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Transmedia history

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I argue that history is a large-scale transmedia project that is not understood as such, and this causes friction when history is engaged with through media in which historical research is not usually presented. To do this, I go through Henry Jenkins' ten-step definition of transmedia and argue that history matches the definition very well. This transmedia discussion brings forth the concept of 'world-building', in which narrative is superseded by world-building as the all-encompassing concept and as the beginning point of analysis. In the analysis, history (as a product of historiography) is treated as phenomenon instead of a discipline and compared to other forms of transmedia world-building.

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Transmedia, used by itself, simply means 'across media.' Transmedia, at this level, is one way of talking about convergence as a set of cultural practices. (Jenkins 2011) (Emphasis in original)

In this paper, I argue that history is by its nature a large-scale transmedia project, which is not understood as such, and that this causes friction when history is engaged through multiple different mediums. To do this, I look at how history¹ is being engaged with across media rather than treating it as a purely academic discipline. In other words my view point is that of a consumer/reader/watcher/player of historical presentations. I do this to argue that, because of the way that modern media is engaged all the presentations are seen as being connected to each other. All kinds of presentations from historical novels to historical games tie in together with historiography in a way that is beyond the academic view of historical knowledge. This means that I will not engage with epistemic questions or historical knowledge or truth here – or at least I will not do so in the manner in which these themes are traditionally approached. What I will do is argue that history fits in very well in the general description of

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transmedia and that the concept of transmedia is useful for theoretical engagements with history.

History and transmedia have a surprisingly long history. Mark J. P. Wolf, claims that the origin of the earliest ‘transnarrative’ characters (characters that appear in multiple stories) was in ‘actual historical figures’. He uses the example of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, who can be found in several of the books of the Old Testament. Wolf’s point being that ‘[w]hen multiple characters, objects, and locations from one story appear in another story, the world in which they all appear becomes larger than either story’ (Wolf 2012, 66). For the transmediality of characters Henry Jenkins’ has used the example of the stories about Jesus in the Middle Ages. Only literate people had access to books about Jesus while others had to rely on other mediums like tapestries, live performances, or stained glass windows. (Jenkins 2008, 119)

Jenkins’ rather polemical argument ‘Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making’ (Jenkins 2008) manages to compress the point of transmedia to a single sentence. For him, the construction of robust worlds that are capable of upholding multiple narratives across multiple media platforms is the core of transmedia. His work is focused on fiction and fan culture and thus his examples are from the realm of fiction. However, I argue that history is an even better example of transmedia. Especially when it comes to the robustness of the depicted world. Because history is modelled on the basis of our actual world, its ‘laws’ are easy to grasp and there are, for example, no mystical forces that need to be individually specified for the reader to be able to make sense of the world.

In general the idea of worlds where stories happen has been discussed for a while by narratologists (see Eco 1984; Pavel 1986; Ryan 1991; Ronen 1994; Doležel 1998, 2010; Ryan and Jan-Noël. 2014; Bell and Marie-Laure 2019). In literary theory discussions, the differentiation between non-fictional and fictional worlds has been traditionally construed by considering fictional storyworlds being always true while nonfictional ones could be either true or false (see e.g. Ryan and Jan-Noël. 2014, 34; Ryan 2019, 62–65). However, modern fiction has changed. Large fictional storyworlds tend to be expanded by several different authors who have to respect the previous works and the integrity of the storyworld before they can make their additions to it. Thus, these large fictional worlds can be false in the same way that nonfictional worlds can be. Although attempts have been made to uphold the differentiation between historical and fictional worlds any simple solution has not (yet) been found.² This

means that nonfiction and fiction are not easily differentiated from the storyworld point of view.

This challenge of separating fiction from history is also present in this paper, and it cannot be solved by considering history as being a transmedially available storyworld. However, the paper brings in perspectives from media studies for discussing historical presentations influence and makes a case for taking the influence of e.g. historical movies or games seriously. This ties into the ongoing discussion of which mediums in general are suited for historical presentations.³ History is continuously publicly presented through a multitude of media: Text, pictures, photos, exhibitions, oral stories, novels, film, games, statues, buildings, sites etc. The whole concept of cultural heritage⁴ is built on the idea that historical material can be found everywhere, yet history is not usually thought of as being always available across media.

'Transmedia' or 'transmedia storytelling' as terms have an in-built vagueness to them.⁵ The definitions can be competitive, or in some cases complementary. In his recent book, Colin B. Harvey, for example, has split the ways of dealing with transmedia into two differing literary-theory-based approaches: structuralist and intertextual. The structuralist approach attempts to exclude 'licensing or marketing-based crossmedia extensions on the basis that they do not apparently contribute to the advancement of the primary narrative', which is 'at odds with the intertextual basis of the term transmedia, and the constant dialogical flow underpinning it'. (Harvey 2015, 38; see also Bell and Marie-Laure 2019 for discussion of narratology in the modern media environment) This does not look like a major problem for analysing history since the licensing of major parts of history⁶ has not so far happened. Nevertheless, the intertextuality of transmedia is what has drawn the majority of theoretical interest to date.

In its core, transmedia simply means using multiple mediums to relay information. This is usually done to reach larger audiences and to evoke interest on the subject matter. The ability to use multiple media platforms widens the possibility of audience participation. This does not mean only 'crowdsourcing content', something, which has become quite common in the web-based entertainment industry, for example. Transmedia storytelling makes it possible to require the audience to 'deploy or acquire skills in order to elicit the specific diegetic outcomes required by the architects of the transmedia project' (Harvey 2015, 3). This works towards creating a kind of 'lust for encyclopaedic knowledge' and not just an engagement with the story presented.

