

17 The transmedia practices of Battlestar Galactica

Studying the industry, stars, and fans

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Introduction

The cult success of the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009; hereafter BSG) has led to a dedicated fanbase. Even long after the series has finished, additional storylines still flourish in graphic novels and other media products. The series repositioned science fiction and its sub-genre, space opera as major genres in television. Its political and cultural themes, visual aesthetics and serial storytelling gave the series a cult status and a solid fanbase (Bourdaa, 2012). Moreover, the series is built as an entire universe. This sense of worldness is still conveyed on different media platforms.

This chapter will focus on BSG as a franchise that adheres to processes of “transmedia storytelling,” as discussed by Henry Jenkins in his seminal work *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins, 2006). Transmedia, or augmented storytelling (Bourdaa, 2012) refers to an extensive narrative spread across different media platforms. Ideally, the different parts of the narrative are told in individual media, such as graphic novels, cartoons, or games.

Different media platforms are integral to the storytelling, world-building, and narration of BSG. The relationship between fans, media professionals, and the media text, however, is more complex than the idea of transmedia storytelling suggests. We show this complexity by focusing on unique examples that are related to the series, but also move away from official media channels that are exclusive to the television network. Our studies not only focused on how the industry extended BSG, but also on the public relationships between actors and fans, as well as the reception by fans themselves.

Our chapter consists of three parts. First, we will start by exploring the different tie-ins of BSG. Then we will examine two case studies where consumer and producer relationships are redefined. The first case study explores recent Twitter messages of BSG actors. As a large ensemble show, actors who play secondary characters such as Chief Galen Tyrol and Karl “Helo” Agathon have developed their own fan followings. These celebrities can be considered as “subcultural celebrities,” “mediated figures who are treated as famous only by and for their fan audience” (Hills, 2003, p. 61). As such, the actors sometimes cater to their social media following interchangeably between being “in

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character,” and through their own “celebrity persona.” Through social media, the actors purposefully extend the story of BSG, or juxtapose it with their new work, suggesting that its characters and story continue as fans’ memories of their characters live on through how they interact with the actors.

The second case study focuses on the board game of BSG (Fantasy Flight Games, 2008). The game proved that the translation from a television series to a board game can be a perfect match. This co-operative board game, with three expansion packs, has received many prizes and has been praised by critics and fans alike. By working with the potential in BSG, and by focusing on its central themes such as mistrust and betrayal, the game offers new readings of the television series and its latent possibilities. Most strikingly, it puts the player or fan in a position of control and power over the original text. By making choices and by interacting carefully with the game, players can weave their own BSG story and are put in the position of producers rather than consumers. Through the game, players can move away from the canon of the television text and explore its latent possibilities.

We argue that transmedia storytelling is not necessarily a coherent process, but a complex dynamic that is constantly developed by fans and the media industry. The extension of a narrative is not only a process of coordinated planning by the industry, but a practice to which fans and professionals, such as actors, actively contribute. BSG has gone a long way and its story still continues on venues where we least expect it.

The development of television and transmedia storytelling

The millennial television landscape is defined by changes in the television industries that led to the development of transmedia strategies. BSG must be read in light of three developments in television production, writing, and reception.

Firstly, emerging technologies such as the Internet and the development of social media drastically changed the television landscape. Fan interactivity was included in production strategies and television became a medium that relied on the activity of its audiences (Gillan, 2010). NBC’s *Heroes* (2006–2010) is an early example of a transmedia production that enriched storylines from television with tie-in websites for the characters, an ongoing collaborative fan fiction, an interactive game and web comics that deepen the background histories of the characters (Hassapopoulou, 2010). Today many American television shows have narrative extensions, which are developed through websites and social media. Examples include the Pawnee website of *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), the Massive Dynamic website of *Fringe* (2008–2013), the FBI files of *Dexter* (2006–2013) or the ARG and the Online University of *Lost* (2004–2010).

