



Transmedia Design Paradigms: Metagame / Intergame

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Game design is a practice thousands of years old, with both a venerable heritage and a range of acknowledged masterworks (Chess, Backgammon, Tetris, etc.) that span cultural and epochal boundaries. And yet it is also a discipline that has resisted the Western tide of professionalization until a surprisingly recent date and, not coincidentally, has a largely informal collection of craft knowledge and production processes. [1]

It is no surprise to learn, therefore, that the even newer sub-discipline of inter-platform, cross-media or, as this workshop has designated it, transmedia game design has almost no “best practices”, nor even a common understanding of what designing a transmedia game means.¹

It is my contention that transmedia game design, even as defined by this workshop’s own parameters, includes two separate interactivity paradigms: metagame and intergame. And although we can certainly speak of designing transmedia games and experiences as a whole, it is important that we understand – and differentiate between – these two modes when conceiving of, documenting, and planning our projects.

Transmedia Metagame and Intergame Interactivity

When referencing the concept of the “metagame” my intent is to reframe within a transmedial context, rather than to rewrite, the familiar Richard Garfield roleplaying definition, “how a game interfaces outside of itself.” [3] While Garfield’s metagame can be envisioned (to borrow a metaphor from the “hard” sciences) as a porous layer that sits atop a game’s structure and mediates contact between game-world and real-world, the addition of multiple game-world elements in alternate media renders the metagame not only liminal, but conductive. Thus, the metagame layer is that through which transmedial elements pass as they travel between gaming components, as well as between game- and real-worlds; “how a game interfaces the worlds within and outside of itself.”

Is it the case, however, that the metagame is simply a channel through which information flows, unchanged by its passage? That does not seem to square with Garfield’s (amongst others’) positioning of the metagame as possessing the potential to alter in-game behaviours, such as the classic example of chess-masters studying each other’s favoured play patterns. [3] Given the metagame’s traffic in game elements, and its potential – if not propensity – to affect the game elements “beneath” it, we must also allow for the possibility that the metagame can actually be, or become, a game element as well.

EA’s pioneering 2001 transmedia title *Majestic* is an example of a project in which the space between observable game elements is just as identifiable as “the game” as was the boxed PC client. *Majestic*’s game design as a whole, in fact, hinged on its use of the metagame – and decidedly as a transformative, rather than a transportive, agent. Data sharing between multiple game components does not *have* to seem like an epic conspiracy...but *Majestic*’s metagame design assured that it did.

¹ With the exception of the brief, but excellent start made by “Designing Crossmedia Games”, see References, [2].



Are there not, however, cases in which developers would harness transmedial capabilities *without* expanding Huizinga’s “magic circle of play” to encompass the interstitial zones between traditionally defined game elements? [4]

To use the example presented in this workshop’s [Motivation & Objectives](#) statement, the straightforward mobile game that allows its bus-riding players to advance their MMO characters’ stats via mini-game play may neither require nor benefit from the liminal immersion of the type of metagame interactivity employed by *Majestic*. The fact that game-world interaction is occurring on a bus, via a mobile handset, need not be a part of the game experience any more than a customer’s choice to withdraw funds from an ATM rather than a teller is a part of her financial experience.² Persistence and accessibility are the hallmarks of this type of interaction, rather than pervasiveness and immersion.

Because of the different, yet also incontestably transmedial, nature of this second interaction type, I propose the use of the term “intergame” for this paradigm, reserving metagame for the type of interaction described above, in which transmedial connectivity is itself a game element.

To complete our earlier metaphor, the intergame layer penetrates and connects game-world components, but does not, unlike its metagame counterpart, also mediate the interaction between game- and real-worlds. Whereas our visualization of the metagame layer positioned it “above” the game elements it connects (like a cloud bank shrouding the tops of a group of skyscrapers), the intergame layer might better be visualized as a set of connections between game elements (like skybridges linking a cluster of skyscrapers).

Of course there can never be a “pure” transmedial interaction or design that does not contain elements of both paradigms, but I believe it will help us, as developers and scholars, to distinguish between the two archetypes.

Why Make A Distinction? Taxonomy ≠ Innovation

There are several reasons why the reader might object to the concept that there are two separate transmedia interaction paradigms. First and foremost, of course, would be the opinion that there is no compelling cause to classify the two approaches individually – that the distinction between the two is a case of splitting hairs rather than identifying categorical difference.