One way of describing transmedia is that of a network (as Harvey does in his 2015 book). The way one engages with ‘Transmedia networks’ depends on which medium one uses. Harvey argues that ‘different sets of configurative practices’ (Harvey 2015, 137)⁷ are needed to engage with different parts of transmedia networks depending on what medium is being used. Harvey explains this neatly: ‘[a] comic is engaged with in a different fashion than the television series that spawned it’ (Harvey 2015, 137). Similarly, playing a game is also a different process and requires a ‘different set of configurative practices’ than reading a book (Harvey 2015, 137; see also Chapman 2016). Because of this, a comic, a movie or a game, for instance, cannot be criticized simply for not being an orthodox medium for historical (re)presentation. In general, there is nothing revolutionary in an argument like this, but it needs to be internalized and accepted as part of the analysis of transmedia because each medium offers a different kind of entry point to the content.

The world-building aspects of transmedia discussions make a point of differentiating between world-building and narrative although it is still not clear how interlinked these two are (see Bell and Marie-Laure 2019). Mark J. P. Wolf’s *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012) offers a good entry to the discussion of world-building, even though he focuses on the idea of ‘subcreation’, which he derives from the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and uses terminology such as ‘primary world’ (by which he means the actual world) and ‘secondary world’ (a possible world or story world; that is, the non-actual world) (Wolf 2012, 23). In his book, Wolf goes through the history of world-building from ancient texts to contemporary transmedia. However, his central point in this is that world-building is not necessarily the same thing as storytelling (Wolf 2012, 29–33) – a point that I am willing to endorse since the activity of telling a story differs from building a literary or a virtual world. Lisbeth Klastrup and Susanna Tosca took a similar stance several years before Wolf’s book came out: in their view, narrative is ‘not the sole defining characteristic’ of what they call ‘transmedial worlds’ (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 410). For them, transmedial worlds ‘are mental constructs shared by both the designer/creators of the world and the audience/participants’. (Klastrup and Tosca 2014, 297)

World-building and storytelling can, in Wolf’s argument, even be in conflict because the descriptions of the world slow a narrative down (Wolf 2012, 29). This conflict between narrative and world-building seems to be in the background of much of the critique that narrative theories of history have faced, mainly presented in various forms of the argument that historians do not tell stories but instead describe how

things were. From the point of view of world-building this seems to make intuitive sense. Historians describe the historical world in quite a detailed way. There is no other world that has had as much textual descriptions of it than the real world through history. However, at the same time historians craft narratives. Both in the sense of explanations of events in the historical world that Arthur Danto presented in *Narration and Knowledge* (1985), but also in the sense that Hayden White put forward, where we recognise history as history because it has an overarching narrative that ties content together (White 1987, 1–25). Both world-building and narrative aspects are currently essential to history.

History requires there to be a world that is more than the narrative, and it currently requires a narrative to be history at all. There can, however, be historical world-building without narrative, and this is something that is often missed when critics read White. My reading is that White does not argue that history is necessarily narrative, but that it currently just happens to be that way, and that maybe we should thus look into what this means for the discipline as a whole. Now, to look at history as a transmedia phenomenon – one which is not limited to narrative historical texts or to seeing every other form of historical representation as subjects to ‘literary historical texts’⁸ – is to take a step back and look at all other ways of doing history or historical world-building. It is to look, for example, at encyclopaedias and acknowledge that they build a historical world, or to look at games and see how they open up the idea of what can be considered possible in historical representation. It is useful to keep in mind that world-building is most often not an overt project. It seeps into representations in much same way as narratives do, and works subtly in the background to leave the impression that there is more to know here than meets the eye.

Wolf’s point is that in fiction storytelling usually takes precedence over world-building. With regard to history, our intuition usually says the opposite of this. World-building takes precedence over storytelling. Interestingly, Wolf uses examples from fantasy and science fiction to point out that there are genres in fiction where world-building tends to take over (his examples include cases like the video game *Riven* and *Star Trek* technical manuals) (Wolf 2012, 17; Harvey 2015, 46). This is why fantasy and science fiction worlds tend to have extensive histories and timelines attached to the stories. All three of these literary genres (Fantasy, SciFi, History) seem to work extensively at building worlds while telling stories.⁹ The biography of Nikita Khrushchev is a story of Nikita Khrushchev, but the point of telling that story is to establish the

character in a world and to invoke the wish to know more about the world where Nikita did what he had to do.

It must be noted that modern storyworlds are not authored by lone individuals as was the case with Tolkien's Middle Earth, for example. Large storyworlds tend to have multiple creators engaging with them either simultaneously or in succession. This limits the creative space and requires creators to look into other people's work to be able to work within the limits of the world (Harvey 2015, 45; see also Bell and Ryan (eds) 2019). I would expect these limitations to sound very familiar to historians, as no history can currently be written without engaging with secondary sources and already established interpretations of the events described.

The challenge of depicting history as a 'storyworld' that can be an object of study is that story worlds are often characterised by their remoteness from the actual world – a different time or a spatial difference, for instance, as in 'A long time ago in a galaxy far far away' (the original Star Wars's opening). (See Wolf 2012, 62; Harvey 2015, 46.) The idea is that a story world is recognised as a 'storyworld' by not being the actual world. Hence the idea of remoteness, which emphasises the idea of the story taking place somewhere distinct from where we currently are. However, in his 2015 book, *Fantastic Transmedia*, Harvey argues against this remoteness of story worlds and I am inclined to agree with him. He argues that this remoteness originates from an assumed unbalanced reader-text approach that does not work well with storyworlds. (Harvey 2015, 45) He draws from Jenkins's suggestion that although storytelling remains the most basic mechanism for communication, there is a change taking place in how we create and engage with narratives. According to Jenkins: 'new storytelling structures are emerging which may appear "fragmentary" if viewed according to old criteria, but which are affording audiences the ability to "make the connections on their own time and in their own ways"' (Harvey 2015, 45 quoting Jenkins 2008, 120–121).