Secondly, recent television series have been developing what Jason Mittell (2006) calls “narrative complexity.” Television shows increasingly include seriality in their writing. They do this on several levels: firstly, production strategies

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such as cliffhangers at the end of episodes or seasons; secondly, more complex characters; and thirdly, a re-working of existing genres. These techniques rely on active audiences to decode them:

You cannot simply watch these programs as an unmediated window to a realistic story world into which you might escape; rather, narratively complex television demands you pay attention to the window frames, asking you to reflect on how it provides partial access to the diegesis and how the panes of glass distort your vision of the unfolding action.

(Mittell, 2006, p. 38)

Finally, television has encouraged participation and included fan cultures in their practices. As Henry Jenkins (2006) noted, the current media culture is a participatory culture, in which fans and producers are part of similar spheres of production and reception. This ties in with a renewed appreciation and validation of fan cultures by showrunners and marketers. Fans are an expert audience who perform activities and create transformative works in organized communities of practice or interest groups. These organized forms of fan cultures are also called “fandom.” They are willing to interact with their shows and search the multiple media platforms to find clues and information on the shows.

In the context of media and digital convergence, one strategy of production stands out as particularly engaging for audiences, namely “transmedia storytelling.” Henry Jenkins was first to coin this term in relation to the franchise of *The Matrix*. He explains that *The Matrix* 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” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95). The most recent definition that Jenkins has offered of transmedia storytelling is “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins, 2011).

Thus, technological and cultural changes paved the way for transmedia storytelling. These changes led to a more participatory culture in which fans consume, share, and spread what they like throughout virtual communities, fan sites or social networks. The active role of fans in this participatory culture implies that power relationships are shifting and becoming more complicated as fans now have more direct interaction with producers and the actors via social media networks. Fans also have more significant power in the creative industries, as our case studies will demonstrate. In particular, they redefine the production of a show, the profession of actors, cast, and crew, and the storytelling process.

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Transmedia strategies in *Battlestar Galactica*

In *BSG*, human civilization has migrated from its home world Kobol to a group of planets called the Twelve Colonies. They are engaged in a war against the Cylons, robots created to support them in their daily chores. The Cylons rebel and commit genocide against mankind. In contrast to the original series from the 1970s, the Cylons have evolved to look like humans and have been living on the colonies for a long time to infiltrate key positions for their plan. This re-imagined version is more complex and frames the series in a post-9/11 American society. While the theme is still survival, the series also interrogates what makes us human. During four seasons, showrunner Ronald D. Moore and his team developed storylines and created complex characters: humans and Cylons alike.

The success of the show can largely be contributed to the vast storyworld that the showrunners and the production team developed. They created an extended universe around the show, adding stories and plots on different media platforms. Suzanne Scott (2008) writes about these transmedia strategies:

BSG has aimed unparalleled wealth of fan-oriented content at its audiences and, whether one chooses to view this as a dialogic departure from the producer/consumer binary or merely a tech-savvy marketing ploy, it is an integrated media model that is rapidly gaining popularity.

(p. 210)

These tie-in extensions pursued three aims: to give more depth to the characters, to fill time lapses in the production of the series, and to focus on different points of view.

To deepen the characters, the tie-ins often explored the past of the humans and the origins of the Cylons. For example, in collaboration with Dynamite Entertainment, Syfy created comics devoted to the past of characters of the shows, specifically Kara and Helo, Adama, Zarek, and Gaius Baltar. To explore the origins of the Cylons, Dynamite Entertainment produced a comic book entitled *The Final Five*. This comic focuses on how the Cylons created the Final Five – five of the twelve humanoid models of the Cylons whose identity was lost to the Cylon collective. The story explores why they wiped their memories from this period. Another example of how transmedia deepens characterization is the web series *The Face of the Enemy* (2008–2009). It focuses on the supporting character Felix Gaeta and explores his homosexuality and the motivations for his future actions in the show.

When one of the authors of this chapter, Melanie Bourdaa, interviewed comic author Brendan Jerwa, he told her that they worked closely with the showrunners to bring coherence to the whole universe. He explained in the interview: “It is my understanding that the comics were passed through Mr. Moore’s office, and they were certainly vetted by Syfy and Universal” (Brandon Jerwa, Interview with Melanie Bourdaa, email, 6/3/2014). He emphasized

that transmedia strategies are useful to give a new breath to the universe and storylines and to continue to expand the storyworld of the show.

