

Analysis of Trans-media Storytelling Strategies

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Abstract Trans-media storytelling defines the process by which a host of contents that exist synchronically integrate into a larger entity. This is closely linked to the ubiquitous computing environment that has been brought into existence by a diversity of media and platforms. In particular, the urban media premised on a particular space resembles trans-media storytelling in that it realises a large description through multiple individual pieces of content. This paper will analyse the structure and characteristics of trans-media storytelling. First, trans-media storytelling uses space-centered storytelling that reflects the recent trend of storytelling. Second, defamiliarization through complexity of story is the key code of trans-media storytelling. This study will be a discussion about the strategy of urban media.

Keywords: Trans-media Storytelling, OSMU, Space-centered Storytelling, Defamiliarization, Urban Media

1 Introduction

With the development of digital technology, media has recently enjoyed remarkable growth. At the same time, a variety of platforms have been developed. Content no longer has a one-to-one relationship with a single medium or platform. Content that is realised through various forms of media and platforms contain common entities. In this context, experts on cultural industry have focused attention on the OSMU (One-Source Multi-Use) strategy. If a single content piece is used by diverse forms of media, it will obtain maximum efficiency. This fact is a core facet of the cultural content industry. Trans-media storytelling shows a similar, but different, strategy.

The OSMU displays a process of diachronic re-interpretation and re-creation of individual content. In contrast, trans-media storytelling displays the process by which a host of content that exists synchronically integrates into a large description. This is closely linked to the ubiquitous computing environment brought into existence by a diversity of media and platforms. In particular, the urban media premised in a particular space resembles trans-media storytelling in that it realises a large description through multiple individual content pieces.

This paper will analyse the structure and characteristics of trans-media storytelling, with an emphasis on the strategy of urban media.

2 Space-centered Storytelling

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, came up with a concept of 'Langue', a different linguistic system than 'Parole' which was the study of previous linguistics.¹ Langue has two central axes: the syntagmatic axis and the paradigmatic axis. If one multiple, replaceable paradigmatic element is selected and combined with another, a sentence will be generated. Thus, these elements can be called a 'combined axis' and a 'selected axis'.

A number of semiologists applied the linguistic framework developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. One application is A. J. Greimas's narrative grammar. That is, a narrative entity can be analysed in the same way as the structure of a sentence. A. J. Greimas saw ordinary story structure as the process of the subject's acquisition of the object. As the subject tries to possess the object that it pursues, the story transforms from a situation of dearth to a situation of recovery. The process itself is a causal combination of the story's syntagmatic elements.

A recent phenomenon of interest is the way storytelling has taken root as a new trend not by means of syntagmatic combination, but of paradigmatic combination. The syntagmatic axis is composed of the principle of temporalness and causality; in contrast, the paradigmatic axis is of spatial character. For instance, in CSI, a popular US drama, episodes that comprise one season are scattered across multiple spaces and simultaneously developed: CSI Las Vegas, CSI New York, CSI Miami.² Each can be seen as a single, replaceable paradigmatic entity.

A space-centered narrative is one important characteristic of digital storytelling. Despite the fact that the space-centered narrative cannot exclude the dimension of time, the relationship between elements comprising a story is non-linear. Put another way, it reveals the process by which replaceable sequences are spatially spread into one sequence. This characteristic has a naturally close relationship with interactivity. A user actively 'selects' rather than passively seeing and hearing. Many forms of interactivity make the telling of a fixed, sequential, linear story impossible.³

Great importance has recently been attached to the role of storytelling in the domain of cultural industry. A tendency to apply storytelling to various content genres has appeared. One such attempt is the production of off-line content based on a particular space. This can include exhibitions, museums, theme parks, regional festivals and so forth. These elements are integrated horizontally.⁴ Storytelling is the way in which a participant recognises a narrative that proceeds temporally in a particular space, and then experiences the story spatially. For example, South Korea

¹ Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Philosophical Library: New York, 1959.

² These types of series are recently referred to as 'spin-offs'.

³ Carolyn Handler Miller, *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*, Elsevier: Boston, 2005, p.68.

⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press: New York, 2006, p.98.

has a theme park in which the famous short story, ‘A Shower’, has its narrative structure spatially realised.

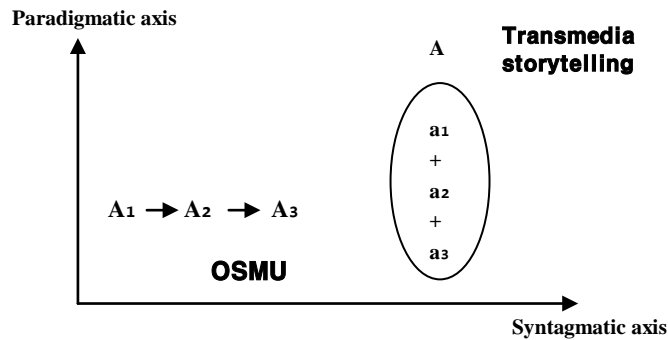


Fig 1. Trans-media storytelling compared with OSMU

Trans-media storytelling also has the characteristic of paradigmatic combination. One story can be introduced as a film, then expanded into a TV show, a novel and a comic book. The world of a story can be explored through gameplay and experienced as an attraction in a theme park. In other words, the story is horizontally integrated. A film, a TV show, a novel and a comic book each occupy a spatial position and develop the story on their own. In this light, trans-media storytelling is different from OSMU. OSMU takes the form of transforming one story into another in a diachronic context. Consequently, the background and trends of the time play a key role. And each piece of individual content has its own complete story. Trans-media storytelling shows itself through a variety of media platforms, with each new text making a valuable contribution to the whole story.⁵ Put differently, individual content pieces are combined to form a whole story.

Trans-media storytelling uses space-centered storytelling that reflects recent storytelling trends, including digital content. In other words, developing a story depends not on the traditional method in which the story components are linked in a linear manner, but on a new paradigm. This allows contemporary audiences to accept the story in an accustomed manner and experience a sense of ‘trendiness’ and interest.

3 Strategy of Defamiliarization

Steve Johnson noticed that popular culture is becoming more and more intellectual. The popular media steadily, but almost imperceptibly, makes our minds sharper, as we soak in entertainment usually dismissed as lowbrow fluff. This upward trend is called the ‘sleeper curve’.⁶ It is an art genre that was not easy for people in the past to understand. However, the content of popular culture is currently in pursuit of complexity and subtleness.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, Berkley Publishing Group: New York, 2005, p. 8.

This trend reminds us of the ‘defamiliarization’ technique, which Russian formalists advocated. They contended that, although arts contain the same story, novel expression is of utmost importance. In other words, the process of perception itself is an esthetic purpose. Viktor Shklovsky said that all parts of a work should be structured as though they had the sole purpose of keeping a reader unaware of the story’s development.⁷ It seems that this nears the intention of the producers of *The Matrix*, an example of trans-media content. The creators draw on the backstory revealed through a series of animated shorts, which need to be downloaded off the Web or watched off a separate DVD.⁸

Defamiliarization through complexity of story is the key code of trans-media storytelling. One story is divided into a multitude of various media and then described. Of course, individual content pieces can be recognised as independent stories. However, trans-media storytelling is clearly premised on a macro-story that weaves itself throughout the various story pieces. That is, it goes through a process in which a coordinate paradigmatic story unit is structured into a syntagmatic entity. The representative technique of defamiliarization includes temporal discord, spatial separation, a picture-frame structure and the like.⁹ Their common characteristic is a parallel, second narrative. As a temporal story and a spatial story, derived from the main plot, are crossed with each other, they create an independent entity. Many storytelling units are integrated into the main plot through a process of embedding and joining.¹⁰

This method does not make understanding a story quick and easy. While the receiver waits to fully perceive the story, a ‘gap’ in the story that is not obviously intertwined with the main plotline introduces mystery or suspense. This strategy for defamiliarization leads the audience, not as onlookers but as participants, to enjoy the story.¹¹ In other words, the strategy intentionally limits information and leaves the story as an unsolved question, which leads the receiver absorbed in ‘puzzle-solving’. Deuze calls this active experience ‘Bricolage’, noting that it is one of the characteristics of digital culture, along with participation and remediation.¹²

Trans-media storytelling is entertainment for the era of collective intelligence.¹³ These days, work departs from the author and has been brought into the domain of collective intelligence. Levi looked upon cyberspace as a field of collective communication and thinking. That is, it is a place in which things remain wide open and undecided. He maintained that it is in this space that human beings can form

⁷ Cesare Segre, *Structures and Time*, The University of Chicago: Illinois, 1979, p. 16.