History as transmedia

Transmedia storytelling is not an uncontested term. My goal here is to point out that this discussion is useful for theory of history. The term has been widely used to describe different endeavours from 'micro-budget projects emerging from the "independent" sector, which utilise social media, the Internet and mobile technologies, as well as high-profile, big-

budget, franchise-based undertakings which can utilise feature films, books, television programmes and console games'. (Harvey 2015, 18)

Jenkins uses the example of *Star Wars* often because it involves one of the most established story worlds and also has an almost fanatical fandom that examines every available detail. In his research on fandom, he has noticed that there are 'several different ways that one might read *Star Wars*'. (Jenkins 2007) Only one of these ways is to focus on the narrative. With focus on the narrative, *Star Wars* is the Skywalker Saga, in which the hero's journey is inevitably the centre-piece of the analysis. There is nothing wrong with this perspective, but there are other ways of looking at *Star Wars*, just as there are other ways of looking at history/historiography (or any aspect of the actual world) than through focus on the narrative. Jenkins puts forward an alternative way of reading *Star Wars*: 'to read *Star Wars* as a world' (Jenkins 2007). This implies, according to Jenkins, that then there would be different parts to explore and that all the miniscule background details would be as meaningful¹⁰ as the story of the protagonist. 'This logic of world-building, of extension, expansion, extraction, shapes all the other elements that would emerge around the *Star Wars* constellation. Each new extension of the *Star Wars* text adds potentially more depth or appreciation of the world depicted onscreen'(Jenkins 2007). This hits close to many people's intuition of what history is. History is not about the story – even though historians do tell stories – it is about the world into which these (historical) stories are embedded by the authors.

Henry Jenkins has expressed his views on transmedia on several occasions. For now, I will use his text 'Transmedia Storytelling 101' (in which he presents 10 general features of transmedia) as the basis for my argument. What follows is a somewhat repetitious dialogue between Jenkins' definition of transmedia and my argumentation for how history matches this definition very well. However, I believe that this kind of step-by-step discussion is needed to sufficiently drive home the argument that history is transmedially at large in the world, regardless of whether that is something scholars would want or not.

1. Transmedia storytelling represents 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 it[s] own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins 2007)

While Jenkins discusses fiction, I think a parallel can be drawn to say that ‘transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of *history* ‘get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience’. History (not to be mixed up with ‘the past’ here) is, of course, not usually categorised as an ‘entertainment experience’. Nevertheless, it is widely employed by the entertainment industry for easily accessible and recognisable settings for their products. While, on the academic side, historiography’s goal is not that of an entertainment experience. Historiography is still perceived to produce a unified and coordinated end product (*aka* history) and it is conveyed in multiple different ways such as oral stories, books, articles, documentaries, museum exhibitions, conserved environments and buildings, movies, toys and games. History enters into our lives through every medium, even if literary form is still the most dominant one within academia.

2. Transmedia storytelling reflects the economics of media consolidation or what industry observers call ‘synergy.’ Modern media companies are horizontally integrated – that is, they hold interests across a range of what were once distinct media industries. A media conglomerate has an incentive to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many different media platforms as possible. [...] The current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative, yet the most gifted transmedia artists also surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise. (Jenkins 2007)

Arguably, history is not provided by an economy-driven conglomerate. However, there have been claims to the effect that history is always ideologically inspired, or that it always has a conservative agenda (that, deep down, it always promotes coherence and structure over radical disarray) (White 1973, 173–175, 1966; [Keith] Jenkins 2003, 20–24). If these arguments have merit, then the ‘conglomerate behind history’ could either be a state or, for example, some more abstract concept like our current ideology of a ‘proper way of living’. Whether there is any merit in these arguments or not, it is still the case that outside of academia historical phenomena are already being treated like any other piece of media and faces similar issues as other media, like for example branding.¹¹ With things like the WW2 brand emerging and being taken on by the general public (Koski 2017; Salvati and Bullinger 2013) the power of transmedia expansion of historical representations should not be taken lightly.

3. Most often, transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories. This process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story. (Jenkins 2007)

Here, we find the theoretical turn away from narrative-driven fiction and a move towards storyworlds. 'Most often, transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories'. (Jenkins 2007) To me, this looks like a description of history, except of course history is not usually described as a 'fictional world'. Following Marie Laure-Ryan's terminology 'storyworld' would be more appropriate term here as it can be used to cover both fictional and nonfictional worlds (Ryan 2019 62–65). However, 'fictional' can be understood as not-actual instead of fictionalized in the sense that the fictional world is just a world that is not the actual physical world we inhabit. The same can be said of historical representations: they are not the actual past even when they attempt to resemble it as closely as possible.