After all, isn’t the metagame as characterized above simply an ambitious intergame system with an element of Alternate Reality Gaming thrown in? We don’t classify *Deus Ex* as an entirely new genre because its first person shooting has a bit of roleplaying in its mix, do we? [5]

Of course, these types of questions are to be expected – and the answers are not at all trivial. If the transmedial metagame is indeed a separate concept from intergame connectivity, there must be other test cases besides the *Majestic* example with which to prove its depth. To this end, I submit the following design exercise: a driving game which, whilst its mobile version is being played on a GPS-enabled handset, provides console-version players with extra “nitro boost” for each mile of real-world terrain they cover.

While calling this design an Alternate Reality Game would stretch the definition of the term past its limit, the transmedia interaction detailed here clearly displays the potential to mediate game-

² There are plenty of examples of this type of interactivity in existing games, as well: consider, amongst others, the example of *Mario Golf*’s character-unlocking GCN/GBA connectivity.



world/real-world interaction.³ Because of the design of the connection point between the game-world's two clients, players might orchestrate marathon sessions to coincide with long journeys – or vice versa! Contrast this with another version of the same hypothetical game in which console-based nitro is earned for passing cars within the mobile game. The game is still undoubtedly transmedial, but the nature of the interaction between player, game-world, and real-world is decidedly different; player strategies are only based upon concerns *within* the game-world.

Unlike the example of genre-bending that *Deus Ex* provides, which may influence the player to approach firefights or explore in-game landscapes differently, the divergence between our two transmedia racing titles drastically alters the types of activities included within the realm of gameplay. As this example demonstrates, the degree of difference in player behaviour between intergame and metagame transmediality is substantial enough to justify their classification as separate design paradigms.

How Does This Help?

By recognizing the existence of two paradigms within transmedia gaming, we can aid designers and developers in the creation of gameplay experiences better adapted to the strengths of each model.

At the most basic level, this terminology provides a vocabulary with which game makers can identify their strategies, implementations and objectives, from the earliest stages of transmedia design to the final brush-strokes of game polish. Though it may seem elementary, the establishment of a shared lexicon is a vital step toward the creation of a discipline of transmedial game design, as well as an addition to the professional knowledge of game design as a whole.

Experienced transmedia game players and designers will also recognize that as the number of device types connected to a game-world increases, the probability escalates that a metagame layer will emerge, even if unplanned-for. Designers who are aware of the extent to which a transmedia metagame can differ from intergame connectivity can be expected to plan for such emergence in a way that avoids disrupting game balance or, indeed, to sidestep metagame interactivity altogether.

Conversely, the increased pervasiveness and player immersion of metagaming can be used to attract interest to the transmedia gaming space – or to a particular title, to be sure. Although the metagame paradigm is certainly not new to the gaming, or even videogaming, worlds, the ease with which it can be explained and discerned in a transmedia context is indeed novel.⁴ Game journalists, potential publishers, and future consumers alike can quickly understand why a transmedia metagame is something they should write about, fund, or start playing immediately. Somehow, the same phenomenon experienced on a single platform does not seem nearly as fresh and exciting.

³ According to Jane McGonigal, “An alternate reality game is: an interactive narrative, or immersive drama, played out both online and in real-world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which hundreds, thousands, or 10’s of thousands of players come together online, to real play (not role play), forming unusually collaborative social networks and working together to solve a mystery or problem that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone.” Though this is certainly not the only definition of ARGs (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternate_reality_game) it has much in common with most others. See References, [6] for more.

⁴ I speak from personal experience here, as transmedia metagaming has proven to be a surprisingly easy sell in comparison with the many single-media metagaming interactions I have tried to “sell” to publishers, executives, etc. in the past.



What's Next?

Having, I hope, opened a discussion on the two paradigms of transmedia gaming, I look forward to the next phase of transmedia game research. Amongst the many topics deserving further exploration are the multiple ethical implications of transmedia metagaming (How much of our users' lives should we claim for the "magic circle"? Is there a point at which we are designing gameplay that simply rakes in money for its own sake?), the practical planning of transmedia intergames and metagames (At what stage of design must we identify our connectivity paradigm? Is it possible to retrofit a transmedia intergame or metagame to an existing game-world?), and the potential for user-developed content in the transmedia space (What is a metagame, after all, if not user-developed game content? Can we create a system that will allow users to grow metagame interaction from intergame seeds? Would we want to?).

All of these questions – and, of course, many more – will be addressed, and hopefully one day answered, within the conceptual and developmental framework that we are building even now.

References

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