While deepening the characters was one reason to create these tie-ins, the second objective was thus to fill in some time gaps before the very beginning of the show or in between seasons, during the hiatus. During the Hollywood writers' strike, the producers created the previously mentioned web series *The Face of The Enemy* to post on Syfy's official website and to give some complementary materials to the show. Prior to this series, they had already produced the web series *The Resistance* (2006) which offered additional information on what happened on New Caprica that formed the Resistance. We learn how the Resistance organized itself around Saul and Tyrol and how two characters are going to choose their side.

The producers and showrunners also tried to give some new points of view on the stories. The comic book *Battlestar Galactica: Ghosts* (2008), for example, offers a new perspective on the war focusing on brand new characters on a new *Battlestar*. This strategy, which diverts from a "what if" scenario, explores possibilities and alternative universes: what happened to other survivors? How are they coping with the Cylon attacks? Similarly, the telefilm *The Plan* (2009) re-tells the story from the Cylon perspective. The producers took the plot from the first and second seasons and re-wrote the story from the Cylons' points of view. By doing this, the writers can fill certain plot holes and answer various questions that were raised throughout the series. The telefilm *Razor* (2006) deepens events from the second season by adopting the point of view of the crew of the *Pegasus*.

Overall, *BSG* can be defined as a series with augmented storytelling potential. Each tie-in offers some add-ons for fans without alienating new potential audiences. The coherence of this narrative universe, maintained through the showrunners as gatekeepers, plays an important part in the development of narrative arcs and characters. We believe, however, that transmedia strategies are also adopted by other participants than these official teams. In our case studies, we focus on actors and fans as agents that contribute to the world-building.

Actors as world-builders

As a first case study, we focus on actors from *BSG* and how they extend the universe beyond the television screen. Specifically, we explore the ways in which they present their public persona to fans on social media, as well as how fans react to their presence on the platform. These interactions play off each other since the actors and the characters they embody, become almost one and the same. This is even the case when the show is not airing on television anymore and the actors have moved to other projects.

Before the proliferation of social media networks, and celebrities' presence on Twitter and Facebook, we often think about celebrity culture in the context of mediation (Turner, 2010). News and information about the celebrity are gathered via paratextual outlets such as entertainment news press, official

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press releases from studios, networks, and the like. Fans watch interviews with celebrities on talk shows and premieres to get a sense of who they are and what they are like. Now, however, fans can tweet celebrities directly, or leave messages on Facebook profiles to share their love and appreciation (or hate) of the actor's work.

This study specifically extends Bertha Chin's work on social media and celebrity culture (Chin, 2010 and forthcoming). Nick Muntean and Anne Helen Petersen argue that "celebrity tweeting has been equated with the assertion of the authentic celebrity voice; ... [it is] the privileged channel to the star him/herself" (2009, n.p.). Twitter also offers the "possibility of interaction" (2011, p. 144), argue Alice Marwick and danah boyd, so some fans tweet the celebrities they love because there's always the possibility that one's tweets will be acknowledged or responded to, while a celebrity follow raises the profile and status of the fan in fandom. This is not necessarily one-sided, as Marwick and boyd go on to argue that celebrities who have a social media presence also have to present a seemingly authentic and "intimate image of the self" (2011, p. 140). They also have to meet fan expectations in this presentation, as well as using the platform to maintain important relationships with other entertainment industry professionals and fans who help run and maintain their fansites.

These so-called "parasocial" relationships take a unique form in fandom. In 2003, Matt Hills proposed the concept of subcultural celebrity, which he described as "mediated figures who are treated as famous ... by and for their fan audience" (p. 61) to explore cult TV celebrities whom cult TV fans may consistently have personal contact with, through conventions, signings, and other personal appearances. Actors like Leonard Nimoy (Star Trek, 1966–1969) and Misha Collins (Supernatural, 2005–), for instance, while not considered international stars in the vein of actors like George Clooney, are highly respected in sci-fi and cult TV media fandoms. Both Nimoy and Collins gain dedicated fan followings from their performances, with Nimoy being re-introduced as Mr. Spock, the iconic character he played in the original Star Trek in J.J. Abrams's reboot film in 2009. These cult and sci-fi TV actors continue to play the iconic roles they are often known for at fan conventions and at times, that performance extends to social media. They are referred to as their characters years after shows end and they have moved on to other roles. But there is also a sense that fans' love for the characters, their "sense of ownership" over them transfers over to the actors as well.