The more interesting part, however, is the idea that transmedia storytelling 'encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers'. Jenkins goes on to point out that this is a 'very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives'. The question of narrativity has been at the core of the theory of history discussion at least since it was brought forth by Hayden White's early work.¹² There have been opponents and defenders of narrativity in historiography and people have proposed ways to move forward from the discussion (Kuukkanen 2015, for example) but here we are, still. If what I am proposing here in this paper holds (that history is a transmedia enterprise), then the 'all-encompassing narrative' viewpoint is flawed. Historical representations do not only form narrative wholes but are part of a world-building process that 'encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world, which always expands beyond our grasp'. In this world-building process the reader/watcher/player/consumer does not even expect to be presented with a totality but with a glimpse of the world, and is left with a longing to know more.

4. Extensions may serve a variety of different functions. [...] The extension may provide insight into the characters and their motivations [...], may flesh out aspects of the fictional world [...], or may bridge between events depicted in a series of sequels [...]. The extension may add a greater sense of realism to the fiction as a whole [...]. (Jenkins 2007)

What Jenkins calls extensions is just added stuff.¹³ Jenkins discusses the use of radio dramas to keep the audience interested in *Doctor Who* when no new television episodes were aired for years. This is an easily understandable example of how a transmedia network works in general. However, the question is how would this work for history? For the nonprofessional history enthusiast, this would probably mean watching documentaries when no interesting books have been published in while, or playing games that have historical content; for a child it could be playing with toys like plastic soldiers, endlessly recreating the battling between different factions and states or playing games with historical characters in them. In general, more informal engagements like playing with history-related material require some relaxation of the epistemic strictness of history since there needs to be ‘space for play’ in the sense that playing must be able to proceed in a non-pre-set, nonlinear fashion to constitute playing at all.

For professional historians, it becomes harder to imagine a gap in the availability of written form professional history but, nevertheless, other mediums tend to complement historical texts; for example, games, documentaries, exhibitions, movies, illustrations and photos are used to fill the visual void left by pure texts. These need not even be deeply thought out presentations, just material that touches on an interesting subject, something that the historian is already interested in in an encyclopaedic way and is willing to engage with more. Extensions also add detail, which historiographical work tends hold in respect. For example, a detailed illustration of how a certain now permanently lost building looked like is valuable for historiographical point of view. Similarly, a 3D model of a historical building or site appearing in a popular game adds detail and makes history more ‘real’ for large audiences by creating a visually accessible presentation of the building while providing yet another way to engage with historical material.

5. Transmedia storytelling practices may expand the potential market for a property by creating different points of entry for different audience segments. [...] Similarly, the strategy may work to draw viewers who are comfortable in a particular medium to experiment with alternative media platforms [...]. (Jenkins 2007)

This aspect of transmedia has been present in historical representation for a long time. Museum exhibitions are a time-proven example; they offer an entry point for audiences that are not as interested in textual material as they are in physical objects while simultaneously providing a different medium for textually oriented ones to engage with material that they already consider interesting. The same can be said of cultural heritage sites. Historical fiction in its varied forms (novels, movies, games) also offers these kinds of possibilities, and some of these mediums have a long-lasting history behind them and have produced materials that have reached the status of 'classics' in their own fields (like some of Tolstoy's work¹⁴). But, as Jenkins notes, this is not a one-way process. It is not a straight transfer from one medium to the other; it is a process of using the mediums together instead of separately or only one at a time. Transmedia storytelling (or world-building) emphasises the combinatory power of multiple mediums.

6. Ideally, each individual episode must be accessible on its own terms even as it makes a unique contribution to the narrative system as a whole. (Jenkins 2007)

The requirement of 'each individual episode' existing on its own terms has been the narrativist way of analysing historical work. Another way of putting this is to say that the concept of episode has been partially absent in theory of history because each historical work has been analysed as a complete piece. Although 'episode' has not been the term used, it is not hard to intuitively consider each historical representation as an 'episode of history' instead of it being a completely independent work. Transmedia emphasises the kind of mentality where everything is just a piece of larger whole and nothing is truly complete. All works, independent of the medium they are presented in, are just glimpses into a world and the next episode in the series offers another glimpse, which is still not enough to be a complete thing. There is just always room for one more episode. Thus, engagements with transmedia resemble more a scavenger hunt than reading a novel or watching a movie. The continued interest grows from finding new things rather than finding completion. We treat most of information already as fragments of larger body of information. Searching for more information has become so easy with services like Google, that we don't even stop to think about fragmented our media environment has become.

7. Because transmedia storytelling requires a high degree of coordination across the different media sectors, it has so far worked best either in

independent projects where the same artist shapes the story across all of the media involved or in projects where strong collaboration (or co-creation) is encouraged across the different divisions of the same company. Most media franchises, however, are governed not by co-creation (which involves conceiving the property in transmedia terms from the outset) but rather licensing (where the story originates in one media and subsequent media remain subordinate to the original master text). (Jenkins 2007)

The difference between independent projects and large-scale franchising is in their original beginning points. Independent projects that have started from the transmedia viewpoint have concentrated on co-creation. Franchise or license-based story worlds have originated from one medium and then branched out to others. Here Jenkins claims, however, that licensed products ‘remain subordinate to the original master text’. This seems to be in stark contrast with the idea of there being no ur-text in transmedia projects to fall back on. As Jenkins among others has noted: it is not always the case that in a transmedia project all media are of equal standing even though all mediums contribute to transmedia world-building in meaningful albeit varied ways.