⁸ Henry Jenkins presents *The Matrix* as a representative case of Trans-media storytelling (Henry Jenkins, op.cit., p.96). <Is this the name of a source citation? Why is it not formatted like the other sources?>

⁹ Eric S. Rabkin, "Spatial Form and Plot", *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 4, No.2., 1977, p.253-270.

¹⁰ A story syntagm combines events to stress their sequential relatedness in one of three ways. Events of a sequence are enchainned (distributed in sequence), embedded (integrated in sequence), or joined (distributed and integrated). (Steven Cohan & Linda Shires, *Telling Stories: The Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*, Routledge: New York, 1988, p.57).

¹¹ Jeong-Hee Kim, *Theory and Practice of Storytelling*, InGanSaRang: Seoul, 2010, p. 74.

¹² M.Deuze, "Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture", *The Information Society* Vol. 22, pp.63-75, 2006.

¹³ Henry Jenkins, op.cit., p. 97.

collective intelligence.¹⁴ The public enjoys films and games; at the same time, they connect with an Internet community to exchange information with each other and to discuss it, during which new meaning is created or found. These activities can elicit no less emotional reaction from the receiver than the original content can. On the other hand, the phenomenon of the 'sleeping curve' has had an enormous influence on the mental development of young generations.¹⁵ It has attracted attention because of its affirmative power to enhance cognitive ability.

What effect does this strategy of defamiliarization have on storytelling? While content for the public is premised on universality, novelty can serve as a strategy that stands in contrast to universality but is of mutual compensation. The public feels intimate with the structure of a universal story; at the same time, they want new stimulation. An element of abstruseness also enables the audience to participate in the story, through which he or she experiences heightened interest.

4 Conclusion: Urban Content Based on Trans-media Storytelling

Storytelling can be applied to various kinds of media content. It does not limit itself to genres such as film, drama, and animation. This seems to reflect a contemporary tendency that prefers 'story' to 'information'. Rolf Jensen showed a blueprint for a dream society that will appear after an information society.¹⁶ Again, he stated that it is important to appeal to emotion rather than to reason. It is likely that urban media content will gradually develop into content that can provide storytelling, not just information, to receivers.

Urban media is characterised by the application of ubiquitous computing technology and a premise within the space of a city. A multitude of media content comprises a larger narrative about urban images. Trans-media storytelling is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium.¹⁷ Ubiquitous computing technology serves as a mirror for the development of media and platforms, too. Consequently, urban content can use a variety of media and platforms within a city to realise trans-media storytelling.

In planning and producing urban content, its characteristics as trans-media can be taken into consideration. This can manifest through two methods. The first is the method of digital storytelling with which the public is acquainted: that is, the encouragement of users to take an active part in the media, premised on a particular space. The second is to divide a story into a host of narratives so as to draw public attention to its novelty. Past literature depended only on sequential techniques to defamiliarization; nowadays, the attempt can be made by various media's differentiated attributes. It is predicted that the more flexible and attractive trans-

¹⁴ Pierre Levi, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, translated from the French by Robert Bononno, Mass: Perseus Books: Cambridge, 1997.

¹⁵ Steven Johnson, op.cit., p.12.

¹⁶ Rolf Jensen, *The Dream Society: How the Coming Shift from Information to Imagination Will Transform Your Business*, McGraw-Hill: New York, 1999.

¹⁷ Henry Jenkins, op.cit., p. 97.

media storytelling, in place of a linear story, will further enhance the value of urban content.

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