In the context of BSG, several actors, namely Aaron Douglas (Tyrol), Edward James Olmos (Adama) and Tahmoh Penikett (Helo), are prolific Twitter users; their interaction with fans or their tweets at times embodying the characters they play on screen. Olmos frequently ends his tweets, particularly on social issues, with the show's mantra, "So Say We All" (2014, 2015). Douglas probably resembles the character that he plays, Chief Tyrol, more than any of the other cast members. He frequently uses the word "frak" (2010) and refers to Tyrol while tweeting (2014). It is almost as if the characters that the

actors embody have become extension of themselves, particularly when interacting with fans or presenting themselves on social media.

Fans similarly reciprocate this extension of character to the celebrity-self, as tweets to actors are also replaced with character names. For example, fans lamented the string of villainous and morally ambiguous roles Tahmoh Penikett played post-*Battlestar* in high-profile guest-starring roles for it clashed with the heroic characterization of Helo, who always had an astute sense of right and wrong. Fans will also go on to promote Penikett's current work by referring directly to Helo, using the pronoun "our" (She's All Nerd, 2014), suggesting a sense of ownership fans feel towards these beloved characters.

This recalls a study Matt Hills and Rebecca Williams conducted in 2005, where they suggest that fans' engagement with Spike, a popular character in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* stimulated "fan adoration, fantasy and interest" (p. 346) for both the actor and the character. Hills and Williams argue that fans are not merely fans of the character or the actor, but of both, made possible by the subcultural celebrity status of James Marsters, who plays Spike. Likewise, fans who identify actors like Penikett and Douglas by their character names exhibit the same affections, borne out of years of familiarity and a sense of intimacy created through the television screen with the characters they play onscreen.

In this sense, we can argue that world-building is collaborative: fans see the actors as their characters just as the actors embody the essence of their characters in their public persona. This suggests that the notion of world-building extends beyond industry-sanctioned texts such as digital games, comics, and web series; that actors' interactions on social media, even for post-show fandoms, help to strengthen the characters' presence for the fans.

Reworking the narrative through the board game

BSG is a show that asks its audiences to participate and think through the plot. The suspicions among the crew, and the Cylon revelations, often led to fan speculation. This kind of behavior has been described as "forensic fandom" (Mittell, 2009). Fans theorize, speculate, and interpret the clues that a series provides them and function as detectives of sorts. This mode of fandom is interpretive, and relies on what Jenkins has often called "collective intelligence" (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 25–59). Such fans operate as a knowledge community that seeks consensus and theorizes media content itself. Fandom in this sense is a type of play, an unrestricted and free activity that relies on puzzle-solving.

While television formats and their audiences are increasingly playful, there is one medium that is particularly outstanding in shaping play through rules and mechanics, namely games. The *BSG* board game (Fantasy Flight Games, 2008) has been met with critical acclaim, having received various prizes and nominations in international awards for board games, and has an average rating of 7.84/10 (February 26, 2015) on the popular site BoardGameGeek.

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The game manages to convey similar tensions and themes as the show. Players have to work together to survive, but there is always an element of mistrust, because there are Cylons on board. The rules mediate themes that make the television series exceptional and engaging to watch. Like the show, BSG revolves around secrecy, deception, and mistrust. BSG is a team game, with the added mystery that who is in which team is kept secret. Each player is put in one of the teams, either Cylon or human, and his or her identity is revealed at the start of the game. Players get a loyalty card which they can never show openly.

Each team has a specific objective. Human players are trying to find the map to earth, and reach Kobol, while Cylon players want to annihilate the human race. Players work together with their team to win, but first they have to find out who is on their side. As the tagline says, this is “a game of survival, politics, and betrayal.” The character roles that players can adopt closely resemble those of the show and come with unique abilities and skills. Players re-enact existing characters from the television show, but can mix them up in new ways. For instance, the admiral character can be Adama, Tigh, or even Helo. Players do not have to adhere to the canon or storyline as it unfolds in the series itself.