For history, the problem of someone owning the copyright to, for example, the Second World War does not exist. So licensing (per se) is not a serious problem for history, even though failing to acquire rights to use, for example, historical photos for research purposes is not unheard of. However, it is harder to think of historical research as not providing the ur-text for other mediums to rely on. Because of this, history has rarely been thought of as being fundamentally transmedial, even though it has been presented across mediums. This oversight has probably occurred because of the research’s strong dominance over historical content (which in itself is not a bad thing). It would be interesting to see if it were even possible to achieve the sort of co-creation in historical worlds that Jenkins describes as taking place in independent transmedia projects in the field of fiction. It might just be that history’s world is already so deeply formed that the ur-texts are in place and all that is left is being loyal to those. What I mean by this is that there are parts of history that are canonised (unchangeable, eternal) in the sense that no-one will question birth and death places of Napoleon or where Prussia was located in 1868, for instance. This relates to the discussion of the difference between interpretations and singular existential statements that has long been going on in theory of history (see Pihlainen 2017, 1–17), but through different terminology.

8. Transmedia storytelling is the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence. Pierre Levy coined the term, collective intelligence, to refer to new social structures that enable the production and circulation of knowledge within a networked society. Participants pool information and tap each others expertise as they work together to solve problems. Levy argues that art in an age of collective intelligence functions as a cultural attractor, drawing together like-minded individuals to form new knowledge communities. Transmedia narratives also function as textual activators – setting into motion the production, assessment, and archiving information. [...] Transmedia storytelling expands what can be known about a particular fictional world while dispersing that information, insuring that no one consumer knows everything and insures that they must talk about the series with others [...]. Consumers become hunters and gatherers moving back across the various narratives trying to stitch together a coherent picture from the dispersed information. (Jenkins 2007)

The description for ‘collective intelligence’ at least superficially resembles the research infrastructure found in academia. Levy’s argument is that in collective intelligence ‘No one knows everything, everyone knows something’ (Lévy 1997, 13–14). The virtual communities that form Levy’s collective intelligence can combine expertise of all its members to do more than anyone of them could do individually. Levy’s epiphany was that there is a difference between shared knowledge (what every member knows to be true) and collective intelligence (combined information possessed by the group’s members) which ‘can be accessed in response to specific question’ (Jenkins 2008, 27). Jenkins is drawn to this to highlight how modern technology has changed the analysis of popular culture. The engagement with fiction has begun to resemble academic engagement with research material and new ideas. While this does not fundamentally change academia or popular culture, the notable factor is that these two are not completely different from or opposite to each other as is sometimes argued. If we follow Jenkins’ line of thought regarding dispersing information so that no one can know everything, we can see how the status of, for example, ‘an expert of *Star Wars* spaceships’ is achieved much in the same way as expert status is achieved in the field of historiography – by knowing more about a certain topic. This kind of expertise-gaining once again stems from, and creates more encyclopaedic lust for knowledge and forms a tentative virtuous circle that maintains the interest of an individual, both to keep the social status of an expert and to know more.

9. A transmedia text does not simply disperse information: it provides a set of roles and goals which readers can assume as they enact aspects of the story

through their everyday life. We might see this performative dimension at play with the release of action figures which encourage children to construct their own stories about the fictional characters or costumes and role playing games which invite us to immerse ourselves in the world of the fiction. (Jenkins 2007)

The performative aspects of play and storytelling that are present in our engagements with media are not usually emphasised (especially in history/historiography). However, the rise of popular gaming and game studies in general has brought these themes also to theory of history (see Chapman 2013, 2016; Spring 2015). A transmedia viewpoint would say that the pre-recognized roles and goals, which are assumed by the audience and then played with, create their own kind of 'setting' for engagement with the subject matter. Fundamentally, this is just an argument that, for example, toys enable a different kind of engagement than a text and that both of these engagements function as storyworld exploration. Transmedia analysis stresses the point of view that although the way engagements are done differ between mediums, all of them are valuable. For academic disciplines like historiography, the standard form of engagement stems from disciplinary practices. Thus the incorporation of a form of engagement that has very little in common with historiography to the repertoire of ways to engage the past is not easily done. Performative dimension of play and the ludic aspects of gaming do not fit nicely with the historiography produces knowledge. However, just from this it cannot be argued that these forms are fundamentally unfit for engagements with the knowledge we have about the past or that they have no value. There need to be ways to engage with subject material that are open and support experimentation, otherwise interest slowly dies out. The playful forms of engagement keep the subject matter fresh and open up new venues for enquiry. The contribution that popular interaction-oriented historical representations (broadly understood) bring to the historical world is often similar to what action figures brought to the world of *Star Wars* – open-ended engagement and space for exploring ideas. What historical toys or games offer is thus the possibility of experimenting with historical character's interactions with the world and this experimentation encourages questioning. If you take military units into the mountains they usually move more slowly in strategy games. Thus, it is apparent that there are serious drawbacks in going over the mountains, so why did Hannibal cross the Alps to attack Rome?. This links both to the discussion of counterfactuals role in historical reasoning (see e.g. Callagher 2018; Evans 2014), and to the encyclopaedic interest in the world in question that Jenkins has been arguing for – and

this is a major motivation for becoming interested in history. People simply want to know more. (How that knowledge is produced is a wholly different question, and one that I will not engage with here.)

10. The encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts often results in what might be seen as gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story: that is, they introduce potential plots which can not be fully told or extra details which hint at more than can be revealed. Readers, thus, have a strong incentive to continue to elaborate on these story elements, working them over through their speculations, until they take on a life of their own. (Jenkins 2007)

Here Jenkins has expressed nicely how these encyclopaedic ambitions work. If we ignore the idea of speculation, this description could be of historiography. Interest in historical topics stems from the 'extra' and 'the missing'. Encyclopaedic ambition emerges from the content that raises questions, not from material that that requires nothing from its consumer. The difference between encyclopaedic and narrative texts has been explored by literary theorist like Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who used the encyclopaedic form to break away from narrative structuring (see Gumbrecht 1997). Encyclopaedias (or in the digital era, mainly Wikipedia) serve to fulfil encyclopaedic ambitions by offering one bit of information while always pointing towards more. Encyclopaedic ambitions are not new, but transmedially available information the has made it once again more easily observable than it was before.

