of *G.I. Joe*, were typically created as "toys first", where the designers produced the toy characters surrounded by loose narrative frameworks, after which cartoon and comic departments presented stories that situated the characters in adventures.⁴⁰ In this way, the toy designs, including the backstories as written on the toy boxes, acted as markers around which the storyworlds were built. While the associated cartoons and comics were very popular and in one way constructed the canonical storyline as they progressed, they could not accommodate everything into their storylines. Thus, many of character and world details were left for fans to examine, interpret and expand in their toy play – and of course there were also those who never saw the shows and thus built their own stories entirely from the material they had available. Given that modularity, connectivity and expandability are at the very core of LEGO bricks as toys, LEGO can be seen as the pivotal 'world building toy-tool'.

As an alternative to cross-branded toys, there are interesting transmedial potentials that have been explored in dedicated LEGO franchises that have been created precisely for exploration and exploitation in multiple media. In her study on LEGO's own "transmedial imaginary worlds" *Ninjago* and *Chima*, Lori Landay argues that the transmedial experience in general can be seen "as a process comprised of individual but connected media experiences".⁴¹ Following media and

³⁷ Robert Buerkle, "Playset Nostalgia: LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game and the Transgenerational Appeal of the LEGO Video Game Franchise", in Mark J. P. Wolf, ed., *Lego Studies* (New York & London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 118-53.

³⁸ Buerkle, *ibid.*, pp. 132-33.

³⁹ Dan Fleming, *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture* (Manchester & New York: Manchester UP, 1996), p. 104.

⁴⁰ Fleming, *ibid.*, p. 100, p.104.

⁴¹ Landay, *ibid.*, p. 61-62.

game scholar Mark J. P. Wolf, she writes that transmedial world-building now harnesses five different media – words, images, sounds, interactions and objects – with each having their own distinct properties, and each medium acting like "a window that reveals an imaginary world" from its particular perspective.⁴² "[S]ometimes the experiences are nested, or fused, or sometimes the experiences are diachronic, adding or changing someone's understanding of the transmedially-experienced imaginary world". And while the audience member is peering through a single window at a time, the whole of the transmedial experience often coalesces in a richer way – precisely because of the other experienced windows.⁴³ These experiences are intended to be gateways between one another; each experience can be entered and filtered through another experience in different media, and there are multiple bridges and entry points built or implied between them. The rich, commercially produced environment of toys, games, media and texts is created for active, playful consumption, but it is also a fertile landscape where transmedial skill sets can be cultivated, and new forms of literacies developed. The capacity to connect multiple transmedial components relies on the ability to utilise virtual, textual, physical and screen elements and experiences into new kinds of wholes, and to approach transmedial storyworlds as playthings, with an active attitude.

Directions for the Future in Transmedial Playthings

In 2016, Rovio and LEGO teamed up to create a LEGO line based on *The Angry Birds Movie*. *Angry Birds Action* (2016), a mobile game, is designed to complement the cinema experience of *The Angry Birds Movie* with "BirdCodes". As *Variety* reported, "[m]ore than two dozen BirdCodes are planted across Angry Birds merchandise and promotional materials, all of which can be scanned through the *Angry Birds Action* game to unveil the augmented-reality bonuses and mini-games."⁴⁴ The implementation includes scannable codes embedded into the instructions for one of the *Angry Birds* LEGO sets to create a "virtual replica" that one can interact with. Also, specific "BirdCodes" were placed in movie posters, so that they could be used to reveal interactive and virtual attractions, including "a 360-degree interactive hut with all of the movie's characters that you can manipulate and take photos and selfies with." There is even an "inaudible watermark" embedded in the audio of the end credits of *The Angry Birds Movie* that enables

⁴² Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), p. 24.

⁴³ Landay, *ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁴ Jacob Bryant, "'Angry Birds Action' Game Uses Augmented Reality to Promote Movie, Brand Tie-In", *Variety* (28 April 2016), <<http://variety.com/2016/digital/news/angry-birds-action-movie-augmented-reality-1201762460/>> (accessed 15 May 2016).

moviegoers to unlock the notorious pigs in their *Angry Birds Action* mobile game. All of this provides further incentive for fans both to buy the game, see the feature film in a cinema, and to play with their technically supported transmedia links.

Such a hybrid, physical-digital strategy may sound novel, but it is the result of a long history of experimenting with digital and material elements in play products. Before *The Angry Birds Movie*, LEGO had created several hybrid products that combined physical and digital elements, such as *LEGO Life of George* (2011), and *LEGO Fusion* (2014). However, none of these received the resources and marketing push of *LEGO Dimensions*, launched in the fall of 2015. *Dimensions* is a 'toys-to-life' game that combines physical toys with a dedicated console game. It unites various intellectual properties that LEGO has licensed for its toys during the years, including *The Lord of the Rings*, DC Comics heroes and *Back to the Future*, with LEGO's own IPs such as those from *The LEGO Movie*. Users purchase a starter set that comes with the *LEGO Dimensions* game, three starter characters and bricks that allow them to build a special "gateway" pad. While looking and moving like regular LEGO figures, *Dimensions* figures are equipped with NFC technology. Placing them on the similarly equipped toy pad (on which the "gateway" is built) transfers the characters into the game as playable, virtual versions. The game can be expanded with several expansion packs, adding new characters and areas to the game. In light of such transmedial phenomena, it appears safe to say that the borderlines between games, toys and media continue to blur, and will probably continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

To summarize, in this chapter we have argued that while it is important to understand transmediality through a careful analysis of the design and operations of multiple commercially available playthings such as toys, movies, comics or novels, it is even more important to recognize the key role of creative energy and curiosity that stimulates the boundary-crossing practices that link them together. While characters, plot elements or milieu can be shared between games, fictional texts and toy products, the native modes of expression, available interaction modalities and user experiences differ greatly between them. Play and playfulness are among the key elements for understanding how such interactions are organised within transmedial contexts. It is important to detect and analyse the commercial product and publication strategies that exploit the cross-promotion strategies in transmedial storyworlds. However, these multi-layered texts or products do not magically come alive all by themselves. For the links between products to be activated in a meaningful way, there needs to be users – readers, game players, toy users – who have both the necessary transmedial literacy, as well as a playful attitude, so that they are motivated to activate and instil these potential linkages with a significant creative and imaginative energy of their own. The analytical tools and theories for understanding transmedial storyworlds are still at rather an early stage, but our work suggests that it is important to focus on describing and defining the operation of transmedial playthings. Then, the connections and

dissonances in transmedial contents, and also in the playful practices of design and appropriation can be taken into consideration. This is important for producing a better understanding of transmediality as a creative play impulse and practice, which is increasingly central for our ludic culture and society.