The goals are fairly straightforward. For humans, the key objective is keeping their resources, which consist of food, morale, and population. There will be many events, like attacks or riots, that will affect these resources. At each turn, a player will struggle to keep the resources afloat. Similar to the show, the crew faces the depletion of food and a decrease in population. There are also Cylon agents that can sabotage actions of the crew. A crucial theme in this game is distrust, which will inform how the players resolve certain situations.

Halfway through the game, more sleeper agents awaken. New loyalty cards are distributed and the Cylons can now start their full-on attack on the Galactica. The winning conditions are easy: Cylons destroy the survivors by infiltrating the ships, or by destroying their morale. Humans need to make sure that the crew survives by maintaining their resources and morale, as well as reach Kobol.

Theoretically, the game can be understood as an adaptation of the show but it also has medium-specific qualities as a game. This is a game that does not fit the transmedia storytelling model. Though it is a product of the show, which clearly features the same characters and themes, it does not fit into the universe coherently and it has not been coordinated to expand the storyline. Through the game, BSG fans can play out different scenarios and alternative universes that relate to the television show. In other words, the game is about envisioning possibilities, rather than about fidelity to the narrative. Depending on the choices of players, a session can be much darker than the television show itself.

The concept that perhaps best fits this game is that of the “transmedial world” (Tosca & Klastrup, 2011). This concept was coined by the Scandinavian scholars Klastrup and Tosca to examine the online game of Lord of the Rings, which is similar to the BSG game in that it diverges from the source text. It allowed fans primarily to be in that world and contribute to it. In other words,

the transmedial world model theorizes world-building across media platforms. Unlike transmedia storytelling, it does not assume that these narrative instances create a coherent storyline but instead argues that they provide a different perspective of a world. As Kjastrup and Tosca write: “A distinct characteristic of transmedial worlds is that audience and designers share a mental image of the ‘worldness’ (distinguished features of its universe)” (2011, p. 48).

The authors describe worldness further through *topos*, *mythos*, and *ethos*, roughly translated as the fictional space and geography, the myths and history of the world, and its ethics that also underline politics and decision making. The game translates these elements clearly by zooming into the storyworld and its themes rather than plot, by exploring the lore of BSG, and finally, by focusing on the norms and morale. Especially in this survival story, the stakes are high and the norms differ from what we would find acceptable in everyday life. Ethics in this case is turned into an explicit game play mechanic by emphasizing the importance of morale as a resource. The humans can lose in battle, but they can also lose their morale and then they are doomed as they cannot stick together anymore.

Unlike the television show, the game has multiple outcomes and lots of variety. In each session, there will be different Cylons, humans, and even traitors that have to be faithful to the other side. The possibility of new alliances, crews, and character histories makes each session into a unique story. Through the board game, fans and non-fans can explore alternative scenarios to the television show and play out the plot differently. The game teases out the possibilities of the show. This storytelling process empowers the fans and allows them to envision this storyworld long after the show has finished.

Conclusion

While BSG ended several years ago, the story is still re-enacted on different media platforms. We have argued that transmedia storytelling is not only an industrial and coordinated process, but a complex dynamic that is partly facilitated by audiences and continued by media professionals. In our research we found that transmediality is a model that facilitates storytelling but also unique performances and spaces of play. The model enables different actors (e.g. fans, actors) in the current media landscape to rework and perform media content.

In our case studies we saw clear forms of extension and play, which do not clearly divide between professional and audience roles. Firstly, media professionals benefit from transmedia connections and performing on different media channels. Actors, for instance, “stay in character” on Twitter not as a playful way of addressing their fans, but also to call them to action and motivate them to contribute to sociopolitical causes. Secondly, through transmedia strategies, fans can also become active media producers and characters by re-enacting and revisiting the BSG narrative. These case studies showed that specific transmedia texts, such as games and social media messages, can reinforce a sense of ownership over the original media text.

BSG has a universe and fandom that extends well beyond its official time and space of production. Actors and fans still perform and rework this story on different media channels. This also means that the creative industries still profit from the franchise, if they preserve interest through consistent public interactions with fans.

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