In fictional world-building, licensing and trademarks severely limit people's options for knowing more. On the history side there is no fan-history in the sense that there is fan-fiction¹⁵ because there is no single licencing authority that can hold the final truth in their hands. What history has is the uncoordinated community of history professionals that evaluate the proposed additions to 'history'. In *Star Wars*, a story can be canonized into the story world by being made into a film or a game or when a character receives its official action figure (or a spaceship gets its own Lego set) and new details are usually revealed in the process. In history, anyone can make their claim, and it cannot be dismissed just because it is 'fan made' or 'not canon'. In this sense, history seems to lack an established ur-text because an ur-text would need an author(s) who would have the authority to canonize new material. Jaume Aurell has recently presented an interesting take on how durability relates to the concept of the canon and how the canon of history might depend on the durability of scholarly texts (Aurell 2018). There is, however, a difference between discussing 'the canon in something' and 'the canon of

something', especially in the case of story-worlds. The 'canon of' is usually depicted as a collection of works, while the 'canon in' is more along the lines of what would be true within those works. Roughly put, this means that the canon of *Star Wars* are the movies and possibly some other works, while the canon in *Star Wars* would be the depiction of the storyworld in those works, that is, what is true in the world of *Star Wars*.

The 'canon' comes up often when story-worlds are discussed by fans in their fandoms. This seems to happen much for the same reasons as historian's debate the correct interpretation. Colin B. Harvey describes these fan-arguments focusing on 'which elements of a particular story-world are "genuine" or "authentic" and which are noncanon [...] and] even leading to the oxymoronic concept of "personal canon", i.e. an individual's subjective opinion on what constitutes the collective "reality" of the storyworld.' (Harvey 2015, 4) Thus fans of fiction end up with surprisingly similar questions to those that historians face: What is authentic, genuine, or true in a fictional/historical world? In fictional worlds the answer seems to usually be something along the lines of 'what the original author has said'. The challenges rise when there are multiple authors who have written at different times. Often the original creator of the world in question holds precedence but not always. There are exceptions because the point of *storyworlds* is that they can have multiple authors, who add material to the world in question. Then, the question of whether something is canon or not tends to be more of a social issue, unless there is an absolute authority such as the license holder who can simply decide (as in the case of Disney buying the *Star Wars* franchise and decanonizing the *Star Wars Extended Universe* material [Hood 2015]).

In this sense the way popular media is being engaged with has begun to resemble the history is engaged. There 'worlds' are no longer an obscure academic idea, but an everyday conceptual tool for making sense of stories. I do not use popular media to imply that it is anyway inferior to other media, neither is popular culture any kind of lower form of culture. (Jenkins 2007, 15) Both popular culture and media are complex constructs, which require their own skillsets to interpret. Thus being a trained historian (who usually are specialist in writing) does not automatically give the skillset to make sense of popular media's engagements with history. (see Lähteenmäki 2019, 59)

When compared to fiction, it is obvious that history lacks the single 'license holder' who could work as an arbitrator in deciding what gets 'canonized' in history. On the other hand, one could argue that the whole

discipline of history has been founded to work as a non-personalised arbitrator to decide what is accepted as history. Of course, nations and states have also tried to 'canonize' the history that fits their agenda, but this only illustrates that what is accepted into history is not always only a simple scholarly matter but involves political and ideological aspects as well.¹⁶ What needs to be kept in mind is that it is a completely a different question whether there is a real need to canonize anything in the sense that fans of fiction or history would like to do. It is still an open question whether the 'canon' is a good way to categorize works or not. There might be other concepts better suited to this even though 'canon' is the one currently so often used.

Herodotus is often claimed to be the 'father of history' (especially in the western world), but one does not hear arguments like 'This goes against Herodotus' vision!' in historiographical debates. The point being that histories (products of historiography) are not a stable objects. History will be different when more is researched and written. So to canonize some singular work of history as unchangeable truth would go against the very nature of history, but the work in question can still be part of the canon of history.¹⁷ Still, one has to admit that there are events in history that have been canonized, like the Second World War or the Mongol invasion of Europe. These are unchangeable 'canon' in the sense that one cannot write a history without acknowledging the existence of these events, but what is not canonized is what one can write about them.¹⁸

When arguing for a useful perspective for looking at history as an example of transmedia world-building, it must be acknowledged that transmediality is not always engaging. Jenkins noted this in his analysis of the Matrix franchise, which he considers to be an example of a failed transmedia project. Mainly because of the 'lack [of] the aesthetic criteria for understanding such transmedia works' (Harvey 2015, 43 quoting Jenkins 2008, 98–99). Others have also pointed out challenges: For example, Emma Beddows has argued that traditional theories of transmedia seem to overestimate how easily consumers move between mediums (Beddows 2012, 145–150). It also needs to be acknowledged that not all forms of presentation are interesting to everybody. An avid reader might not appreciate games, or a film enthusiast might have no interest in reading because it lacks visual stimulus. This could be because the tone of a presentation also shifts when the medium changes. Harvey ties tone shifts to Mittell's finding that 'oversimplification' of a character's representation can also repel audiences from transmedia expansions, to argue

for the necessity of balance between repetition and difference in transmedia expansions (Harvey 2015, 128–129 referring to Mittell 2015, 301). All these factors seem to indicate at least partial explanations for why history adaptations to mediums like cinema, TV and games tend to face a lot of criticism.

Criticism of *** ... stems from the difference between representation as carried out in literary forms as opposed to, for example, visual ones. The need for different standards has been most apparent in the evaluation of historical films and games (see, for example, Rosenstone 1995; Chapman 2016). I think historians are often especially put off by the perception of visual mediums as oversimplifying historical phenomena and processes. A transmedia viewpoint on this issue would emphasize the notion that representations in different mediums are not inherently in opposition to each other but complementary. They provide different entry points for engagement with the same phenomenon and the main challenge is to make sure that the phenomenon is recognizable across all mediums (repetition and differentiation).

What kind of transmedia is history?

History can be depicted as an unbalanced transmedia, in which professional historians provide the parent (or ur-) texts through research, and these are then transferred to other media to form a transmedia depiction of ‘our history’. The challenge is that the other medias are not completely reliant on the ur-texts provided by historians even though they tend to rely on those to a large extent. The often playful approach of interactive media like games or social media tend to deal precisely with what did not happen in the past. This can be done either indirectly by presenting options or by explicitly making it the players goal to ‘change history’ (Harvey 2015, 26). Such an imbalance in historical transmedia presentations is not a necessity, but it is the current situation. What I mean by this is that this imbalance – where transmedia extensions ‘do not honour’ the ur-texts – can be remedied if more ur-texts (historical research) are produced in more varied media to begin with. The point is not to match the ur-text, but to provide ‘ur-film’, ‘ur-games’, and other ‘urs’ for history so that a use of non-standard medium becomes non-issue.

Jason Mittell’s differentiation between forms of transmedia storytelling is useful for delving deeper into the functionality of historical transmedia. For Mittell, the ‘nature of the relationship between the originating text and the transmedial expansion is a crucial means of differentiating

between strands of transmedia production' (Harvey 2015, 31; Mittell 2014, 269–271). This leads him to discuss centripetal as well as centrifugal storytelling. Both of these forms of storytelling can be observed in historical transmedia storytelling. Centrifugal historical storytelling is in play, for example, whenever a museum exhibition opens, a TV-documentary airs, or a new book is published, and these present some previously untold story of a group of people. Centrifugal storytelling expands the storyworld in new directions, whereas centripetal makes the world more complicated and delicate. Because the centripetal form does not expand as much as deepen as it revisits old elements from new points of view, it is somewhat harder to find in the wild if one does not know what to look for. Historiography has been doing this for a long time, although within one medium. As a presentational form games offer a good example of centripetal storytelling.¹⁹ Adam Chapman's (2013) article's title 'Is Sid Meyer's Civilization History?' thus presents a great question. His answer ends up being 'yes it is', but from the point of view of a transmedia analysis that is ultimately uninteresting. This is because the query should be the opposite of what is usually discussed in relation to history. The question is not 'what counts as history?' but 'how do all the varied presentations fit together to create a medium-transcending effect that is interpreted as "history" by the audience?' This question of 'how to recognise history as history' has been raised before (see, for example, White 1987, 1–25), but I would like to extend this questioning to non-literary mediums. 'History' is taken for granted in the analysis in the same way that 'Star Wars' is taken for granted in transmedia studies. Nevertheless, centripetal historical storytelling makes history more complex, it emphasises the multivocality of historical perspectives, which in itself is something that is often praised in historical representations.

The central aspect of transmedia storytelling and world-building is that the people who engage with the transmedially available material can choose through which media they wish to do their engaging. This means that not all mediums are needed for a world to be engageable. The more mediums that are used, the more options there are for gathering information about the story world, however. As in the realm of fiction, so in history: Not all history consumers use all of the mediums available to them. Some mostly only read books, watch documentaries, visit historical sites or exhibitions, or play games. But no-one can completely escape historical representations because history is everywhere. This is the main point of the article: History is transmedial whether we wish it to be or not! There is no point to claiming that history is something that *only*

historians do when popular media bombards us constantly with historically loaded images and stories.

Another take on how history is engaged with in modern societies was presented by Jerome de Groot in 2009. In his book *Consuming History: Historians and heritage in the contemporary popular culture* he argued that the commodification of history has already happened. (De Groot 2009, 5). De Groot's argument comes from a slightly different viewpoint than mine, but it shares the same general idea as my argument of history being transmedially at large in the society: history is not only an academic discipline focusing on knowledge about the past. De Groot thinks that the public builds its 'history sense' or 'sense of history' through popular culture. A view that I agree with.

For the analysis of popular culture's engagements with history (or anything related to the past) the challenge is that those presentations cannot be evaluated by using the same standards that are in place for evaluation of academic history. Thus being a trained historian does not automatically grant the proficiency to interpret popular culture's engagements with historical material or presentations. (see Lähteenmäki 2019, 59) The fragmentary nature of modern media aggravates this challenge as popular media has become more fluid and its trends change more rapidly than before. This also means that the media literacy required for evaluating all different popular history related material might be impossible to achieve for a single person. However, the multitude of historical presentations across media also strengthens history. As more presentations link together more robust history becomes. This of course does not require the use of different media, and it is the general idea of how historiography operates, but the modern fragmentary use of multiple mediums fortifies the effect.

Conclusions

In 2009, Jerome de Groot published a book entitled *Consuming History*, which looked at historians and heritage in popular culture. One of his conclusions in the book is that 'contemporary historical imagery is fed by a multiplexity of consumption practices, often diverging and converging simultaneously – at once closing down experiences while opening up new possibilities and potentialities' (De Groot 2009, 249). It would seem that transmedia is a useful concept in analyzing this 'multiplexity of consumption practices'. A transmedia perspective emphasizes the idea that no medium is safe on its own little island in the modern media ocean. At

the same time, a transmedia perspective does not give any preference to history over other presentations simply for the sake of its status as an academic discipline. This serves to reveal intuitions about history as a practice and a form of knowledge. It becomes reasonable to ask which mediums can be used for historical representation and for what reasons. How much does the chosen medium affect the content? And which aspects (if any) of history are altogether independent of these presentation mediums? Further, are some mediums preferred over others, and, if so, why?

I have argued that history can be considered to be an example of transmedia world-building. The building of historical world is based on the same intuitions as is the building of multiauthored modern fictional worlds. When, however, fictional and historical transmedia worlds are compared, no fictional one can match the amount of detail that has been established for the historical one – and it is the details that matter in world-building. This is most fitting for history since historians take pride in getting even the smallest details correct in their presentations. In a system where no presentation is the complete depiction the informational value of details rises as through them coherence is generated across presentations. When even the smallest details fit together coherently, an idea of a world that has more in it than what is currently being engaged with begins to emerge.

Transmediality is not a new phenomenon. (I, for example, first came across the concept of ancient Romans in Albert Uderzo's and René Goscinny's *Asterix* comics as a child during the 1980s). Modern technology has made transmediality much more obvious, with digital technology appearing in places where history is presented: museums employ virtual and augmented reality in their exhibitions, historians comment on social media, films and games are filled with digitally made historical imagery, and so on.

Because historical research is conventionally presented through writing, history currently forms an unbalanced form of transmedia in which written text dominates the other mediums. History texts, then, provide the ur-texts for other presentations in different mediums. There is, however, a tension between the literary form of history and other mediums as the consumption of history in non-literary forms is growing. This means that non-literary presentations are no longer viewed only as adaptations of texts, but as genuine historical presentations that contribute to the discussion. A transmedia viewpoint thus gives emphasis to those forms of representation that are often taken as 'not quite proper history' by

levelling the field between mediums and by giving credit to all the different ways of which different mediums contribute to the building of what we commonly depict as history.

Interestingly, the idea of history as transmedia world-building also moves narrative out of the centre of history-making. Small details and descriptions matter as much as the story. Narrative is not abandoned, but it is not the defining factor in historical world-building – it is just one tool among others like encyclopaedic listing or visual images. Admittedly, what is missed by this viewpoint are the traditional aspects of historical research such as the epistemological questions of what can be known about the past. In the end, this means that ‘history as transmedia world-building’ is not a complete point of view for analysing history, but it is clearly a useful one.

Notes

1. ‘History’ in this paper does not mean ‘the past’ but a product made usually by someone who attempts to give out information about the past.
2. See (Doležel 2010) for the latest attempt and (Lähteenmäki 2018) for criticism of it.
3. For games, see Spring (2015); Chapman (2013), (Chapman 2016); and Chapman, Foka, and Westin (2017); for film see Rosenstone (1995), (2006); Burgoyne (2008) and Davis (2000). For an experimental take on the comic/graphic novel form of history, see (Netter and Gruner 2017). For social media, see (Myers and Hamilton 2015), and (Ilkka and Virta 2016).
4. There is an ongoing discussion in heritage studies about what should be included in cultural heritage and how to evaluate it; see, for example, Harrison (2013) and *Intangible Heritage* 2009 (eds. (Smith and Akagawa)).
5. See also (Ryan and January-Noël 2014); (Bell and Marie-Laure 2019).
6. However physical material directly relate to historical events, like memorabilia have already become commercialized.
7. See also Rosenstone (1995, 25, 35–36) and White (1988, 1193) who have given similar arguments in relation to different mediums of historical representation.
8. I use the term ‘text’ here in a very limited and literal way in order to put emphasis on the difference of perspective that a transmedia viewpoint entails.
9. See Liedl (2015) for an interesting take on the relation between Science Fiction and History as genres/being part of the same genre and of the world-building that happens in these.
10. Meaning and where it might reside is a large discussion, see, for example, (Pihlainen 2017).

11. See (Koski 2017) and (Salvati and Bullinger 2013) for a more detailed discussion on branding and Richie 2009 for a historian's autobiographical take on working as a history expert for the television/film industry in the heavily branded field of pirate history.
12. The most famous piece being the *Metahistory* (1973).
13. See Wright (2018) for a nice exploration of the paratexts that extend historical games and their influence.
14. For an interesting take on Tolstoy and his work's relation to history, see Southgate 2009.
15. See *Internet Fictions* 2009 (edited by Ingrid Hotz-Davies, Anton Kirchhofer and Sirpa Leppänen) for a discussion of fan-fiction in the digital age.
16. About the ideological aspects of history see: (White 1987, ix–xi), (1973, 173–175), (1966); (Paul 2015, 70–81); (Pihlainen 2017, 1–11, 32–34, 38–58); (Jenkins 2003, 20–24).
17. See Aurell (2018) for discussion of history's classics and canon.
18. As has been pointed out to me: the Holocaust is probably an exception to this. There seems to be a canon in place for both the existence of it and for what should be written about it.
19. Social media projects are another example of centripetal storytelling. See (Lähteenmäki and Virta 2016) for a case study of history in social media form.

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Ilkka Lähteenmäki holds PHD from University of Oulu and is exploring the theoretical aspects of different forms of historical (re)presentation ranging from the traditional literary representations found in history books to social media and popular games.

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